



Do we have a water problem?

Using Social Marketing to Solve Problems

By Jeff Hoffman,
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A recent seminar on environmental communications posed a hypothetical: How do you get people to reduce fertilizer and pesticide use?

An official from a state's department of environment protection answered, "Just tell them to stop. They know how bad it is."

Maybe yes. Maybe no.

Water managers traditionally take a top-down approach to attempt to conserve and protect the quality of our water resources. We're often told what we can't do or given recommendations that drastically change lifestyles. The general public perceives such messages as negative and unrealistic.

People don't want to be told they are bad—or wrong—in their behaviors. Most people truly believe they do not contribute to increased nitrogen levels in our waterways. Nor do they believe they use too much water. (But they will point fingers at their neighbors, businesses, and golf courses.)

Most people want to do the right thing—as long as they're told what the right thing is, why it is important, and that it is easy to adopt in our modern lifestyles.

As an attempt to help the public ease into a reduction in water use, water management districts and municipalities give away or provide rebates for low-flow toilets, showerheads, faucets, dishwashers and clothes washers. Millions of these water-saving devices are now in American homes. And water managers have a metric to measure the amount of water saved.

Easy and done, you say.

Maybe yes. Maybe no.

Sure, water-efficient devices help save water, but some water managers (often behind closed doors) fear that they are not addressing the real issue —behavior change.

That's where social marketing comes in. This method of applying commercial advertising and marketing techniques to advocate behavior change, long an ally in health issues, is relatively new to environmental issues. Social marketing starts with reality and moves the public gradually.

It studies behaviors, motivations, and inspirations before crafting messages that resonant with audiences.

Studies suggest that we are bombarded with some 3,000 different marketing messages daily. That's 3,000 messages that compete with a simple message to turn off the water when brushing, or that pesticides run off into storm drains.

Those flyers on 101 ways to save water are no longer enough.

A good social marketing campaign can help. Three themes are key—fear, facts and fun.

Fear has greatest impact during emergencies. People react immediately when seeing physical changes in water quality or supply (polluted rivers or drying reservoirs). But fear is a temporary motivator. When the situation returns to normal, people revert to pre-emergency behaviors.

Facts are always appreciated by the public—as long as facts are simple and easy to remember. Most people will comply with behavior-change suggestions as long as they understand—and believe—the reasons given.

Fun is a social marketer's secret weapon. People decide to read, watch, or listen to a message in fewer than three seconds. Humor, energy, and upbeat messages engage audiences long enough to ensure memorability.

At stake is having new behaviors seen as socially responsible. The best way is through a well-planned and orchestrated, broad-based media communications campaign. Cost efficiencies can be achieved, and, best of all, water managers can show us that we all benefit when we all participate in positive change.



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