

MESSAGES THAT STICK: POLICY AND THE PUBLIC

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ABSTRACT: Outreach communications about urban forestry are intended to change attitudes and behavior. Principles derived from psychological research can provide glue so these messages stick. Examples focus on local decision-makers.

Thousands of dollars have been spent to build awareness regarding urban and community forestry issues. The implicit purpose of outreach is to change attitudes and behavior in support of city trees. Yet, information campaigns can be very expensive and a variety of studies suggest that attaining the desired response from individuals is unlikely (McKenzie-Mohr, 2000).

Persuasion psychology yields ideas that can be used to create more effective behavior change tools. The research literature is extensive, though largely invisible to the professionals who can most benefit from it. This paper will introduce principles derived from psychological studies that can be applied to urban and community forestry outreach.

Selecting An Audience

Identifying a target audience is essential. Marketers segment the general populace by age, geographic location and sociological traits. Acting strategically, information campaigns can be addressed to audiences that have a greater degree of influence on a community's programs.

Local government officials and their staff are very influential in allocating resources for tree programs. While the principles outlined in this paper can be applied to any defined audience, local decision-makers will be used to illustrate ideas.

First, the Messages . . .

Communications with and for local decision-makers are usually intended to persuade them to change attitudes and behaviors. Central processing is the term for messages that become integrated into a person's attitude or value system and are likely to be reflected in behavior.

Psychological research has explored cognitive processing and durability of communications. Message receivers who thoughtfully consider

message content demonstrate more enduring attitude change. In contrast, when receivers have little motivation and/or ability to think about the message presented, the effects are typically short lived.

Urban forestry issues may be portrayed with catchy graphics or clever sound bites. Such peripheral communications do get attention but have not proven to be very persuasive. Generally speaking, attention-getting ad campaigns (like Got Milk) may influence product purchases but do little to influence significant behavioral changes (Bator and Cialdini, 2000).

Recommendations? Stick to a main message. Provide vivid details and examples about the primary message. Avoid vivid secondary or extraneous details, as they can distract the receiver from attending to or comprehending the primary message. And try to present the message in a context where the person has a chance to consider the ideas and reflect on them.

Active interaction increases the likelihood that the receiver will integrate the messages. One-on-one meetings focus attention and provide opportunities to respond to personal interests of the decision-maker. Repeating the message over time and providing a written version of the ideas also helps. Research on memory shows that retrieval of a person's past experiences is a more important contributor to current opinions than is retrieval of abstract concepts. Attempt to connect current messages to the receiver's positive memories.

. . . Then, the Glue

Local officials work in complex, message-dense environments. What methods can be used to convey information, overcome distraction and enhance the stickiness of urban forestry messages?

Studies of the psychology of persuasion reveal that certain interpersonal dynamics are powerful influences on how we think and act. These behind the scenes tactics can be used to improve the stickiness and power of communications (Cialdini, 2001).

Authority

Many outreach communications includes tree benefits data provided by scientific studies. Such expert generated factoids are an effort to persuade audiences using authority.

Authority is a powerful motivator for defining or encouraging individual behavior. We are trained as children to recognize and acknowledge legitimate rule. Our legal, military, religious and political systems all reinforce those lessons in adult settings.

Relying on the pronouncements of authority can provide genuine, practical advantages as many people trust informed experts to offer insight about unfamiliar situations. Forwarding scientific information to decision-makers provides them with guidance on how to respond to community forestry situations about which they may have little first-hand knowledge.

Reciprocation

The authority of scientific information is but one persuasion approach. Reciprocation is another tactic. Imbedded in most of our social exchanges is the rule of reciprocation. The rule says that we should try to repay, in kind, what another person has provided us. If someone does us a favor, we should do one in return. This behavior is deep-seated and pervasive. The web of indebtedness has been observed in all human societies; anthropologists (Leakey & Lewin, 1978) observe that our ancestors learned to share food and skills in an honored network of obligation.

Even the smallest of favors bestowed on a person will prompt reciprocation response. For instance, fundraisers know that including a token gift in a request for donations (e.g. personalized address labels) can nearly double the number of donors. Similarly, food servers have learned that simply giving customers a candy along with their bill significantly increases tips. Also, businesses have found that, after accepting a gift, customers are willing to

purchase products or services they would have otherwise declined (Cialdini, 2001).

Uninvited favors or small gifts are nearly as effective in triggering feelings of indebtedness as are requested favors. We are so programmed that uninvited first favors create a sense of obligation. We find it difficult to fend off an unsolicited gift, then a sense of obligation to repay follows. The urge to repay perceived debt is a powerful motivator. Even small gifts, such as a notepad or pen, left during a meeting can prompt the pay-back reaction.

