

# Social Marketing Focus Groups Summary

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Results from Thurston County and Pierce  
County Focus groups

**6/2011**

A total of four focus groups were conducted in support of the DOH funded Social Marketing for Onsite Sewage Systems project. The goal of the focus groups was to identify effective images and taglines to support education and outreach efforts by local health jurisdictions regarding septic system maintenance.

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## Introduction

A total of four focus groups were conducted in support of the DOH funded Social Marketing for Onsite Sewage Systems project. The goal of the focus groups was to identify effective images and taglines to support education and outreach efforts by local health jurisdictions regarding septic system maintenance.

Each focus group consisted of 8-12 citizens from either Pierce County or Thurston County, one facilitator, three note taking observers plus an audio recorder. The facilitator and observers were described to participants as non-experts who were interested in the effectiveness of education outreach materials that were under development. Participants were told that the knowledge of the participants was not being tested, rather the educational materials were being assessed and that participant reaction to the materials was critical to improving the materials.

Participants were recruited by a mailed invitation sent to approximately 1200 citizens. The mailings were directed to a set of random citizens selected by geographic area using county assessor database. The site selection criteria included geographic location of the property and that the parcel had an on-site sewage system. The invitation identified the health jurisdiction as the sponsor of the focus group, but the actual topic of on-site sewage systems was not mentioned on the invitation. Participants were offered a \$50 gift card for a local variety store for their time.

The Thurston County focus group participants lived in non-Marine Recovery Areas while the Pierce County focus groups consisted of citizens that live in a Marine Recovery Area. The Thurston County focus groups featured one group from an urban/suburban area and one group from a rural area while both Pierce County groups came from a rural area. The focus groups were held in meeting rooms near the areas represented by the participants and all began at 6:00 PM and concluded by 8:00 PM. Snacks and beverages were provided to participants and each focus group meeting included a 10 minute break.

The materials tested during the focus group included a series of mailers, a series of logo images, a set of taglines and an inventory for how to best communicate with participants.

The mailers used in the focus group were developed by Snohomish County staff for use in a social marketing campaign which was ongoing at the time of the focus groups. The mailers included a variety of images and rationales for recipients to properly maintain their septic system. The focus groups tested the impact for each of the images and rationales, as well as the impact of combinations of images and rationales.

The logo images were initially collected from a variety of existing septic system education projects. Participants were asked to describe how well the graphics made the connection between septic systems and the environment.

The taglines were culled from a variety of existing septic education projects. The focus group was asked to evaluate the taglines for immediate impact and what language might spur them to pursue further information or to take action. Both logo images and taglines

went through a process of elimination and refinement during the course of the focus groups based upon feedback from participants.

The inventory of communication methods consisted of a variety of standard means of communication, including newspaper articles or advertisements, workshops, and mailers. Participants were asked for their preferred method of receiving information about their septic system.

The facilitator followed a written guide that was designed to spur conversation amongst participants, allow participants to thoughtfully describe their reaction to the various materials and to maintain consistency in conversation between focus groups. As the focus groups progressed the guide was revised to improve group discussion and to reflect revisions to the materials.

### **General findings**

The four focus groups consistently described the role of the local health jurisdiction with positive terms. Local health jurisdictions were viewed to be impartial, knowledgeable and authoritative. The groups encouraged the local health jurisdiction to prominently feature both the name and logo as a method of increasing the likelihood that the education materials would be opened and read. A health jurisdiction logo indicated that the material was non-commercial and was likely to contain accurate information.

The number of messages any single brochure/flyer can effectively convey is limited. The groups tended to be able to describe what was expected of them if there were one or perhaps two actions they were asked to take. Education materials can be made more effective if the action that the audience is expected to take is clearly defined and limited to one or two actions.

Several main themes emerged as the reasons people are compelled to maintain their septic systems: to save money, protect their family's health and protect the environment, specifically water. These messages resonated with participants in all focus groups, *but the specific message tended to resonate with a discrete subset of participants*. In other words, there was no single message / image that resonated with all participants. When creating an education project it can be helpful to keep in mind that any single message will likely inspire a certain subset of the audience, and to increase the reach of the project it makes sense to promote several complementary messages in subsequent mailings or education efforts.

### **Specific lessons from messages and images**

We used a set of existing mailers created in Snohomish County as well as a set of standalone graphic logos to get feedback on images, language, layout and other factors that determine whether the mailer would be read or tossed into the recycle bin.

One message consistent throughout the groups is that the health jurisdiction name and logo are factors in whether the mailer is opened or not. Some common responses related to this:

- *“The health department logo got me to read it.”*
- *“This mailer coming from the government gives it validity”*
- *“I like the picture of the pumper, but the slogan about unbiased advice makes me wonder if I’m getting advice from an untrustworthy pumper? A health department logo up on top would make it clearer.”*
- *“I’d open it also, because it said it was from the health department, it’s not from a private company out to make money.”*

The flip side of this was sensitivity to whether the material came from a for-profit company and was an advertisement for a service.

