Social Marketing in Action: Increasing Recycling in a Large Organization

Todd Weaver, Georgia State University, USA

This research addresses the important question of whether grassroots social marketing efforts can successfully increase recycling in a large organization. Guided by established behavioral theories, I employ an Action Research methodology to engage with concerned groups at a large university in the southeastern United States. This collaboration involves gaining an initial understanding of the situation, planning and implementing social marketing efforts intended to improve the situation, and learning from reflection on these efforts. This approach will not only improve the problematic situation but also give insight into the individual and organizational processes involved in initiating and sustaining pro-environmental behaviors.

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**Topic**

In recent years, environmental sustainability has become a matter of great concern, prompting individuals, communities, and organizations to take up the difficult task of identifying and reducing their environmental impact. By employing Action Research methodology to intervene in a specific problem situation over time, my research will address the important question of whether grassroots social marketing efforts can successfully increase pro-environmental behavior in a large organization.

**Theoretical Frameworks**

The majority of research on pro-environmental behavior has employed two related theories: Ajzen’s theory of planned behavior (1991) and Schwartz’s model of altruistic behavior (1977). Researchers have used these models to examine pro-environmental behavior descriptively by demonstrating the relationship between attitudes, norms and/or intentions and behavior (e.g., Tonglet, Phillips and Bates 2004; Guagnano, Stern and Deitz 1995). However, relatively little research has attempted to identify the processes by which pro-environmental behaviors can be initiated and increased over time. By using Action Research to investigate these behavioral models in a specific context, I hope to gain insight into the behavioral antecedents of pro-environmental behavior as well as the social marketing techniques that can influence these antecedent conditions.

**Methodology**

Action Research involves a collaboration between the researcher and an organization or community that leads to immediate and ongoing improvements in a problem situation (Susman and Evered 1978). Action Research is particularly appropriate for contributions to transformative consumer research (Ozanne and Saatcioglu 2008), which has been championed by the Association for Consumer Research (Mick 2006). Although there are a variety of Action Research approaches, I am employing Susman and Evered’s cycle (1978), which includes the following five steps: diagnosing, action planning, action taking, evaluating, and specifying learning.

The context of this research is a large, southeastern university that is lagging behind other local universities in terms of sustainability efforts. In order to make the scope of this project manageable, I am restricting my focus to recycling, since recycling is a tangible and visible aspect of sustainability that is easily understood by most people. The first step of the Action Research process involves engaging with the community to gain a shared understanding of the problematic situation. I employed a variety of ethnographic methods in this diagnosing stage, including semi-structured interviews with informants that spanned the three focal categories of students, faculty, and staff; an online, qualitative survey of the same groups; observations of recycling behavior on campus; and secondary research that included academic journals, publications of the university, and publications of recycling-oriented organizations, such as the Association for the Advancement of Sustainability in Higher Education (AASHE). These sources revealed three important themes that will guide the subsequent steps of the Action Research project.

**Initial Findings**

The first theme that emerged from my research is that recycling has not been an institutional focus at this university. Unlike many colleges today, there is no person or department tasked with improving sustainability. Although several groups are undertaking a variety of independent efforts to increase recycling, the overall effectiveness of these efforts seems to be limited by their ad-hoc, uncoordinated approach. Different constituencies hear different messages concerning recycling, see different types of recycling bins in different places, and are not sure that recycling bins will be available in a given space or building. This lack of focus has likely suppressed important precursors for recycling, such as social norms and ascriptions of responsibility in Schwartz’s (1977) model.

The second theme that emerged is that there is a general lack of awareness of the recycling services available on campus. Community members are not sure which materials can be recycled on campus, nor are they confident that materials placed in bins are actually recycled. If awareness were higher, it would be reasonable to expect that recycling would increase at the university even absent any other changes in current practice. For example, in Ajzen’s (1991) model, the lack of awareness would have a detrimental effect on perceived behavioral control over recycling.

