

# OUTREACH FOR THE STARS

ARE YOU FEELING THE TEMPTATION TO USE THE SAME OLD MESSAGING TO COMMUNICATE PROGRAM SPECIFICS TO RESIDENTS? DO YOURSELF – AND YOUR COMMUNITY – A FAVOR AND CONSIDER THESE SIX TIPS FOR EFFECTIVE RECYCLING CAMPAIGNS. BY JASON HALE

I freely admit it: I have launched some truly poor communications campaigns for the recycling programs I've operated. But the good news is I'm rehabilitated.

It typically happened in the spring, when workloads were crushing, program improvements were in full swing, material quantities were cranking up and all manner of official reports were due. My calendar would let me know it was time to inform the public about a special collection event, or perhaps to remind residents about the services we offered.

I'd have every intention of updating the truly wretched spring-time flier I created my first month on the job, a quasi-advertisement that was a direct descendant of the campaign that had been run since the launch of the program. A voice in the back of my head would scream, "Don't send this!" But, regrettably, bowing to an overflowing plate, I'd approve it anyway, check the task off my list and move on.

This was simply not OK.

And it's not an acceptable practice for your program, either, especially when the basics for outstanding outreach can be easily grasped. After looking into the great campaigns that are out in front of U.S. residents today – and talking to the marketing pros who created them – six simple tips for campaigns emerge and they can be followed every time. These aren't the steps to running a campaign; rather, they are the elements that make a campaign reach people and truly affect behavior.

To contextualize this communication credo, I recently spoke with Marissa Segundo, recycling coordinator for the City of Largo, Fla., as well as Seth Nickinson, public outreach coordinator for Santa Barbara, Calif. Both run recycling programs that have seen success because of, not in spite of, their communication campaigns. And wouldn't you know it, they employ the six tips.

## Tip 1: Consistent core

Change may be the only constant in life, but variations in messaging causes confusion, which we all know is a leading cause of participation and contamination issues. Your campaign shouldn't give people a reason to throw their hands in the air and walk away from recycling.

Make sure you use consistent language in describing the materials you do and don't accept, as well as in explaining how to prepare and set them out. Direct folks to a single point of contact, such as a website or phone number, and use the same logos, colors and layout themes across all materials and platforms to generate familiarity and recognition.

Case in point: When the City of Largo rolled out single-stream carts two years ago, all outreach materials were linked to the everything-you-need-but-nothing-you-don't Largo Recycles More website.

Santa Barbara follows similar thinking. "Choose links and language carefully and stick to them," Nickinson said. He makes a point of repeating the same telephone numbers and URL ([santabarbaraca.gov/recycling](http://santabarbaraca.gov/recycling)) on all materials and maintains consistency with color and other visual cues.

## Tip 2: Simplicity rules

Many of us are well aware of the KISS principle (keep it simple, stupid), and it's as true as ever in campaigns. If you try to convey too much in your marketing materials, your messages will become garbled and lost, or your audience will ignore the entire effort because it seems too complicated.

Instead, think about what you're really aiming to accomplish. What behavior are you trying to influence? Increase participation?





A simple, image-oriented sticker used in Largo, Fla.

Reduce a specific contaminant? Introduce a new material? That main goal should be the sole focus of the campaign.

"We try and be selective each year about our messages," Nickinson said. "We don't presume we can tell everyone everything all at once."

## THE HOW OF EFFECTIVE RECYCLING CAMPAIGNS



Consulting firm RRS developed the above graphic outlining outreach best practices.

### Tip 3: Focus on the audience

Get out of your own head for a moment and think about the 82-

year old grandmother, or the computer programmer who rarely has time to set out his cart at the curb, or the third-grade teacher who spends her evenings planning lessons and grading papers. Unlike

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you or me, recycling isn't the main focus of their daily interactions.

Still, you need all of those individuals to get on board with the program. The first step is using language they understand – that means avoiding the ultra-technical or jargon-dense details that you and I geek out on in recycling chat groups or at annual conferences. For normal people, those finer points can be intimidating, confusing or a downright snore fest.

In addition, you need to understand where your audience goes for information. Is the grandmother watching YouTube videos? Is the computer programmer getting the local newspaper delivered? Answering these questions can help you target your communications efforts, thereby applying your limited budget to the best avenues of connection.

In Largo, program staff set up tables at events, the library and other locations frequented by Largo residents. Segundo, the recycling coordinator, talked to people to gauge their preferences on critical basics like how to refer to “single-stream.” It turns out that more than 60 percent of residents liked “mixed recycling” best, and that is what was used in program communications.

## Tip 4: Fewer words, more images

Stop for a moment and think about how the world is communicating. Some of us tell our personal story through social media – over 350 million new photos are uploaded to Facebook each day, according to a 2013 report on Internet usage. I hear you pointing back to Tip 3 and shouting, “Not everyone is using Facebook – remember Grandma?” I could never forget dear grandma, but the point here is that visual storytelling is prevalent.



*The winners of Largo's recycling billboard design contest signed their work with giant crayons, an event that helped the campaign stand out.*

Let's take it from another angle: science. A major 1979 study on communication found that when comprehension was immediately tested after participants were shown information in different formats, illustrated text was 9 percent more effective than text presented with no imagery. When subjects were tested later, illustrated

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text proved to be 83 percent more effective than text alone. Now, one study doesn't make it so, but visuals are clearly the way to our brains.

