

Waste reduction: The forgotten R and how it impacts happiness and well-being

Kelley Dennings
New Dream Fellow and Advisory Committee Member
kdennings@gmail.com

Extended Abstract

Background

Research has shown that not only does decreasing consumption support the environment; it is also good for our health and well-being (Kasser, 2002). The document, *Principles of Ethical Practice of Public Health*, describes how people and their physical environment are interdependent - People depend on natural resources and a damaged environment has an adverse effect on health. However, people also effect the environment through consumption of resources and generation of waste (Public Health Leadership Society, 2002). This is the basis for why this work is needed - consumption effects our environment and our environment affects our health and well-being – and New Dream is well situated to lead the charge. New Dream’s mission, as a national non-profit organization, is to empower individuals, communities and organizations to transform their consumption habits to improve well-being for people and the planet (New Dream, 2017). The framework New Dream is using to change behaviour is social marketing. Social marketing is rooted in psychology, uses commercial marketing for societal goals and the key features are segmented audiences, interventions involving the 4 P’s and social science research into customer barriers (Andreasen, 1995). Social marketing has been used to decrease water and energy consumption or increase the consumption of organic and local foods, but few articles focus on decreasing material consumption.

Objectives

New Dream has a popular winter campaign called Simplify the Holidays because more waste is generated during that time of the year (Environmental Protection Agency, 2016). The goal of this social marketing campaign is to motivate individuals to shift some purchases from material gifts to experiential gifts during the winter holidays, thus increasing time spent with friends and family and in the out-of-doors leading to a boost in long-term happiness and overall well-being, along with supporting the environment by decreasing consumption. Specifically, the purpose of the formative research was to explore the attitudes, awareness, barriers, benefits, and any existing behavior around the topic of giving experiential gifts and how those results would inform the intervention. Experiential gift examples include: going someplace with friends or family like to a winery, concert, sporting event; getting out in nature by camping, picnicing, skiing, or traveling to a nearby town. This might also include doing a class together like cooking, painting, wildflower identification, etc

Formative Research

Research used to inform a subsequent survey included a scientific literature review and four focus groups (one specifically with millennials).

Technique	Sample Size	Source
Literature Review	Not applicable	Journals
Focus groups – all ages - regarding gift giving behavior	13 people – one conducted in North Carolina, one in Virginia and one in Louisiana	Convenience sample from friends, family, colleagues, the community and listservs
Focus group – millennials – regarding gift giving behavior	4 people from American University in Washington, DC	Convenience sample