- *“My first impression was that it was an ad and that I’d toss it”*
- *“The front picture would keep me from opening, looks like a medical advertisement.”*
- *“Once I figured out it wasn’t an ad I’d open it.”*

A mailer that featured a septic pumper on the outside panel received mixed response, though mostly positive. Many felt this image was very compelling, and others felt the image caused the mailer to look like an advertisement from a septic system pumping business.

- *“There’s a picture of someone actually doing something, which I think is real helpful.”*
- *“My eyes went to the truck and I was trying to ID the company”*
- *“Makes you think someone is going to charge you for something.”*

Though often mentioned as a trusted source of information, the health district wasn’t always entirely trusted:

- *“Am I possibly going to open up a can of worms by contacting the health department?”*
- *“The other part is that FREE is emphasized, but why is the health department sending someone out, but then I wonder if they’re looking to find violations.”*

We learned that a brochure is more likely to be read if the health district name and logo is prominently displayed on the front of the brochure. We also learned that we should make the motivation of the health department clear in the brochure in terms that make sense to the reader.

One of the mailers tried to convey too much information. Even though the information was narrowed down from “three simple steps” to “two simple steps” and calls to action were simplified over the course of the focus groups, participants felt that there was too much text and too many calls to action for one mailer. Many participants could not repeat the calls to action even as they looked at the mailer because there was too much information. Some common responses about this were:

- *“I’m confused about the message: Use water wisely OR protect the drainfield?”*
- *“In other words eliminate step 2 and step 3 because if the key is to educate people and to have someone from the county come out that would be all you need”.*
- *“I don’t want to say confusing, but you had to read a sentence a couple of times to figure it out. The second is that, uh, find the Snohomish County Health District certified pumper list and find the form with questions to ask pumpers before hiring at ‘www.’ And then do this, and then do that. It’s too much...”*

We learned that we should separate calls to action into separate mailers, so rather than trying to convey the message that septic owners could benefit from learning more about how their system operates and that the septic system should be professionally inspected every three years the message could be broken into smaller pieces:

- 1) Learn about your septic system and its needs
- 2) Have a certified professional inspect your system every three years.

Money came up time and time again as a prime motivator for participants: It was not seen as the primary motivator for all participants, but even those who perceived other aspects as more important agreed that saving money might spur their neighbors to action.

- *“It’s not so much keeping the family safe. It’s the amount of money it’s going to take to fix it.”*
- *“\$250 for maintenance or \$5000 on a repair put something like that on the front.”*
- *“Everyone cares a little about money; some people care a little about the environment.”*
- *“Don’t really like the image, but the words are interesting. How is it going to save me money?”*
- *“This is helpful because it tells me, “am I doing something that’ll damage my septic system and result in me paying to fix my septic system instead of going on a vacation?”*
- *“I don’t see how my septic system saves me money, it came with the house, it’s functioning and if I have it pumped, what else is there? It would take something more for me to show me how my septic was contributing to environment, not just my health. Maybe something I wasn’t aware of...like the environment, or if it said avoid expensive repairs that might get my attention.”*

The environment was mentioned as a value held by participants. Many participants were able to see a clear connection between septic systems and the environment; others struggled to see a direct connection:

- *“I didn’t like the words of improving My Quality of Life, but I would have liked to hear about improving my community’s quality of life.”*
- *“Saving the money isn’t what it’s about; it’s about watching the environment.”*
- *“The front cover might be more effective if it said ‘Do you know what parts of nature are affected by your septic?’”*
- *“Stop poisoning the fish that you eat would be more compelling to me.”*

- *“It’s important to keep water clean but we need to balance that with property rights.”*
- *“Show how a septic system 800ft away (a long distance away) will affect a stream.”*
- *“Fishing makes you think about connections between septic and water problems.”*

Protecting family was also a theme that seemed valued by participants. This was seen from both the positive aspect of wanting to protect the family as well as viewing some images or message in a negative light if the message appeared to be manipulative or threatening:

- *“This one here is trying to get right on target, to the parents and children of families.”*
- *“Pierce County Is Here To Protect You And Your Family’s Health, that would make me want to read it.”*
- *“I don’t like kids to sell really just about anything, that’s just me; I work at a pre-school and don’t like to see it.”*

A mailer that featured an image of children lying on a lawn with the suggestion that they could be on a drainfield had mixed results, mostly negative (overall negative for 3 out of 4 focus groups). Several participants felt offended that the image “uses my kids to get me to do something.” Other negative feedback came from participants who don’t have children around the house, or don’t have children who play near their drainfield because their drainfield is not under the lawn, and as a result, the image doesn’t call to them.

- *“This one here is trying to get right on target, to the parents and children of families.”*
- *“It might work if you had kids at home.”*
- *“I kind of thought, it was silly, but I thought of a scare tactic. Isn’t that weird? I went to a really weird place with that. I am tired of people exploiting kids to make their point.”*
- *“More tempted to open it because it has kids on it.”*
- *“It makes me think Wow, maybe I should think about this.”*

Images of family made an impact so long as the image and message were clearly linked. One image that didn’t work well featured a mom and children on a lawn playing with a water hose. The intent was to encourage readers to use water thoughtfully so as to not overload their septic system. The response was overwhelmingly negative. Participants did not correlate the image with the corresponding message. They were confused and frustrated by the lack of clarity. They did not feel the image related to them whatsoever. As a result, the vast majority of participants said they would trash the mailer without opening it.

