

Social Marketing White Paper for  
Mason County Extension Office  
October 30, 2009  
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## **Community Based Social Marketing for Sustainable Behavior: Application to Rural Communities in Washington State**

Scientists and environmentalists are keenly aware of the impact of human activity on precious water resources.

Many residents, however, don't readily make the connection between what they put down their drain and the quality of a bay some 20, or even just a few, miles away.

How can we get people to see their role in environmental stewardship? There is hope, but only if we stop talking *global*, and start making it more *personal* and *local*.

This paper draws on lessons learned in two Puget Sound communities in Washington State that adopted a marketing framework to make their programs more audience-oriented and effective. Information obtained through two telephone surveys provided a better understanding of the beliefs and practices of residents in rural and transitioning areas in Mason and Snohomish Counties, and offered valuable insight into what natural resource agencies can do to help residents adopt more environmentally sensitive practices.

**Why don't people do what's good for them and the environment?** They don't know how; they know, but barriers prevent them from doing it easily; or they know, but the benefits of doing something else are more attractive.

The challenge for natural resource agencies is to abandon their organizational priorities in favor of what's important and motivating to their "customers."

### **Community Based Social Marketing**

Social marketing is a process for influencing public behavior on a large scale, using marketing principles for the purpose of societal benefit rather than for commercial profit.<sup>1</sup>

What sets social marketing apart from other strategies is a commitment to understand consumer wants and needs, and a willingness to segment and prioritize audiences based on their readiness and ability to change.

There are seven basic steps in the social marketing process.

1. Initial Planning
2. Formative Research
3. Strategy Formation
4. Program Development
5. Program Implementation
6. Tracking and Evaluation

It represents a departure from expert-driven, top down program planning to a consumer-driven marketing mindset. Instead of asking, "What's wrong with *them*?" the marketer asks, "What's wrong with our programs? What do we need to offer people to make it worth it for them to change? What would make our 'product' more attractive than what they are doing now?"

Marketing is based on a theory of exchange: the exchange of time, effort, inconvenience for something of value to the consumer. Program planners are wise to ask, "What's in it for them?"

They have to create an awareness that a problem exists, make an attractive offer, demonstrate the benefits of their product or service, and take steps to lower the price or cost of doing something differently.

### **Best Practice Framework for Sustainable Behavior**

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While the application of behavioral science to environmental problems is relatively new, sufficient evidence exists to support a planning framework that includes the following elements. Best described in the book *Fostering Sustainable Behavior* by Doug McKenzie-Mohr, PhD, this framework has resulted in measureable behavior change when used within the community-based social marketing framework.<sup>ii</sup>

- Commitment: From Intention to Action
- Prompts: Remembering to Act
- Norms: Building Community Support
- Communication: Effective Messages
- Incentives: Advancing Motivation
- Convenience: Making it Easy to Act

### **Application to Water Quality Efforts**

What happens when we rethink our programs and strategies to embrace what our consumers want and need? In Mason County, the Oakland Bay Clean Water District conducted a telephone survey with 158 residents to find out what would motivate people to adopt the recommended septic maintenance schedule. In Snohomish County, the Public Works Department conducted a telephone survey with 400 residents of unincorporated Snohomish County who have septic systems on their property.

Here are some of the lessons learned.

**Make it personal. Make it local.** While the majority of residents surveyed in Mason County expressed interest in water quality in Oakland Bay, they did not readily make the connection between their practices at home and pollution in the Bay.

This viewpoint is reinforced in Snohomish County, where residents give themselves high marks for septic maintenance, even though most cite inaccurate or inappropriate septic management practices. In fact many of those surveyed could not say what type of septic system they have.

Immediate health impacts on family, pets and livestock are more motivating than statements about the environment in general. In Mason County, statements about the impact of a failing system on their property value, and of pollution on the local economy, jobs were also motivating – again, more people-focused than environmentally concerned.

**Make it concrete. Make it convenient.** Respondents in Mason County said that coupons, discounts, contact information for maintenance specialists, and do-it-yourself manuals would make it easier for them to adopt recommendations.

**Make it popular.** Substantial research indicates that we are strongly influenced by norms in spite of our tendency to think of ourselves as unique. Natural resource agencies are beginning to appreciate the importance of people going public with their behavior – utilizing strategies like posting yard signs and placing recycling stickers on compost bins – to let their neighbors know that adopting such practices is the norm, not the exception.

### **Rural residents in Mason County**

The Mason County survey looked at differences between residents who are in compliance with septic maintenance recommendations and those who are not. A few slight differences were detected.

Younger residents aged 18-34 are a slightly more compliant. Those who are married or living with a partner and live in the home year round are also more compliant. Those who are non-compliant tend to have lived there longer, and are more likely to be female. Certain

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neighborhoods are more compliant, although the reason for this requires further inquiry. There was no difference based on income, education, or whether they have children living in the home.

Respondents were asked to rank barriers and potential motivators for septic maintenance. "Most helpful" incentives include discounts/coupons for materials (booklets), services (pumping and repair), and low interest loans (repair)

The best ways to reach them are direct mail to home, the local weekly newspaper, and a website. The most trusted spokespersons for septic guidance are Mason County and Mason County Public Health.<sup>iii</sup>

### **Residents in Rural and Transitional Areas in Snohomish County**

The Snohomish County survey detected differences between residents living in rural neighborhoods and those whose neighborhoods are transitioning due to development.

