

8-1-2015

## Using Commitment as a Tool to Promote Behavior Change in Extension Programming

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### Recommended Citation

Martin, E., & Warner, L. A. (2015). Using Commitment as a Tool to Promote Behavior Change in Extension Programming. *The Journal of Extension*, 53(4), Article 32. <https://tigerprints.clemson.edu/joe/vol53/iss4/32>

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## Using Commitment as a Tool to Promote Behavior Change in Extension Programming

### Abstract

Social marketing is an approach used to encourage behavior change among a specific target audience. Social marketing offers a number of tools, and Extension programming that targets behavior change could improve outcomes by incorporating the commitment tool. Commitment has been effective in natural resources campaigns that encourage sustainable behavior change. This article discusses the concept of commitment and different ways that this social marketing strategy can be used to promote behavior change through Extension programming.

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### Introduction

Behavior change is essential for achieving environmental sustainability (McKenzie-Mohr, Lee, Schultz, & Kotler, 2011) and has been a major goal of Extension programming for decades (Comer, Campbell, Edwards, & Hillison, 2006). Extension professionals have been encouraged to incorporate innovative strategies into programming to encourage behavior change (Argabright, McGuire, & King, 2012).

Social marketing is a strategy that integrates traditional commercial marketing principles to influence behavior change among a specific audience (McKenzie-Mohr, 2011; Wood, 2012). *Commitment* is one of a number of tools used in social marketing to help individuals embrace behavior change (McKenzie-Mohr & Schultz, 2012).

### Commitment as a Strategy for Encouraging Behavior Change

Commitment is when a person expresses "a positive intention to take some action" (Sanagorski & Monaghan, 2013, p. 1). Individuals who commit to a small action are likely to commit to something bigger (McKenzie-Mohr, 2011). By asking target audience members to commit to something, Extension professionals can increase the likelihood of audience members adopting a new behavior. When individuals make a commitment, they are more likely to follow through with their promise to ensure that the commitment is maintained (Hui & Molden, 2014). Individuals maintain their commitment not only for themselves, but also because they care how others might perceive them if they do not maintain their promise (Pallak, 1979).

Commitment has been used to encourage environmentally sustainable behaviors. Commitment is most

effective when individuals believe that they are committing to something that is meaningful and has a purpose (James, 2010). One strategy that is used to encourage commitments for behavior change is to offer incentives. Incentives are used to reward individuals for positive behaviors. An example of using an incentive to reward pro-environmental behavior is offering a small prize to individuals who recycle used beverage containers (Gardner & Stern, 1996). Incentives may be helpful in encouraging individuals who have low motivation to adopt some behavior, but may be unnecessary when a person is highly motivated and fully committed (James, 2010).

In a commitment study, individuals who made a commitment increased their recycling behaviors (Werner et al., 1995). Those who gave a written commitment were more motivated to recycle and recycled more than individuals who were verbally asked to increase their recycling (Werner et al., 1995). Individuals who used their signature to commit to recycle more also reported higher rates of recycling months after the program was over, indicating the potential for commitment to lead to sustained behavior change (Werner et al., 1995).

## Types of Commitment

Commitments can be verbal or written, made by individuals or in groups, and made privately or publicly.

*Public commitment* is used to make the public aware of who has committed to a specific practice. Public commitments are longer lasting and more effective than private commitments (McKenzie-Mohr & Schultz, 2014). A study that focused on decreasing gas and electricity usage found that residents who agreed to have their names appear in a local publication decreased their natural gas consumption by 15 % and electricity usage by approximately 20% (Pallak & Sullivan, 1979).

*Group commitment* is used to increase the likelihood that individuals will follow through with their commitment because they want to be seen as consistent among their peers (Wang & Katvez, 1990). Residents of an assisted living facility who signed a group commitment increased their recycling activities during and after the commitment period was over. The group of residents recycled nearly 50% more paper for nearly a month compared to recycling behavior at baseline (Wang & Katvez, 1990).

Commitment strategies may be aided by *commitment devices*, or voluntary strategies implemented by individuals to assist in enforcing self-imposed restrictions (Blondon, 2014; Rogers, Milkman, & Volpp, 2014). Commitment devices can be perceived as a positive way to reinforce behavior, or as a loss of privilege (Blondon, 2014). One form of commitment device is a contract or deposit, such as an agreement to deposit money into an account that cannot be accessed until the intended goal is achieved. Commitment devices are potentially very effective behavior change tools; however, they are not used as often as other forms of commitment (Rogers et al., 2014).

## How Extension Professionals Can Incorporate Commitment into Programming

Social marketing tools, such as commitment, are valuable additions to Extension programs because they are effective in encouraging behavior change. There is no cost to incorporating commitment into

Extension programming, and this tool can increase rate of practice change among audience members. Extension professionals must recognize clients' perceived barriers and communicate benefits associated with behavior change before seeking commitment from them. It is important to understand that behavior change takes time and that target audience members should initially be asked to commit to actions that are small and reasonable. An Extension professional may ask target audience members to commit to doing some behavior during group classes, individual consultations, or written correspondence. Extension professionals can consider implementing commitment strategies into their programming by first encouraging the target audience to commit to participating in the full program and corresponding activities. Commitment works best when clients recognize that they are in control of their own choices.

The following summarizes best management practices adapted from the literature (McKenzie-Mohr, 2011; Sanagorski & Monaghan, 2013) that can be used to incorporate commitment into Extension programming:

- Select behaviors that are achievable and meaningful to participants.
- Incorporate clients' feedback in all phases of behavior change process.
- Use public and group commitment to increase likelihood of behavior change.
- Ask for a small commitment prior to a larger one.
- Add commitment to existing means of clientele contact (e.g., educational displays, newsletters).
- Connect requested commitments with programmatic objectives.
- Evaluate programs to measure how commitment has changed clients' behaviors.

## Conclusion

Commitment is an effective social marketing tool that can be applied to Extension programming. Social marketing strategies are beneficial to Extension programs because they are primarily focused on behavior outcomes. By incorporating commitment into programming, Extension professionals may realize an increased opportunity to promote sustainable change.

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