Segundo gave a perfect example. Largo had recently launched its program and was running into yard waste being included in the recycling carts. She could have sent out letters explaining how the organics would contaminate some of the materials, cost more money and raise residual rates, but that would have gone deeper and more complex than was warranted or productive. Instead she opted to create a visually oriented sticker and stuck it to the carts. The idea both employed imagery and kept things simple (the second tip on our list).

In Santa Barbara, Nickinson typically divides curbside materials into four categories: plastics; glass containers; paper and cardboard; and metal. He includes example pictures that show the most prevalent material mix and offers more in-depth information on each category on the program's website. In this way, Santa Barbara rocks out tips 1-4.

## Tip 5: Never one and done

Anyone who has ever tried to teach something to a child, or to my Uncle Joe, knows that you cannot say something once and expect it to sink in. In my experience, communication requires three to seven "touches" to fully get through. Especially in today's media-saturated world, we can't retain everything we encounter.

Nickinson employs an editorial calendar for the Santa Barbara program to ensure the program hits its core diversion messages across key media repeatedly over time. "Not only is it not 'one and done' in a given year, we can't ever stop good education," he advised. "Recycling is not necessarily top of mind. Plus new people move to town, kids grow up – we need to continue to remind people over the years."

In Largo, meanwhile, the city's cart rollout included a year-long campaign with multiple touch points across various media. Residents received a letter from the mayor, information was sent home with school-children, "Meet the recycling truck" events offered face-to-face discussions, an information packet was hung on each recycling cart delivered prior to the first day of service and social media posts and ads were deployed.

Even after the rollout, Segundo continues to reinforce the program with media

touch-points. She also started a wildly successful campaign that offers indoor recycling storage bags featuring images of recyclable materials.

Residents hang the bags wherever they generate waste, an action that carries multiple benefits: It helps keep plastic bag contamination out of the cart, boosts recycling convenience and serves as a constant reminder to divert items from the trash stream.

## Tip 6: Make it interesting

This is perhaps the hardest objective for a local recycling program to accomplish. Interesting is in the eye of the beholder, and your idea of funny may be your local elected official's idea of inappropriate. But by not trying to instill creativity, you're missing the chance to grab your audience. Think about your favorite ad campaign. Chances are it's far from bland.

So how do you walk the line between



*Santa Barbara's trash monster, the star of a memorable local public service announcement.*

clever and crude? This may be best expressed through examples.

Santa Barbara created a campaign that used a 30-second public service announcement to reinforce the message of litter prevention, and it featured the Trash Monster, a human-sized foam-covered curbside recycling cart with angry eyes and pointy teeth. As if that wasn't memorable enough, the creature routinely tackled those uneducated folks who tossed chip bags on the ground, dumped mattresses on side streets or flicked cigarette butts in public parks. The PSA ran on television in local ad spots as well as in on-screen cinema advertising before movies in the local theaters.

Similarly, a couple different aspects of Largo's single-stream cart rollout kept things interesting. First was the letter from the mayor. Each residence received a personal-



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ized note in a fancy gold envelope, in which the mayor expressed her support for the upcoming new program and emphasized the importance of recycling. It was designed to stand out as special, akin to Willie Wonka's golden tickets.

Second was a unique billboard contest. Kids in grades K-5 were asked to design a billboard expressing a passion for recycling and the new mixed recycling program. The City received nearly 200 entries and the two winners were hoisted high into the air by a fire truck to sign the actual billboard with

a giant crayon. Not surprisingly, dangling children hundreds of feet in the air with giant writing implements to sign a billboard got some attention. (Rest easy: The kids made their way back to the ground safe and unharmed.)

## So does it work?

In Largo's first year after switching from bins to carts, the community recycled 6,800 tons of material, a 60 percent increase over the previous year. That garnered a \$250,000

savings in disposal fees.

And outreach seems to have been a major component in the gains. When residents were polled about the biggest benefit of the new curbside program, 49 percent referred directly to the campaign slogan. Furthermore, a survey found that 65 percent of residents were aware of the new recycling program before carts were delivered and 82 percent knew which materials were advertised as unacceptable.

"If you don't set measureable objectives before you go into a new program, you are doing yourself a disservice," Segundo said. "Seeing the tonnage increase result was great, but evaluating the behavior-change objectives was the coolest part of the campaign."

Santa Barbara has also felt the positive effects of well-planned and -executed outreach campaigns. As Nickinson put it, "Our consistent outreach, advertising and direct contact with constituents is a direct contributor to the low volume of confused or complaint calls we receive, and to our low contamination rates. We believe this strongly enough to continue a strong outreach campaign year after year."

The proof is in the diversion pudding, with 93 percent of Santa Barbara survey respondents stating the City is "on the right track" with respect to trash and recycling. Additionally, 77 percent said they are getting "the right amount of information" regarding recycling. As for those that want more information, Nickinson is gearing up to engage them in new and exciting ways.

## Go forth and campaign

There you have it. From now on, just say no to wretched campaign practices. The tips outlined above are straightforward, easy to incorporate and will add focus and polish to elevate your recycling campaigns and push higher levels of engagement. In turn, your recycling program can experience greater participation and reduced contamination levels, not to mention an improved and united community.

Raise your game. Make an impression. But beware of the Trash Monster.

**RR**

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