Finally, the third theme that emerged from my research is that many students, faculty and staff members do not regard recycling as an important norm. Just as the university’s administration has not emphasized recycling and other sustainability initiatives, it seems that many campus constituents do not feel that recycling is a priority. Again, this finding relates to the behavioral antecedents identified in the Schwartz (1977) and Ajzen (1991) models. For example, according to Schwartz (1977), the internalization of social norms regarding
recycling would be an important antecedent of recycling behavior. Together, these themes provide an explanation of the low level of recycling at this university, but they also suggest ways in which recycling might be increased via social marketing efforts.

**Current Status and Expected Contributions**

Currently I am engaging with campus groups in the action planning stage, in which we will use our shared understanding of the problematic situation to develop social marketing campaigns aimed at increasing recycling at the university. These efforts will focus on creating the behavioral antecedents identified by Ajzen (1991) and Schwartz (1977). Furthermore, longitudinal measures of these antecedents will provide evidence of their relationship to recycling behavior. Once complete, I anticipate that this research will not only increase recycling in the focal organization, but it will also provide important insights into the process by which recycling behavior can be initiated and increased over time.

**Selected References**


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**The Influence of Intrinsic and Extrinsic Messages and Benefits on Motivations to Donate**

Jennifer Wiggins Johnson, Kent State University, USA

Pamela Grimm, Kent State University, USA

Bret Ellis, Kent State University, USA

It is a common practice for nonprofit organizations to send marketing communications to potential donors that have either intrinsically or extrinsically focused messages. Communications with intrinsically focused messages may emphasize the organization’s need, the positive outcomes that the donation will have for the organization and its constituents, and the satisfaction that the donor will feel from having helped the organization. Extrinsicly focused messages may emphasize the extrinsic rewards or benefits that the donor will receive in exchange for his or her donation, such as invitations to special events, tangible rewards, or social recognition. The purpose of this research was to determine whether message focus, either intrinsic or extrinsic, had an impact on donors’ motivation to donate.

Research on motivation has repeatedly found that extrinsic rewards can decrease an individual’s intrinsic motivation to engage in a behavior (Deci and Ryan 1985; Harackiewicz, Manderlink, and Sansone 1984; Harackiewicz and Sansone 2000; Lepper, Greene, and Nisbett 1973). This overjustification effect suggests that when individuals experience both intrinsic and extrinsic rewards for a behavior, the behavior is overjustified and the individual attributes the behavior to the extrinsic reward (Deci and Ryan 1985). This results in a drop in intrinsic motivation after the receipt of the rewards. Non-marketing messages have been found to reverse the effects of extrinsic rewards on intrinsic motivations by making intrinsic motivations more salient (Fazio 1981). We believe that the benefits stressed in marketing communications, either intrinsic or extrinsic, will have an impact on motivations to donate that may mitigate the effects of offering a reward for the donation.

An experiment was used to investigate this phenomenon. Three groups of undergraduate students, at three different locations, received different communications messages asking them to participate in a food drive. Messages were delivered verbally by their instructor and through a series of three e-mail messages. One group received intrinsically focused messages, one group received extrinsically focused messages and the third group acted as a control and received no messages, only basic information about the food drive. The intrinsically focused messages emphasized the help that the students would provide for families in need, and the extrinsically focused messages emphasized a promised reward of a pizza party to the students if they reach a predetermined goal for the food drive. While only the extrinsic messages condition emphasized the pizza party, all of the groups were promised and received a pizza party at the conclusion of the food drive if they met a set goal.

Under the cover of a research project on donations being conducted by a friend of the instructor, participants’ intrinsic and extrinsic motivations to participate in the food drive were measured three times: once prior to the receipt of any messages, once after the message manipulation, and once after the pizza party. Motivations were measured using two multi-item scales measured on a 1-7 scale with endpoints “strongly agree” and “strongly disagree.” Students received extra credit for participating in the research.

A total of 142 students participated in the study: 60 in the intrinsic condition; 54 in the extrinsic condition and 26 in the control group. The items designed to measure motivation were factor analyzed across all three groups. Four items for intrinsic motivation and four items for extrinsic motivation were retained. Factor loadings for the items ranged from .73 to .94, and α= .94 for the intrinsic motivation items and α=.88 for the extrinsic motivation items. The four items for each factor were summed resulting in a mean range of 4 to 28. Manipulation