



In My Opinion: Making recycling second nature

Looking beyond eco-babble and into the
psychology of helping people throw recyclables
in the right bin.

BY ED SKERNOLIS



Ask anyone on the street what they can do to be more “green” or sustainable and the top answer you’re guaranteed to hear is “recycle.” One might think that with such a high level of public consensus, our nation’s recycling rates would certainly not be stagnating in the 25-34 percent range as they have for years. So what’s causing the “knowledge/action gap” and, more importantly, how can we bridge that gap?

This was a central topic to Keep America Beautiful’s recent symposium, *Re:Psychology – Making Recycling Second Nature*. Over the course of two days, the symposium assembled a panel of expert speakers including academic researchers, social marketers, behavioral scientists and recycling practitioners in order to engage an audience representing a broad spectrum of industry, nonprofit and municipal recycling professionals. The goal was not to produce a final “how to” roadmap but, rather, to spark a cross-sector dialogue about the challenges faced and the lessons learned from real-world experience,

building momentum to move forward with a united and cohesive approach. So, what did we learn?

Making recycling matter

We know that an individual’s recycling actions are the product of many influences, including convenience, lifestyle, emotional connections, knowledge and both community and societal norms, among others. Recent research suggests a rough U.S. ratio of 20-60-20, with 20 percent of the population being habitual recyclers, 20 percent non- or anti-recyclers, and the middle 60 percent being “sometimes” recyclers. Our national rates are certainly consistent with the behavioral profile.

Several widely-assumed profiles were verified by data. Homeowners recycle more than renters, and, as a corollary point, single-family homes tend to generate more recycled material than do multi-family dwellings. Used packages and products generated in

or near the kitchen are recycled more often than those generated in the bathroom (e.g. shampoo bottles).

Recycling bins matter, too. Both at home and in public spaces. Variables like color, size, positioning, wheels (for heavy bins) and labeling can all cumulatively affect a receptacle's relative success.

Reinforcement also matters. We assume that an individual is more likely to ingrain recycling behavior if they have the opportunity to recycle; not only at home, but in the office, the school, the airport or at the weekend soccer field. External reinforcements, such as "pay-as-you-throw" and other well-designed incentive programs show great promise.

However, when it comes to messaging, we are beginning to understand (and for some, counter-intuitively), that "Conserve Our Resources" or worse, the "Save the Earth" vein of dire messaging don't move the needle. The "always" recycler doesn't need that kind of messaging, and the casual or non-environmentalist (the other 80 percent) is skeptical at best, if not completely turned-off by the approach. And research shows that *no* specific argument for recycling – be

it economics, fashion, resource conservation or even national security – produces a significant change of behavior or holds any greater sway over the majority of people.

What does work, as affirmed by many of the panelists including California State University, San Marcos' Dr. P. Wesley Schultz and Stewardship Ontario's Lyle Clark, are social norms. These widely-held and commonly-agreed standards of behavior in a society go beyond ideology or personal preference to act as a sort of "peer pressure on steroids" ("belonging" or being part of a group). The most powerful social norms are those that are at the same time both ubiquitous and so deeply ingrained as to be almost invisible. Social norms are those behaviors that aren't just encouraged by messaging, but backed up with infrastructure, codified by laws and accepted by the vast majority of individuals as positive and effective.

From seat belts to recycling rates

Take the case of the seatbelt, considered optional just three decades ago. Why did we change behaviors so quickly on a broad,

societal level? It wasn't just the advertising with the "Crash Test Dummies," but rather a combination of messaging, "click it or ticket" laws, the chiding of the driver and the persistent beeping tone from the dashboard that all worked in unison towards the desired outcome. And, importantly, that outcome is generally shared regardless of politics, demographics, income or any other variable. Wearing a belt is simply what we do, because our society broadly expects us to do it.

How does this apply to raising our recycling rates? We know that the major reason given by "sometimes" recyclers for not "always" recycling is convenience, and not a matter of environmental commitment or lack of it. Yet, from an operational standpoint, the ability for the U.S to move to recycling rates of 50-75 percent isn't constrained by our knowledge of recycling infrastructure. We do still need to provide greater access to convenient recycling systems at, or near, the point of discard. That is largely an issue of capital investment by communities and businesses and, not inconsequentially, political will.

Effective messaging in support of

Continued on page 48

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Continued from page 44

concrete systems is very important, because beyond the operational issues associated with access and convenience, there remains a great need for promotion of individual recycling behaviors that are both meaningful and enduring. One challenge emphasized by Marilyn Cruz-Aponte of the Hartford, Connecticut Department of Public Works and echoed by many professional communicators in attendance, is a rapidly diversifying ethnographic base – especially in urban areas – for which cookie-cutter messaging from outside the audiences' culture is ineffective, or even counterproductive. Add to that the expense and challenge in a rapidly fragmenting media environment with thousands of channels, and we begin to see what we're up against.

Making the message move more

Given limited resources, are we in the recycling community doing a good job at it? Unfortunately, the answer is "yes and no." We do a good job, although by no means universally, with operational convenience factors – right-size bins, pick-up schedules, introductory information, single-stream collection, and

pay-as-you-throw, for example. Messaging, on the other hand, is scattershot. Most recycling promotions (both municipal and corporate) continue to ask people to recycle to "save trees," or "go green." For most Americans, these approaches do not influence behavior, and, perhaps more damaging to overall environmental behavior, these messages become part of a larger complex of "eco-babble," the constant barrage of environmental messages to which people are now exposed, and which, as in the case of every other form of information overload, produces more apathy than action.

If we want to get people to participate in the act of recycling, to recycle more of what they generate, and to recycle more frequently, presenters agreed upon a few simple truths – build the *positive emotional* connection, and create the appropriate social norms both in individual communities and across the broader society. Or as presented by Meghan Campbell, contributing strategist for Ogilvy Earth, we must make it: personal, plausible and positive. That is how we can create the recycling habit, how we change the 20-60-20 paradigm to one of 60-20-20 or better. And that kind of shift is necessary if we are to see overall national recycling rates move to 50 percent, or higher, over the coming decade.

Of course, the world is not that simple. But these are starting points for a smarter, more coherent approach to motivating environmental behavior. The most challenging part of all is recognizing the diversity of the population we are trying to influence – culture, age, lifestyle, economic status – which will each require unique themes and messaging. And, of course, these challenges cannot be met without creativity and effort.

See for yourself – all of the presentations from the Symposium are accessible online at <http://kab.org/symposium>. The recycling community in the U.S. is fortunate in that we have organizations and forums that allow us to share and learn from each other, making us all smarter recycling professionals. We have the benefit of a growing body of behavioral and market research. And, yes, while there is more to learn, with more foresight and cooperation, we can take this knowledge to new levels of effectiveness. RR

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