

USE OF SOCIAL MARKETING AND SOCIAL MEDIA TO PROMOTE RECYCLING IN NORTH CAROLINA ON A SHOESTRING BUDGET

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OVERVIEW

The North Carolina Division of Pollution Prevention and Environmental Assistance (DPPEA) utilizes three social marketing campaigns. The Recycle Guys campaign was adopted from South Carolina in 2000. NC DPPEA recommends recycling coordinators use it for Pre-K through 8th grade. In 2005, the Division created RE3.org via an Environmental Protection Agency grant. The audience for RE3.org is high schoolers, college students and 20 some-thing adults. Lastly, NC DPPEA is embarking on a new campaign called Recycle More NC. It will focus on educating 35-55 year olds.

DATA GATHERING

The NC DPPEA regularly conducts surveys throughout North Carolina to gauge citizens' brand recognition for the campaigns, how they spend their free time, preferred communication methods, etc. The surveys are conducted and analyzed by student interns. Interns help immensely when on a shoestring budget.

The data provides the Division with useful information. We understand an Earth Day survey is slightly skewed due to the nature of the audience but we are confident that the campaigns are branding with North Carolina residents. Recycles Guys have a recognition rate near 70%. When asked where the respondent saw either logo, 32% say the Internet, 28% say television and 16% say school.

One performance measure that an educational campaign has is Web site visits. With 32% of survey respondents saying they saw our campaigns on-line we work hard to provide useful and timely information on our Internet sites. Even though our campaigns include a television advertisement component we do not see a spike in Web site traffic due to tagging our URL onto the commercials. More and more residents and businesses go first to the Internet to find recycling information. Keeping your web

site up-to-date is imperative and doesn't require lots of money.

For RecycleGuys.org, October spikes are caused by a Halloween craft page. The page consistently comes up in search engines and includes a funny ghoulish voice when refreshed. There are also consistently higher visit totals each April, which reflects the Earth Day bump.

For RE3.org, the August 2007 spike in Web site hits was caused by an incentive program. Those that visited our Web site and pledged to recycle were registered to win a trip to the MTV Video Music Awards. After trending upwards from 2005-2007, Web site visits now oscillate on a seasonal cycle.

SOCIAL MARKETING VERSUS SOCIAL MEDIA

Social marketing is the application of commercial marketing concepts and techniques to target populations to achieve the goal of positive social change.

Changing social behavior requires overcoming barriers and increasing the perception of benefits. It involves four steps:

- 1) Identifying barriers,
- 2) Developing a strategy,
- 3) Conducting a pilot, and
- 4) Evaluating the strategy.

One strategy is communication and one type of communication is social media.

Social media takes traditional web pages one-step further, hence the term Web 2.0. Web 2.0 is about interacting with your audience via the Internet. Social media uses normal personal interaction (which just happens to be over the Internet) to pass along ideas, content, and knowledge to others. It's no different than asking your neighbor across the street what plumber they use, however, you do it on-line.

The book “The Tipping Point” by Malcolm Gladwell discussed the idea of “connectors”. Connectors are the people who in his words “link us up with the world”. He characterizes these individuals as having social networks of over one hundred people. Social media sites allow all of us to become connectors.

We also want to become “mavens”. Gladwell describes these people as information specialists. They accumulate knowledge and know how to share it with others. We hope that RE3.org is a location that people go to for up-to-date recycling information in N.C.

Taking it one step further, we also want to be “Salesmen”. Gladwell describes them as persuaders – charismatic people with negotiation skills. Using all these “rules of epidemics”, as Gladwell calls them, we will hopefully get more people to recycle in N.C. Social media can help us to reach that ultimate goal.

SOCIAL MEDIA

The use of social media can be an effective and economical way to spread recycling information. N.C. DPPEA has been using social media for the RE3.org campaign for over three years. The blog first began in November 2006. It is used to easily communicate with recycling coordinators and environmental educators throughout N.C. The posts provide recommended social marketing techniques, recent marketing and recycling news and data, DPPEA updates, etc.

In 2006 we also created a YouTube account. The on-line video sharing site allowed us to distribute our new RE3.org commercials in an economical manner. One RE3.org video has had over 12,000 views. In 2007, we uploaded the Recycle Guys commercials. One commercial has had over 31,000 views. Typical peaks occur during April due to Earth Day publicity. The “Grasscycling” commercial was placed on YouTube’s home page in honor of Earth Day in 2008.

In December of 2006 we created our MySpace page and our Facebook group. At this time MySpace was the better social networking site because it was available to all, used by more people and you could designate your own URL. Much has changed since 2006. We now use Facebook more.

In 2006 Facebook became available to anyone with an email address. Since then the number of active Facebook users has surpassed those on MySpace, therefore we now use Facebook more. We have different ways for a Facebook user to find RE3.org: through a group, cause, and page. We currently utilize the “page” function more,

for its friendlier user interface as well as the ability to link updates to our Twitter account.

