

Lessons Learned From Qualitative Research Related to a Community-Based Social Marketing Effort

AWARE Colorado

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Introduction

In 2008, AWARE Colorado (Addressing Water And Natural Resource Education) undertook focus group and key informant interviews as part of a community-based social marketing (CBSM) research effort.

The Colorado Nonpoint Source Program has adopted CBSM as the approach to be used by its Section 319 grant recipients when undertaking education and outreach efforts. The approach is based on Doug McKenzie-Mohr and William Smith's book, "Fostering Sustainable Behavior."

This report will document the lessons learned by AWARE Colorado while conducting this research. The intent of the report is to help others who may be planning qualitative research associated with CBSM projects.

The CBSM approach involves identifying barriers to sustainable behaviors; designing strategies that utilize behavior change tools; piloting strategies with a small segment of a community; and finally, evaluating the impact of the program after the strategies are implemented.

Background

AWARE Colorado is a statewide educational initiative of the League of Women Voters of Colorado Education Fund (LWVCOEF), tasked with increasing awareness of local decision makers about the impacts of land use choices on water quality and providing strategies for protecting water resources. The LWVCOEF receives funding for this program from the Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment through a grant from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.

Prior to this research effort, AWARE Colorado assessed the relative effectiveness and implementation likelihood of various water protective approaches through a stakeholder meeting and follow-up survey.

That research showed that an important core of low-impact development (LID) strategies centered on parking lots, which provided a clearly focused target for this focus group/interview research. (LID is a planning, design and construction process that seeks to mimic predevelopment runoff conditions in order to reduce flood risk and pollutant loads to receiving waterways. Besides promoting LID, AWARE Colorado also encourages other sustainable

stormwater management approaches such as better site design, natural resource-based planning and green infrastructure.)

AWARE Colorado undertook this CBSM qualitative research study using focus groups and key informant interviews. The goal was to more effectively address how to prevent, or reduce, polluted runoff from parking lots – and by extension, other community development activities. AWARE Colorado will use the resulting research report, *Preventing Polluted Runoff From Parking Lots: Benefits, Barriers and Opportunities*, to develop a community/stakeholder approach that encourages the adoption of water-protective, LID land use approaches statewide.

AWARE Colorado hired National Research Center, Inc., (NRC) to conduct and report on the qualitative research. NRC conducted a series of focus groups and key informant interviews with seven different stakeholder groups located in the South Platte River Basin: landscape contractors, landscape architects, engineers, planners, stormwater managers/engineers, developers, and appointed and elected officials.

Preliminary Research Played a Critical Role

In preparation for the focus group/interview research, AWARE Colorado conducted a literature search to look for similar projects. It also assessed the relative effectiveness and implementation likelihood of various water protective approaches through a stakeholder meeting and follow-up survey. Finally, the content of this focus group/interview research was based, in part, on research conducted by the Boulder-based Keep it Clean Partnership, which worked with Wright Water Engineers to produce the white paper “Breaking Down the Barriers to Low Impact Development in Colorado.”

AWARE Colorado also contacted faculty members at Colorado State University and received additional information about LID practices that were appropriate for parking lots.

AWARE Colorado’s contract with the state nonpoint source program stipulated that a CBSM program be conducted in the South Platte River Basin. The basin has a drainage area of about 24,300 square miles. The South Platte River originates in the mountains of central Colorado, at the Continental Divide, and flows about 450 miles northeast across the Great Plains to its confluence with the North Platte River in North Platte, Nebraska.

In an area so large, it was important to ensure that the diversity of communities was represented in the focus group/interview research. It took quite a bit of time to conduct the demographic research necessary to include a broad cross section of communities in the basin.

Research was conducted to make certain that participants reflected diversity in:

- Geography (mountain, Front Range, Plains)
- Community size
- Community type (urban, rural, suburban or urban cluster)
- Growth potential

Data sources included:

- Denver Regional Council of Governments
- Colorado Department of Local Affairs
- North Front Range Metropolitan Planning Organization
- U.S. Census
- City and county Web sites

Recruiting Participants

AWARE Colorado used the expertise of its advisory committee to select the stakeholder groups to be included in the research. With limited funding, not all identified stakeholders could be included, so those deemed most critical to the adoption of LID in communities were selected.

It is important to refrain from making assumptions about which stakeholder groups or audiences to draw from based solely on your own experience. The process of identifying research participants can be improved by thinking outside the box and asking other experts.

For example, the research report showed that focus group/interview participants emphasized the importance of educating the public – a stakeholder group that was not included in AWARE Colorado’s research effort.

Participant recruitment can be done by in-house staff or through the research firm. In either case, enlisting an adequate number of participants can be a lengthy, difficult task. Recruiting participants from select stakeholder groups – instead of from the general public – can pose additional challenges. Even though individual stakeholders may be more willing to participate if they are familiar with the topic to be discussed, the potential pool of likely participants may be limited, and additional effort may be needed to garner sufficient involvement.

The focus groups/interviews may be the participant’s first introduction to your organization and program. Steps should be considered to make it a positive experience.

Incentives, such as meals, transportation vouchers or other small gifts, are considered an important part of recruiting focus group participants. While it seemed most individuals did not participate based on the promise of incentives, a number of participants indicated that the small gift was appreciated and showed that their input was valued.

Advisory Subcommittee of Experts is Essential

Unless there is considerable in-house expertise related to social marketing research, it is important to gather a team of experts to help guide the research effort. Local community colleges, universities or businesses may be a good source of experts who volunteer to provide technical assistance as part of an advisory team.