A message that worked better was a father and child fishing on a dock and smiling at the reader; the intent was to encourage readers to use water wisely to protect the environment. Both men and women resonated with the image. Virtually all participants said that they would open the mailer and look inside.

An overarching lesson we learned was that no single approach appealed to all participants. It appears that a successful education and outreach campaign can be built upon several messages that are aligned, such as creating two brochures; one with a focus on strategies to avoid hefty repair bills through ongoing septic maintenance and a second brochure focused on protecting the environment through ongoing septic maintenance.

The tone of the materials also affected how the materials were received. Participants appreciated the positive directives (“do this”) in a mailer and said they don’t like mailers that tell them “don’t do this” without telling them the preferred behavior.

- *“Both the flyers have good information, but this one is more positive, one says what we shouldn’t do, one says what we should do.”*
- *“Maybe include dos and don’ts on the same brochure.”*

Another discussion that recurred was the assignment of blame for a failing septic system:

- *“I like it because it’s not making a person feel defensive, it says right on the front “unknowingly”. It’s saying you’re not a bad person, you just didn’t know.”*

At each focus group there were questions about the nuts and bolts of septic system operation. For example there was a lengthy discussion about the depth of a drain field, or the cost of having a septic tank pumped:

- *“The thing that strikes about this is they’re insinuating that people are dumb. They don’t know that their septic system is at least 18” underground. [discussion about the depth of the drainfield depth of pressure distribution systems by several participants]”*
- *“Because at \$4,000 to have it pumped, I don’t know how much it costs to have it pumped. [some general discussion about the cost of getting a septic tank pumped, general consensus is around \$300 or \$400.]”*

Participants had many questions about the actual operation of septic systems as well as about the role of local and state government agencies in the regulation of septic systems.

These, and other, misconceptions highlight the importance on ongoing education and outreach efforts.

The suggestion of showing a failing drainfield as a mucky backyard in the brochures came up several times, though producing an image that portrayed a failing drainfield turned out to be a difficult. The image tends to look like an unspectacular muddy yard, though apparently an advertisement on television has been successful with such an image.

## Taglines

The focus group tested a variety of taglines for the project. We asked participants to “rate each for its ability to compel you to care for your septic system.” These were explained to be a series of slogans or taglines that may go on mailers, in letters, used in

ads or as part of general septic system outreach. Discussion of the taglines happened only after everyone had made their selections.

The following lines had the most impact on the focus groups:

- Septic system care depends on you.
- Don't let your septic system drain your wallet.
- Protect your investment.
- Extend the life of your septic system.
- Septic systems impact water quality.
- Properly maintained and monitored systems have longer operating lives.
- Maintain your septic system to save money.

These had the least:

- Inspect now and avoid any untimely delays during future building projects.
- Complete your inspection now to assure your system is working properly.
- You live in a marine recovery area.
- It's the law.

Based on focus group findings, we suggest that programs utilize more than one tag line per educational piece. For example, a letter may use the tag line, Protect Your Investment as a sub heading to explain the cost of septic maintenance vs. waiting to make costly repairs, AND, Septic Systems Impact Water Quality as a sub heading to explain the impact on local water quality that septic systems may pose.

## **Methods of communication**

We surveyed participants to determine ways in which they'd prefer to receive information about their septic system.

Favored methods included:

- Direct mailers mailed to your home (with links to a website for more information)
- Free workshops in community spaces
- Informational brochures picked up at local community spaces such as post offices, drug stores, etc
- Articles in the local newspaper
- State DOH / local health jurisdiction web page

Methods not favored included:

- Ads in the local newspaper
- Puget Sound Starts Here website
- Facebook page that links to a septic website
- Professional septic providers

### **Logistics of conducting focus groups**

We found that it was very helpful to create a guide for the facilitator to follow. It was helpful in terms of finalizing focus group goals, fine tuning questions and maintaining consistency between groups. The guide was structured as a script with questions, follow up questions and notes for the facilitator to help keep the discussion on topic. The guide used in these focus groups remained largely the same from group to group but was revised between each group to reflect revisions to the materials and to better match the actual flow of the group discussion.

We made an audio recording of each focus group, and a video recording of the first focus group, but eventually found it as useful to take notes on a laptop computer as the discussion unfolded to capture the gist of the discussion. We initially relied upon the recording for our notes and found that transcribing the notes was too time consuming. The recording was useful in double checking our notes, and we had three observers review the final notes for each session.

When recruiting participants it is important to verify with each participant that they meet selection criteria. We found the county assessor data to be very helpful in finding participants, but not 100% accurate in terms of which address has, or does not have, a septic system.