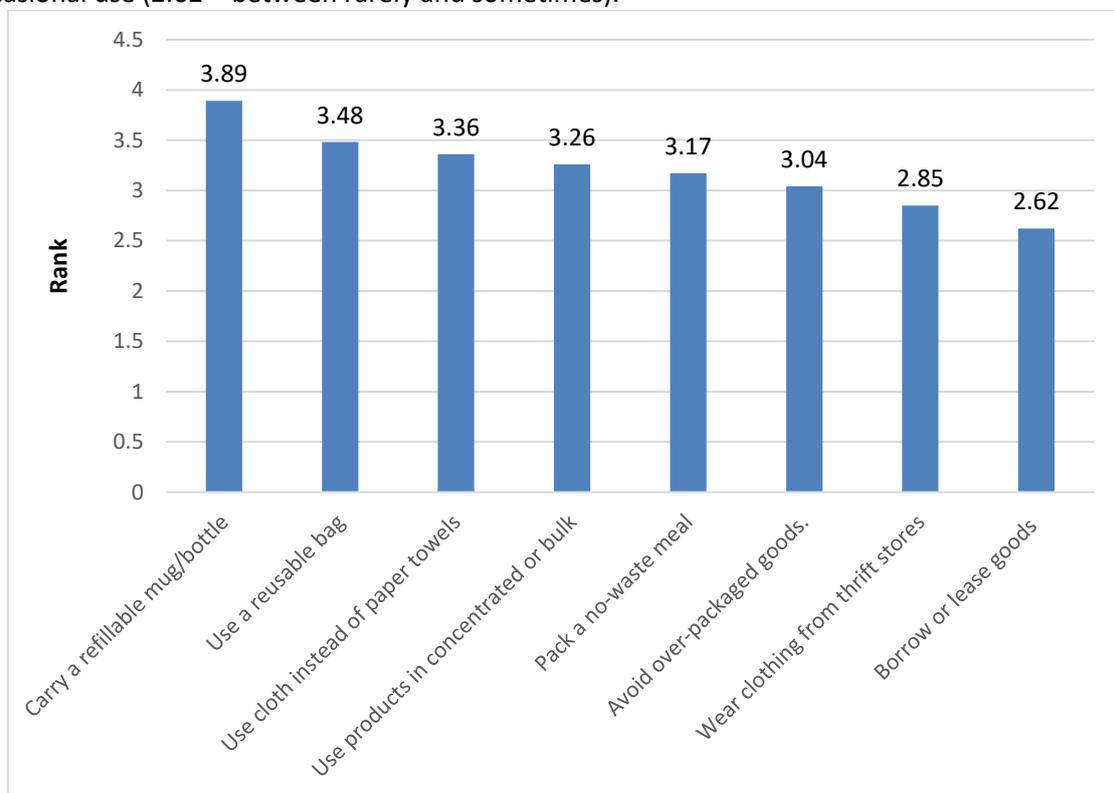
A survey was then conducted to better understand the barriers and benefits associated with experiential gift giving and the types of waste reduction activities currently being conducted.

Technique	Sample Size	Source
Paid survey audience	189 participants from NC, good age, education, income and race diversity	Survey Monkey

The survey barrier and benefit results for both friends and family can be found below, along with the various waste reduction activities conducted by paid survey respondents.

Question	Friends	Family
Have given an experiential gift	52%	55%
Top benefit of experiential gift	They are more unique, different or special (41%)	Provide lasting memories (46%)
Top barrier of experiential gift	Hard to schedule a joint activity if in different town (20%) and due to limited schedules (20%)	Hard to schedule a joint activity if in different town (21%)
Plan to give experiential gift	2.80	2.89
They would support me in giving an experiential gift	3.59	3.75
Willing to share personal hobby as a gift	3.46	3.53

The most frequent waste reduction response was carry a refillable mug or water bottle (3.89 – between sometimes and often). The least common response was borrow or lease goods for occasional use (2.62 – between rarely and sometimes).



Segmentation

In addition to running the statistics on demographic questions we also created indexes based on a series of questions asked within the survey, to allow us to segment by those that do outdoor activities, those that are “greenminded” and those that are “happy”.

Millenials were more likely to create an online wish list to share with a family member, more likely to say they would be happier if they could buy more things and less likely to carry a reusable bag. Those at higher income levels were more likely to give an experiential gift and less likely to wear thrift store clothes and use cloth towels. Those with less income are less likely to have taken a trip in the last year. Non-white’s were less likely to eat out, less likely to carry a refillable bottle and more likely to use cloth towels versus paper towels. They also differed in their belief of the top benefit to giving an experiential gift to a friend. Non-white’s believed it would provide lasting memories, whereas non-Hispanic whites felt the top benefit was that it would be unique. Non-white’s thought the top challenge to giving an experiential gift to a family member would be that it is hard to think of an age-appropriate experiential gift versus non-Hispanic white’s saying the top challenge is that it is hard to schedule a joint activity as an experiential gift.

For the three indexes we created there were some statistical differences. If you ranked higher on the happiness scale you felt less need for material things. Those that do outdoor activities were not different than other responders, but if you were someone that didn’t do outdoor activities you were also less likely to eat out, take a trip, go to the movies and carry a refillable bottle or mug. Finally, the hypothesis was that if you were greenminded you would have a higher environmental ethos and have statistically different responses. That was true. However, even greenminded individuals have room for improvement. They do not “always” pick the most environmentally friendly action.