Engaging experts in LID, CBSM and social marketing research, as part of a focus group subcommittee, was invaluable in helping AWARE Colorado contract with a research firm, draft a focus group/interview script, and evaluate results. Without the participation of these experts, data may have been reported incorrectly, potentially tainting the entire effort.

Earlier, the AWARE Focus Group Subcommittee helped draft a request for proposals for research firms, evaluated the proposals using an analytical approach, drafted follow-up questions for applicants and recommended the firm that AWARE Colorado would ultimately use.

Hiring a Research Firm vs. Do-It-Yourself

Contracting with a professional research firm can be beneficial in many ways. It can provide expertise in developing the research approach and script development, recruiting participants, facilitating focus groups, conducting phone interviews and reporting outcomes.

Even if the research could be conducted using in-house resources, having an outside, objective firm provides legitimacy to the results. For example, a key finding of the research firm that AWARE Colorado contracted with was the need for more education. Had AWARE Colorado conducted its *own* research and reported the same finding, it may have appeared self-serving because education is the very service that AWARE Colorado provides.

Flexibility and Communication Are Critical

Because CBSM research is unlike traditional market research regarding both method and outcome, it is important to contract with a research firm that can be flexible and incorporate different approaches.

It is also important that the firm communicate well with the client and be willing to adapt to the client's needs. Lack of good communication can result in project delays and can detrimentally affect the research results. Poor communication can also generate unanticipated work and expense for the contracting organization.

If problems arise with the research firm, addressing them early and working with upper management may be helpful.

The research results must be reported in such a way to make them useful to the contracting organization. It may require a number of drafts with intervening comments, corrections and suggestions before the report is acceptable. Even though this can delay the conclusion of the project, it is imperative that the results are accurate and useful.

Discussion Guide Development

In addition to CBSM strategies, AWARE Colorado researched other community change models when developing the facilitator’s discussion guide used for the focus groups/interviews. They included the “Community Readiness Model” and “Carrots, Sticks, and Promises: A Conceptual Framework for the Management of Public Health and Social Issue Behaviors.” It is important to understand the approaches that will be used before drafting questions for the discussion guide.

Before a discussion guide is developed it is important to:

- Be clear about the goal of the research and the expected outcomes.
- Know and communicate to the advisory team, research firm and participants how the report will be used.
- Understand the limitations of qualitative research (compared to quantitative research).
- Have a clear idea about the script development process regarding tasks assigned to the research firm and tasks assigned to the contracting organization.
- Understand that script development is an iterative process and that several drafts may be necessary.

To ensure that the discussion guide generates the desired information, it can be piloted in the first individual interviews or in the first focus group. That way, appropriate modifications can be made to the script before it is used for the remaining research.

Partnerships

Due to budget constraints, AWARE Colorado opted to work with partner organizations to schedule focus group meetings. The intent was to “piggy-back” before, or after, existing meetings, making it more convenient for members to attend the focus group and increase participation.

The groups partnering with AWARE Colorado in conducting the focus groups were:

- Associated Landscape Contractors of Colorado
- Colorado Chapter of the American Planning Association
- Colorado Chapter of the American Society of Landscape Architects
- Colorado Stormwater Council
- Keep it Clean Partnership
- Urban Drainage and Flood Control District

This was a successful strategy. Though it is very helpful to partner with other organizations, flexibility in scheduling is needed if this approach is used.

Overall Thoughts

Applying CBSM to community behavior change, rather than individual actions, requires some modification of the prescribed method. Using the CBSM model as a template, and applying it to LID strategies for parking lots, resulted in a useful approach for AWARE Colorado.

Although McKenzie-Mohr and Smith call for using focus groups in their CBSM approach, AWARE Colorado also successfully used phone interviews. To recruit busy professionals for similar qualitative research projects, a mix of these research methods may be considered in order to save time and money in the recruitment process.

Other things to keep in mind:

- It can be more time intensive, and costly, to conduct individual interviews rather than focus groups.
- Focus groups and interviews may yield different results due to the interactive nature of the focus group process.
- The population of stakeholders, and the information desired, will determine the appropriate method, or mix of methods.

As with all qualitative research methods, the small sample size and purposeful selection of participants in focus groups and key interviews may limit the generalization of the findings. The results do, however, suggest what specialists in similar fields of studies and occupations might feel and say, despite not being broadly representative.

Learn from mistakes. For example, parking lots provided a manageable scope for this focus group/interview research and the results will also be used to address broader, related community development activities. However, there was some confusion on the part of research participants about *why* AWARE Colorado focused on parking lots and not on the broader scope of LID strategies. (Although valuable time was spent discussing this issue, AWARE Colorado did learn how highly participants regarded using all LID tools, not just those that apply to parking lots.)

Next Steps

AWARE Colorado plans to use results from this research in its ongoing CBSM efforts. This study will lead to specific community outreach strategies that aim to effectively deliver information to Colorado communities and maximize changes in behavior to protect water resources. AWARE Colorado will enhance its program by incorporating approaches that address barriers and benefits discussed in the research analysis. In its future program planning, AWARE Colorado will also consider findings that deal with stakeholders' motivation, ability and opportunity.

To address the need for more education and outreach to the general public, AWARE Colorado will continue to make a DVD, and a related discussion guide, available to local chapters of the League of Women Voters and other groups interested in sharing information with citizens in their communities.

A new Web-based interactive map has been developed by AWARE Colorado to highlight locations where various LID approaches have been used in the state. Although this doesn't directly address the need for structured pilot projects, it enables anyone interested in these approaches to see on-the-ground examples of LID techniques.

AWARE Colorado also plans to conduct a follow-up meeting of interested stakeholders and assist local communities with potential pilot projects.