

Stormwater Communications Campaign Statewide Message Discussion

A Disconcerting Context for Our Campaign

In May 2006, National Geographic released their survey of more than 500 young Americans.¹ They found that six out of 10 could not find Iraq on a map of the Middle East, in spite of the constant media coverage of that region since the U.S. invasion in March 2003. The survey results were not any more promising for questions closer to home. In spite of the significant media coverage of the 2005 Hurricane Katrina, one in three could not find Louisiana on a U.S. Map. *The connection between this poll of geographic knowledge and the statewide communications campaign is an important one: media coverage does not guarantee an audience's attention or their understanding.*

This stormwater communications campaign is challenged by the fact that Americans' overall environmental literacy is low. The National Environmental Education & Training Foundation (NEETF)/Roper studies from 1997 to 2001 found that two-thirds of adults were unable to pass a basic, multiple-choice, environmental knowledge quiz. A highly relevant finding for our campaign was that only 28% of those surveyed could correctly identify the most common source of water pollution. However, Americans perceive that they are "fairly knowledgeable" about environmental issues and problems.²

The NEETF concludes that most Americans receive their environmental information from the media (television, newspapers, radio), and that media coverage is not intended to produce a deep understanding of the issues. *So, if media coverage does not guarantee an audience's attention or their understanding, and most Americans don't have a strong environmental knowledge base, where does that leave us?*

Fortunately, we know that most Americans are concerned about water quality. A 2004 survey of 1000 adults revealed that 88% believed toxic contamination of soil/water to be at least a somewhat serious problem. Eighty-three percent considered water quality to be at least a somewhat serious problem, and 77% were concerned about the quality of their drinking water.³ These concerns should help shape the form of communication used in the statewide campaign.

Although obtaining a full picture of Rhode Islanders' knowledge, perceptions, attitudes and behavior with respect to stormwater is beyond our budget, we can use national surveys as our guide. Those surveys indicate that the average citizen does not understand that stormwater runoff is a major water pollution problem. We also suspect that many citizens believe that stormwater is diverted to a water treatment plant. And if Rhode Islanders are anything like those people surveyed in Minnesota, 53% don't know where stormwater goes.⁴

¹ *Final Report: National Geographic-Roper Public Affairs 2006 Geographic Literacy Study.* May 2006.

² The National Environmental Education & Training Foundation. *Environmental Literacy in America.* September 2005.

³ Yale University School of Forestry & Environmental Studies. May 2004. *The Environmental Deficit: Survey on American Attitudes on the Environment.*

⁴ Eckl, Eric. <http://waterwordsthatwork.com/>. Episode 7.

Our Suggested Approach

The schools of thought about environmental issues and behavior change that are reflected in works such as *Made to Stick*⁵, *Water Words that Work*⁶, and *Marketing Social Change*⁷, embody the approach that we recommend for the Stormwater Communication Campaign. **We propose that the statewide message for the Stormwater Communication Campaign be very narrowly focused to address the sole topic: stormwater runoff is polluted.**

We hope that a simple, concrete message that seeks to inform Rhode Islanders about only one thing related to stormwater (that it's a source of pollution) will be a platform for the rest of the campaign, a "trailer" to the main feature, which are the local messages. Those local messages will attempt to tell Rhode Islanders what they can do about the problem (i.e. affect some behavior change), but before that can occur, the audience needs a basic information gap to be filled.

Other Issues to Consider

We had difficulty constraining our message to that one simple idea. There are plenty of other concepts about stormwater that we feel are highly important for people to understand. For example, we expect that many in our audience hold these beliefs: "Rain is natural and whatever goes down a stormdrain gets filtered or treated anyway." We believe that most people don't understand what "stormwater" even is. (Although we're hoping that careful use of language can make that concept obvious without making that our "teachable concept.") We assume that many people believe that stormwater is treated, and we wonder if people truly grasp the idea that rain eventually makes its way to bodies of water. Nevertheless, we are trying to keep the message simple and concise, and we can't tackle all of these issues with one message.

As discussed in the RFP, the statewide message might capitalize on Rhode Islanders' values for local water bodies, their shellfish, and their recreation opportunities, as done in the Chesapeake Bay campaign. Additional research indicates that establishing connections to family and future generations can be useful when working with the topic of water pollution. We know that quality of life (community character, personal health, secure economic opportunities) is a top-ranked value for most people, so linking our statewide message to the idea that stormwater pollution risks our quality of life could be worthwhile. However, we do not advocate a fear-based, dour, or serious tone and prefer the use of humor. Presenting such a message that highlights risks without fear or gloom, though, presents its own challenge.

Also, we should avoid any jargon associated with this topic. The words "stormwater," "non-point source pollution," and "water quality" are unclear to most people. "Trash," "pollution," "enough clean water," and "enough healthy water" are words and phrases that *Water Words that Work* recommends.

Because the local messages are the heart of the overall communications campaign, in that they will offer the behavior change suggestions that improve stormwater issues, we want to be clear that the statewide message is cognitively linked to the local messages that will follow. We have observed "To Be Continued" and "Coming Soon" finales to commercial advertising, and we are wondering if such an approach holds any relevance for our message. Unfortunately, local

⁵ Heath, Chip and Dan Heath. 2007. *Made to Stick: Why Some Ideas Survive and Others Die*.

⁶ Eckl, Eric. <http://waterwordsthatwork.com/>

⁷ Andreasen, Alan R. 1995. *Marketing Social Change*.

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messages are likely to dribble out over a lengthy period of time, which might not follow quickly after the statewide message, so timing will be a consideration.

Finally, there is the consideration that media coverage does not necessarily guarantee an audience's attention or their understanding. We're hoping that the simplicity of our message, drawing upon existing knowledge (water quality is a concern and water can be polluted), will facilitate understanding. We also hope that the message's creativity will enhance how much attention it commands. Let the ideas flow!