In May of 2007 we created our Flickr account for both campaigns. Flickr is an on-line photo sharing site. It allows people to download our high quality resolution pictures and graphics easily. It also allows us to share pictures of events we attend.

In 2008 we began using Twitter for the RE3.org campaign. Twitter is a micro-blogging site that only allows posts of 140 characters or less. By using the Twitter search function you can see what people are saying about a topic in real time. We typically “tweet” about recycling, specifically in North Carolina and our local communities. In the fall of 2009 many tweets were devoted to spreading information about North Carolina’s new plastic bottle landfill disposal ban. During this time, dozens of Twitter users “re-tweeted” or composed their own tweet about the plastic bottle disposal ban. We saw a 12% increase in Twitter followers during the fall of 2009.

SOCIAL MEDIA AND BEHAVIOR CHANGE

In the spring of 2009, N.C. DPPEA partnered with U.N.C. Charlotte to conduct a study linking social media with behavior change.

The study aimed to increase recycling tonnage and positive attitudes towards recycling. It was hypothesized that upon receiving this social media intervention, students would use this information to influence others in their residence hall to recycle more frequently and that the recycling rate for this residence hall would increase. Residents from Cedar, Hickory, and Sycamore Halls were surveyed about their daily habits, knowledge about recycling, and recycling choices. During the initial surveying of students, the amount of recyclables from each residence hall were collected and weighed for four weeks to achieve a recycling baseline.

Residents from Hickory Hall and Cedar Hall were used as control groups. Influencing recycling habits in these residence halls was not attempted, and the students received no intervention material. In an attempt to increase recycling, the students from Sycamore Hall that indicated their desire to participate in the project were emailed information about recycling. During the months of February and March 2009, the participants received four consecutive weekly emails from RE3.org which provided a link to a social networking site (Facebook.com and YouTube.com), reminded the student to recycle and asked them to remind their friends to recycle.

After four weeks of emails to residents of Sycamore Hall, a follow-up survey was conducted during a two week time frame in April 2009 to determine any attitudinal or

reported behavior changes towards recycling. The social media interventions were established with 27 students, ten males and 17 females. Additionally, the weights of the recycled material from the three residence halls were again collected and measured for four weeks in April 2009 to see if the amount of recycling in the residence hall had increased.

Before week one, no participant was a fan of UNC Charlotte Recycling or the RE3.org page on Facebook. It is unknown if any were following RE3.org on Twitter or had seen the YouTube page prior to the study. At the end of the four weeks, one known intervention participant had become a fan of UNC Charlotte Recycling. However, during the time of the study RE3.org's Twitter following nearly doubled in size as well as RE3.org's YouTube page saw an increase in visitors. While these social media trends might correlate with the RE3.org weekly emails, they do not reflect causation. It is still unclear as to the effect of using social media tools for recycling behavior change.

Comparing the initial survey to the final survey showed a definite increase in the number of students from Sycamore Hall who claimed to "always" or "frequently" recycle in their residence hall. However, the actual amount of recyclable material collected from Sycamore Hall decreased. Students from Cedar Hall and Hickory Hall increased the amount material they recycled in their residence halls.

Educating students about recycling is important, however according to the students surveyed, the majority of them felt they had sufficient recycling knowledge but forget to do it. The recycling barriers identified in this study were 1) not thinking about recycling or 2) inconveniently located recycling bins. According to the student surveys, they receive news and information via television (82%), the Internet (51%) and friends/family (66%). Two of these strategies lend themselves well to the use of social media. The continued use of this economical and demographically appropriate approach is recommended to remind people to recycle and help them influence their peers to recycle.

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS ABOUT SOCIAL MEDIA

N.C. DPPEA often gets questions on how we can find the time to update and maintain the several social media accounts RE3.org uses. We see these social media sites as an important part of our education and outreach strategy. The popularity of Facebook, Twitter, etc. with the RE3.org demographic makes the time spent on the social media sites appropriate. We find that if you dedicate the time, you see results. For example, during the 2009 N.C. State Fair, we daily updated the RE3.org Facebook Page with pictures and status updates about our booth at the fair.

After the 10 day event was over, we saw an 8% increase in Facebook Page Fans.

Another question we often receive is about allowing comments to our social media sites. We received some inappropriate comments on our YouTube account. However, YouTube and Blogger allow you to approve comments before they are posted. YouTube also has a filter mechanism that removes all swear words. We do allow negative comments to be posted on our sites (they occur very infrequently). We respond to them with factual, pertinent recycling information. We see it as a way to start a dialogue.

Lastly, we are often asked how does one set up and use a social networking site. We created and recorded a webinar with step-by-step information, including screen captures, to help walk people through starting a social media component to their educational campaign. The webinar can be found on RE3.org at <http://www.re3.org/coordinators.htm>.

