Evolving Outreach: How Environmental Communication and Outreach Must Change with its Audience

Jackelyn Briseño Arceo, Program on the Environment, University of Washington
Site Supervisor: Jenny Heins, Sustainable Ballard: RainWise
Faculty Advisor: Stanley Asah, School of Environmental and Forest Sciences, University of Washington

Background

- Stormwater runoff is the #1 cause of water pollution in urban areas, contaminating seafood and drinking water, and causing habitat loss and biodiversity loss.
- Programs across the country provide cheap/free private green stormwater infrastructure (GSI) like rain gardens and cisterns (Fig 1) to homeowners as solutions for slowing down and filtering pollutants out of urban stormwater runoff.
- Creating appealing environmental messaging is important in gaining participants in the program and installing more GSI.

Research Questions

- What are the opportunities and barriers for GSI incentive programs in community outreach?
- Which motivators are most successful in garnering support for GSI installations?

Internship and Methods

- Canvassed Seattle neighborhoods as a RainWise Outreach intern.
- Conducted a content analysis of 4 GSI incentive program’s outreach material: brochures and mailers (Fig 2).
- Interviewed GSI outreach teams in WA state (Fig 4).
- Analysis of RainWise Facebook follower likes and engagements to determine audience content preference (Fig 3).

Results

- Programs that have aged and captured their “pro-environment” audience early on benefitted from shifting messaging from collective benefits to personal benefits.
- Audiences have an interest in community building and education: two areas of opportunity to garner support for GSI (Fig 3) (Fig 4).
- Lack of funding presents barriers for many outreach teams.
- Social proof is a persuasive principle commonly and successfully used to motivate audiences to support GSI (Fig 2).

Opportunities

Social Proof – “People are more likely to show interest if...their neighbor has an installation.”

Community Building - One organization connected with people at neighborhood “Night Out” parties.

Significance

- We now know that environmental communication cannot remain static and that a number of appeals can be used to garner support based on the age of the program and the audience it serves.
- Social acceptance and community building around environmental programs and movements will help normalize sustainability of all kinds to help solve climate change

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