Key Findings from our Focus Groups – June 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.

- An invitation was mailed to 1200 residents of Thurston and Pierce Counties. We had a response rate of just over 3%; this was at least partially due to the incentives we were able to offer.
- 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. This was done to minimize bias of participants that would choose to participate due particular knowledge or past experience with septic systems.
- Participants were offered a $50 gift card from Fred Meyer for their time. Several participants mentioned this as one of the reasons they chose to participate in the focus group.
- The target audiences included people living in MRAs in Pierce County and a non-MRA audience in Thurston. We also included participants from rural and suburban areas to test the messages with a variety of participants.
- 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. We found it helpful to clearly identify each piece during note taking to help debrief comments for each piece.
- 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.
- Different audiences responded to different messages. Educators need 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.
- We learned that a brochure is more likely to be read if the health district name and logo are prominently on the front of materials.
- 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.
The following phrases were identified as the most compelling by 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.

Favored ways to receive information 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