Those in transitional areas were more likely than their more rural counterparts to

- Hire help rather than do it themselves (62% would call a pumper, vs. 46% in rural areas)
- Say that "keeping family safe" was their top reason for taking care with their septic system (44% vs. 36% in rural areas)

While rural respondents were

- Twice as likely as Transitional to think that Drano was ok down the drain (12% vs. 5% in Transitional areas)
- Slightly more likely to say that it's "critical" (10 on 10-pt scale) that they have "no government trouble." (87% gave this a "10" vs. 80% in Transitional areas)

There were some demographic differences as well:

- Rural areas included more two-person households (54% vs. 44%)
- Transitional areas included more three persons households (21% vs. 10%)
- More college degrees in transitional areas (52%, vs. 31%)
- More private business employment in transitional areas (41% vs. 31%)<sup>iv</sup>

Most participants in the Snohomish Survey agreed with the statement, "The condition of the septic system on my own property does not really impact local streams and lakes." A quarter agreed that concerns about septic systems were "just scare tactics."

### **Using Audience Research to Create a Social Marketing Plan**

In Mason County, a marketing plan was developed that integrates the best practices recommended by Mackenzie-Mohr with the 4 P's of marketing: product, price, place and promotion.

#### **Commitment**

- Add a homeowner commitment strategy to annual septic mailings. Include a signature request and specific dates.
- Develop a mechanism for publicly recognizing homeowners who make the pledge.

#### **Prompts**

- Continue targeted direct mail reminders to homeowners, and add option to sign up for e-mail reminders, coupons, information and other updates and benefits.

#### **Norms**

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- Create a tangible, visible symbol that can be displayed to identify homes that are up to standard, and encourages neighbors to adopt the recommended practices.

**Communication**

- Revise current signage and printed communications to emphasize homeowner priorities: health of their family, maintaining property values, and protecting local economy and jobs.

**Incentives**

- Develop, publicize and distribute incentives for septic maintenance that people said would motivate them to follow best practices: discounts, contact lists, do-it-yourself booklet, low interest repair loans, free tank risers.

**Convenience**

- Enhance mailings and other communications to feature discounts and rebates.

**Oakland Bay Septic Marketing Mix**

<p><b>Products</b></p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Direct mail to landowners in watershed. Include commitment strategy and reward with:           <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Coupon for discounts on inspection and pumping</li> <li>• Contact information for vendors, do-it-yourself booklet, low interest loans, rebates, classes</li> <li>• Website address for more information on Oakland Bay, offers to homeowners</li> <li>• Text should emphasize benefits to homeowners (health, property value, local economy and jobs)</li> <li>• Text should discuss how pollution from their property drains to Oakland Bay, and the importance of Oakland Bay to local jobs and economy</li> <li>• Provide brief description of the Oakland Bay Clean Water District</li> </ul> </li> <li>2. Reminder letter or postcard to landowners in the database when inspection is due and:           <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Coupon for discounts on inspection and pumping</li> <li>• Contact information for vendors, do-it-yourself booklet, low interest loans, rebates, classes</li> <li>• Website address for more information on Oakland Bay, offers to homeowners</li> </ul> </li> <li>3. Information packet for septic businesses – investigate what information they currently provide, and develop a packet that they can leave behind with homeowners, including such things as:           <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “Window cling” or other handy leave-behind item documenting the type of system and when their next inspection is due</li> <li>• Appropriate brochure or booklet for each system</li> <li>• Return mail card for more information on incentives. Include website address for more information.</li> <li>• Consider leaving room for septic vendor to insert their contact information</li> </ul> </li> </ol>
<p><b>Price</b></p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Discount coupons</li> <li>2. Low interest repair loans</li> <li>3. Septic tank riser and filter retrofit rebate program</li> </ol>

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<b>Place</b>	Direct-to-home via mail or septic vendor packet
<b>Promotion</b>	Mason County Journal Watershed signage

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## Conclusion

Natural resource agencies will not be successful in changing public behavior until they stop focusing on what *they* want people to know, and start focusing on what what's important to the people that they are trying to influence.

The community based social marketing framework is a systematic, data-driven process that leads to improved outcomes. We are encouraged to plan differently, to set specific goals for specific audiences, and track progress over time. This framework also requires a better understanding of the audience, and targeting the audience very specifically to meet their needs as opposed to making best guesses. Often the 'natural resource agency' perspective has different motivating factors than those that ultimately motivate the target audience. By changing our tactics we are more likely stimulate real, measurable change.

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<sup>i</sup> Social Marketing Lite, William Smith (Academy for Educational Development aed.org)

<sup>ii</sup> Fostering Sustainable Behavior, Doug McKenzie-Mohr, Ph.D (cbsm.com)

<sup>iii</sup> Exploration of Barriers and Motivators to Adopting Recommended Practices for Septic and Livestock Maintenance in the Oakland Bay Watershed, January 2009. (Available upon request from John Konovsky, Squaxin Island Tribe, jkonovsky@squaxin.nsn.us)

<sup>iv</sup> Residential Septic System Care and Maintenance: Baseline Survey, December 2008. (Available upon request from Snohomish County Public Works, Surface Water Management)