Commitment and Consistency

Each person strives to be consistent in his encounters with the world. A pledge or commitment to an idea or cause, no matter how insignificant, is the first step in integrating a new dimension of our personal self-image. A promise or pledge of certain actions, be it verbal or written, is a catalyst for an internal conviction.

When committed to a principle or behavior, a person will often adopt an identity that is consistent with the pledge. These ongoing efforts to avoid personal dissonance will frequently result in long-lasting attitude and behavior change. Cialdini (2001, p.53) explains, Once we make a choice or take a stand, we will encounter personal and interpersonal pressures to behave consistently with that commitment.

Early, modest commitments are important; great influence is concealed within small promises. A personal commitment can launch a snowball effect. Resulting change is not just specific to a particular condition; it covers a whole range of related situations. And as more behaviors are expressed greater commitment is self-reinforced.

Decision-makers can be encouraged to go on record in support of a relatively minor political gesture — to pass a resolution in favor of Arbor Day or dedication of funds for a modest tree planting. Additional external incentives can be used to motivate pledge behavior. The promise of publicity for desired actions (e.g. an article in the local paper) or favorable photo opportunities may be valued.

When someone takes a stand that is public and visible to others, there arises a drive to maintain that stand in order to appear to be a consistent

person. Following through on one's commitments presents an image of being rational and trustworthy, character traits that are widely admired.

Scarcity and Contrast

Perceptions are formed through comparison of multiple objects or situations. One experience of contrast is scarcity. Collectors of all sorts of things can attest to the increased value associated with scarcity of something.

People are often more motivated by the thought of losing something than by the thought of gaining something of equal value. Public health officials make use of this dynamic in social marketing; campaigns advising women to get check-ups for breast cancer or to encourage smokers to quit are far more successful if the consequences are expressed as what is lost rather than what is gained.

Scientific reports of urban forestry benefits can be presented in terms of what is lost by not investing in a city's forest rather than what is gained. Painting a picture of potential losses, reinforced by photographic images that show contrasts are a persuasive way to convey urban forestry needs.

In some communities trees are not perceived to be scarce. They may be considered abundant, even though tree professionals are aware of looming forest health or disease losses. Projected losses can be graphically portrayed; aerial photographs are useful.

Catastrophic tree loss (e.g. due to ice or wind) can enhance public perceptions of value. In experiments a drop from abundance to scarcity of valued objects produces decidedly more positive reaction to an object than does constant scarcity. An experience of community-wide tree loss can prompt citizens to realize the depth of feeling and value that they hold for trees, providing a window of opportunity to generate greater public support.

Social Proof

The concept of urban forestry is relatively little known or understood in many communities. Often, decision-makers are first uncertain about what urban forestry is, and then what actions they should take in regard to it.

The actions of other people, either observed directly or reported to us, are powerful motivators for our own actions. From trivial actions (whether to eat chicken with fingers at a dinner party) to major decisions (how to invest our retirement assets), the perceived actions of those around us will be important guides in making choices. In ambiguous situations there is a tendency for people to look and see what someone else is doing.

The larger the number of people we perceive to be doing an action, the more likely we are to comply and follow their lead. Sometimes an active display of commitment by one or two people is enough to get the ball rolling. Once the social evidence builds momentum many more people are willing to commit and act on behalf of a cause.

The principle of social proof works best when we are observing the behavior of people just like us. It is the conduct of our perceived peers that gives us the greatest insight into what constitutes correct behavior for ourselves. We are more inclined to follow the lead of a similar individual than a dissimilar one. Testimonials from people who are similar to us can be powerful motivators.

Visual material is also an effective way to depict how others behave. After showing videos of certain desirable behaviors to children, psychologists have found that kids quickly emulate the depicted acts. Behaviors are continued long after film viewing. Pictures of community forestry events (such as tree plantings or restoration projects) that include people who are similar may persuade others to join in.

Conclusions

Urban forestry outreach communications are being delivered at local, state and federal levels. Thousands of dollars are being spent to build awareness. The implicit purpose of most information campaigns is to change attitudes and behaviors regarding urban tree and forest issues.

Local decision-makers are an influential group of people who generate the policy and resources that shape community forestry programs. Delivering messages to them is an important activity. What can help make messages stick?

Insights from psychological research provide the glue. First, main ideas are important, delivered in

a context where the receiver is able to consider them and take psychological ownership. Then, the interpersonal dynamics of how the message is interpreted are also important. Authority,

reciprocation, commitment and consistency, scarcity, and social proof are all psychological principles that boost the persuasive power of urban forestry messages.