

Promoting Behavior Change Using Social Norms: Applying a Community Based Social Marketing Tool to Extension Programming

Abstract

Most educational programs are designed to produce lower level outcomes, and Extension educators are challenged to produce behavior change in target audiences. Social norms are a very powerful proven tool for encouraging sustainable behavior change among Extension's target audiences. Minor modifications to program content to demonstrate the practice of specific behaviors by target audience members' peers compared to others can make a big difference. It is advisable that Extension educators use a combination of descriptive and injunctive norms. Social norms should be applied more frequently by Extension educators in their programs to produce desired behavior change among target audiences.

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Introduction

In an environment with recent demographic shifts, complex funding structures, and stringent accountability measures, Extension educators are challenged to focus more on changing target audiences' behavior over lower-level outcomes (Franz & Townson, 2008; Frisk & Larson, 2011; McKenzie-Mohr, 2011; Peters & Franz, 2012; Pratt & Bowman, 2008; Skelly, 2005). It is well documented that most educational programs are designed to increase knowledge gain or change attitudes but have little or no effect on behavior (Frisk & Larson, 2012; McKenzie-Mohr, 2011).

Community-based social marketing (CBSM) is an alternative, behavior-focused approach to traditional knowledge-intensive programs and applies commercial marketing strategies to produce desired behavior change for the wellbeing of individuals and the whole community (Andreasen, 1995; Lee & Kotler, 2011; McKenzie-Mohr, 2011; Skelly, 2005). A major step in the CBSM process is the development of a strategy to encourage a behavior change using tools to address a target audience's barriers and benefits (McKenzie-Mohr, 2011). Social norms are recognized as an important CBSM tool that can encourage the desired behavior change among target audiences (Frisk & Larson, 2011; Goldstein, Cialdini, & Griskevicius, 2008; Lee & Kotler, 2011; McKenzie-Mohr, 2011; Schultz, Nolan, Cialdini, & Goldstein, 2007).

Social Norms

Social norms are defined as beliefs about whether specific behaviors are approved of by the people important to us (Ajzen, 1991). Several studies have confirmed that social norms can be used to encourage target audience members to adopt desired behaviors (Aarts & Dijksterhuis, 2003; Goldstein et al., 2008; Lewis & Neighbors, 2006; Schultz et al., 2007). Schultz et al. (2007) further classified social norms into descriptive and injunctive norms, where descriptive norms refer to behaviors that individuals in the community commonly engage in, while injunctive norms refer to the collective approval or disapproval among members of the community towards specific behaviors of interest.

Schultz et al. (2007) studied the effect of descriptive and injunctive norms on energy conservation and used door hangers to communicate information about individual households' energy consumption in comparison to their neighbors (descriptive norm). Some households also received a smiling emoticon (injunctive norm) if their energy consumption was below the norm and a sad emoticon if their energy consumption was greater. Surprisingly, among the households who received information alone, the high-energy consumers reduced their energy use, while low-energy consumers increased their consumption. In contrast, the low-energy group who received information and the smiling emoticon continued consuming less energy, which emphasizes the importance of combining descriptive and injunctive norms to produce behavior change (Schultz et al., 2007). In another experiment on hotel towel reuse, a descriptive norm appeal (how many people are reusing their hotel towels) was more successful than a general environmental message (Goldstein et al., 2008).

Neighbors have been shown to play important roles in homeowners' decisions to hire professional lawn service providers to apply chemicals (Blaine, Clayton, Robbins, & Grewal, 2012), and media promotion of perfect lawns has been shown to prompt homeowners to apply more chemicals (Clayton, 2007). Shaw et al. (2011) found that social norms were important factors in individuals' decisions to install rain gardens to benefit lakes. Due to the impact of social norms on behavior, it is important to thoroughly understand sources of normative messages among target audience members to provide us with an indication of who target audiences' respected peers are and where they look for information.

Case Study

To explore the source of normative messages influencing landscaping behaviors, a Web survey was administered to a purposive sample of Florida residents ($n=249$). Respondents received one of four randomly assigned open-ended questions and were asked to identify people, organizations, and websites that influence their landscaping behaviors. The data was analyzed using content analysis, where multiple researchers separately coded the various themes in the data (Creswell, 2005). The findings will be used to inform future campaigns where social norms are applied to landscape behaviors.

Table 1.

Major Sources of Information that Influence Residents' Landscaping Behaviors

Source Rank	Source of Information
1	Government (local, state or federal)

2	Family members
3	Peers
4	Mass media (includes major websites)
5	Internet search
6	Big box stores (Home Depot, Lowes and others)
7	Extension
8	Landscape professionals
9	Neighbor
10	Environmental/water conservation organizations
11	Homeowner's association
12	Newspaper/local media
13	Local landscape supply store
<i>Note.</i> The sources of information are listed in a sequence from most influential to least influential	

Social Norms Application

Social norms are of great use in encouraging behavior change among Extension clientele. Extension educators need not change the content of their programs to apply this tool, but may supplement programs with extra information related to the program's content. For example, Extension educators promoting home water conservation may consider supplementing information about the importance of water conservation with a comparison of a household's water use compared to their neighbors. This can be reinforced by expressing community support and indicating that the household is contributing to saving the environment.

Guidelines for using social norms in the Extension programming context follows (McKenzie-Mohr, 2011).

- Social norms should be used when members of a target audience are practicing the desired behavior. For example, prior to the rainy season (when irrigation needs are minimal), Extension professionals may provide normative messages to homeowners saying 70% of your neighbors do not irrigate during rainy days.
- Extension programs should use easily noticed normative messages. For example, the educational material for water conservation should provide a clear comparison of water used by a homeowner in relation to their neighbors.
- Extension educators should consider using normative messages to discourage negative behaviors, (avoiding watering the lawn during rain events) and to encourage positive behaviors, (installing rain

sensors).

- Descriptive norms should be used cautiously when undesirable behaviors are more prevalent among target audiences. For example, if the majority of homeowners are irrigating during rainy periods (undesirable behavior), providing normative information may lead to homeowners who were using less water to increase their water use to reach the average.
- Combine both descriptive and injunctive norms to encourage a particular behavior, such as providing the information to every homeowner about their average water use compared to community (descriptive norm) and community approval to homeowners who are using less water (injunctive norm).

Conclusions

Minor modifications to program content to demonstrate the practice of specific behaviors by a target audience compared to others can make a big difference. It is advisable that Extension educators use descriptive and injunctive norms combined. Extension educators are encouraged to use this powerful tool in their programs to produce sustainable behavior change among Extension's target audiences.

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