

Toward More Effective Water Resources Information Programs: Lessons Learned from Health Communication

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OVERVIEW

Public health communication programs have for decades led environmental/natural resources programs in (1) Breadth and depth of theory-based programming; (2) Empirical examination of research questions and testing of hypotheses; (3) Application of social science research tools aimed at formative, process, and summative evaluation efforts; and (4) Direct application of theory and research findings to program policies and strategies.

Reasons for this include the longer tradition of and far more extensive support system for public health, greater personal public interest in and thus financial support for health issues, and greater coherency among the multitude of health organizations at all levels.

Previously the authors outlined key ways in which the knowledge gained from health communication programs could be applied to natural resource programs. Here we examine such applications to water resources programs, with primary focus on water quality programs. We provide an overview of theoretical approaches, program strategies and tactics, and quantitative and qualitative assessment methods to gauge program impacts. Recommendations are offered for more effective transfer of health program techniques to water resource issues.

HEALTH COMMUNICATION ADVANTAGES

Health communication programs have a longer tradition of theoretical underpinnings borrowed largely from social psychology, persuasion research, and more recently communication models. Health promotion specifically has relied to some extent on formal and information education concepts.

Similarly, health programs have benefitted from decades of behavioral research hypotheses testing, evaluation and assessment. Standard paradigms of both laboratory and field experiments have lent rigor to research results and implications. More recently, more qualitative assessment techniques have been used, including focus groups, participant observation, expert interviews and the like.

Further, sophisticated measurement tools have been developed for formative, in-process and summative evaluation of health programs. And, health program research have widespread and effective dissemination of their program impacts and research findings to academics, policymakers, and publics, who regard health as perhaps the vital issue both personally and in society.

Much of this work has been possible through strong funding levels from federal (e.g., NIH) and state agencies, as well as private foundations, corporate health industries, special interest groups and the like. Formal schools of public health have greatly advanced the field intellectually and pragmatically.

Among the issues we examine are how current social science theories applied to health programs can serve water programs, including recent advances in social marketing, risk communication, community readiness, reasoned action/behavior, and the like. Equally important are new ways of looking at communication strategies, e.g. from tailored messaging, community involvement in communication tactics. Health programs have also led the way in choice of communication channels and other tactics, in particular moving to more interactive and individual-centered efforts made possible by computer-mediated communication

WHAT WATER PROGRAMS CAN LEARN

○ Incorporate social science and communication theories into strategic planning of water programs. And do this seriously by applying appropriate theory to specific problems.

○ Take advantage of successful "social marketing" tools from other fields, notably health, which has seen the most applications in recent years.

○ Do formative research on public knowledge, attitudes and behaviors toward the water issues at hand PRIOR to planning, and use and apply the findings.

○ Take into account research on public communication successes and failures, and patterns, habits and preferences of specific tailored audiences. One message does NOT fit all audiences.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR WATER PROGRAMS

○ Have a clearly defined set of operationalized (measurable) program goals.

○ Produce program content of the highest professional quality possible for attention, credibility and impact.

○ Orchestrate program components into a whole and ties to larger, more comprehensive programs if possible.

○ Ties program content to LOCAL issues and concerns.

○ Incorporate local citizen participation into developing program strategies, design, production and evaluation.