Theory and Strategies

This campaign utilized the Theory of Planned Behavior. The theory states that if people see the suggested behavior as positive (attitude), if they think others want them to perform the behavior (subjective norm), and if they have confidence in their ability to perform the behavior (self-efficacy) this results in a higher intention (motivations) and they are more likely to actually change their behaviour (National Cancer Institute, 2005). The use of a pledge is an excellent way to solicit behavior change. Commitment strategies have been well studied and clear guidelines of how to use them exist. The strongest commitments tend to be specific in nature, obtained privately but displayed publicly, and signed (rather than verbal or online) (McKenzie-Mohr, 1999). The New Dream intervention pledge followed these guidelines.

Intervention

This intervention used social marketing’s 4 P’s marketing mix. The product was giving an experiential gift. Common price issues were time and money. To decrease the price associated with giving experiential gifts we provided easy-to-understand tips that included creative gift ideas for all ages and budgets. The place component was online to advertise the intervention and promote the tools to help giving an alternative gift. However, the actual experiential gifts happened away from a computer out in the world with friends and family. Promotional strategies included New Dream’s website, newsletter, social media, earned media, and Google ads. Promotional messages involved the following themes: tradition, giving something unique, and making lasting memories.

Results

After someone pledged they received 3 weekly emails between Thanksgiving and Christmas. The emails addressed the barriers we heard in the research. We had 241 pledge takers from all across the country. These pre-intervention pledge takers answered questions about their behavioural intention and happiness levels. In early January we sent a post-pledge survey to the 241 pledge

takers to ask questions about how their experiential gift giving activity went. Sixty-nine post-pledge surveys were received and 23 states were represented.

The results showed:

- 83% followed-through on their pledge and gave an experiential gift
- 59% of gifts were given to family
 - 43% planned to give to family and friends but only 13% did
- 42% of experiential gifts were done within 2 weeks of giving
- All experiences that were done were rated as “good” or “excellent”
- 91% said they would give an experiential gift next year
- 33% increased their satisfaction with life after the holidays, but 28% had their satisfaction with life go down after the holidays.
- 64% said they were somewhat satisfied to very satisfied with life after the holidays. This was up from 58% before the holidays for this same group of people.
- 1% said they were unsatisfied to very unsatisfied with life after the holidays. This was down from 7% before the holidays.
- 6 people increased their life’s satisfaction more than 1 point – 2 people increased by 4 points.

Conclusions

The top conclusions to this project were that those with less things are happier. It also showed that there are differences between various segments so one message, program or action does not fit all. Those that are greenminded have room for waste reduction improvement too and finally, we need to move beyond carrying a refillable water bottle or using a reusable bag as a way to get to waste reduction.

In the future we would like to use the social ecological model to move beyond individual behaviour change to larger systematic change for waste reduction. Additional research to continue supporting this work could include: 1) barriers to giving an outdoor experiential gift, 2) the role of social norms, 3) testing a public health messaging frame, and 4) how to decrease consumption as income increases.

References

Andreasen, A. (1995). *Marketing Social Change*. Jossey Bass. San Francisco, CA.

Environmental Protection Agency. (2016). Retrieved on 7/5/18 at <https://blog.epa.gov/blog/2016/12/creative-ways-to-cut-your-holiday-waste/>.

Kasser, T. (2002). *The high price of materialism*. MIT Press. Cambridge, Mass.

McKenzie-Mohr, D. (1999). *Fostering Sustainable Behavior*. New Society Publishers. British Columbia, Canada.

National Cancer Institute. (2005). *Theory at a Glance: A Guide for Health Promotion Practice*. US Dept of Health and Human Services.

New Dream. (2017). *Mission*. Retrieved on 9/30/17 at <https://www.newdream.org/about/mission>.

Public Health Leadership Society. (2002). *Principles of the Ethical Practice of Public Health*.