

Make a

SPLASH

With Your Communications

Eric Eckl,
Water Words That Work, LLC



Interest in using social marketing approaches—advertising and information campaigns—to persuade citizens to voluntarily reduce polluted runoff is mounting in the wastewater industry. So it's worth taking a moment to consider what social science and market research says about your fellow citizens' attitudes and receptiveness to your message.

At first, you might be pleasantly surprised. Then you'll probably be a little frustrated and puzzled. But later we'll explore how to use this information, and I hope you will finish the article feeling enlightened and poised for success.

Here's one thing you should know: In survey after survey, everyday citizens tell pollsters that water is their top environmental issue. A 2008 Gallup Poll found that out of a list of several dozen environmental problems, water-related issues clustered at the top. And there are dozens of other surveys that corroborate that finding.

Disparities in attitudes among people from different walks of life—sex, age, race, income, education, or political outlook—are smaller when the topic is water than for most other issues. Exceptions to this pattern are rare, and this has been the case for at least 10 years.

Surprised? That's understandable. Frustrated? Sure.

You'd think that with research findings like that it would be a piece of cake to persuade your neighbors to spend more on their septic systems and less on fertilizer. You'd think they'd call elected officials in a rage when they read about dilapidated water infrastructure in the newspaper. You'd think they'd line up to join your local environmental group.

But they don't. So what explains the chasm between what the pollsters tell us Americans think—and what they actually do? What accounts for this puzzling gap between lip service and action?

Lack of knowledge is certainly part of it. Most citizens are astonishingly ignorant of what polluted runoff is, what causes it, why it matters, and what they can do about it. And for decades, nature protection and pollution control experts have assumed that if a lack of knowledge is a barrier to action, then imparting knowledge is the solution.

In recent years, however, social science has increasingly honed in on two other barriers to action that seem to be more important to overcome:



Hurdle #1: Vocabulary

Most Americans simply do not understand (or respond to) the professional shop talk that graces the pages of this magazine. When confronted with words like “sprawl,” “nonpoint source pollution,” “biodiversity,” “impervious surface,” “in-stream flow,” and even “water quality,” many will draw a complete blank or imagine something very different from what you meant.

In 2005, the National Environmental Education Foundation (NEEF) reported that just about half of all Americans could guess the correct definition of “watershed” from four options. Around the Chesapeake Bay, it's a little lower. In Kentucky and parts of Florida, it's a little higher.



And American adults stubbornly resist adding these terms to their vocabulary or any other terms for that matter. The average American adult learns only a few dozen new words per year, less than one per week. Amazon.com offers dozens of “build your vocabulary” books and CDs, which all sell poorly.



Hurdle #2: Confidence

People who are confident in themselves, understand what to do and that their conservation actions make a difference, are almost twice as likely to make an effort than those who lack such confidence. So it matters that, according to NEEF’s landmark study, *Environmental Literacy in America*, only about 10 percent of everyday citizens approach environmental information with confidence.

Put these two findings together, and here’s what you get: The gap between Americans’ professed atti-

tudes toward water protection and their behavior is at least partially explained by the fact that our efforts to reach these citizens actually backfire on us. In our publications, on our Web sites, and in our presentations, we overload otherwise receptive citizens with professional language that they struggle to follow sapping their confidence that people like them have a contribution to make.

The Water Words That Work™ Method

Over the past few years, I have developed a simple method that can help nature protection and pollution control professionals successfully translate your work. By this I mean, rewrite, digest, and reorient government reports, monitoring data, regulatory language, scientific findings, and other raw professional documents into messages that are clear and compelling for everyday citizens.



Step One: Begin with Behavior

Before you jump into writing or speaking, let’s pause to imagine success. In your mind, envision the day after your audience read or heard your words, and you have inspired, outraged, touched, or otherwise moved them to act. Now answer this deceptively simple question: What are they doing today?

Will they:

- Change a personal habit or behavior, such as starting carpooling or reducing lawn watering?
- Buy a different product or service going forward?
- Make a donation of time or money to your organization?
- Call or write a government official?

- What?

It’s important to narrow your list of possibilities down to the most important first step, and tell them what it is. If you can’t do that, your readers and listeners won’t be able to either. And when everyday citizens receive too many options or no guidance at all, the most common response is the same—to do nothing at all.



Step Two: Find Foolproof Photos

A picture is worth a thousand words, and that means you should lavish as much time and care on your choice of photos as you do on your choice of words. Here are four categories of photos that are foolproof. They’ll help you get the response you want.



- Faces. You should have at least one picture of a human face—big enough to see their eyes—on every page.
- Fixes. Show people being part of the solution, preferably in the company of friends and family and with smiles on their faces.
- Families. Pictures of people with diverse ages and genders enjoying the outdoors together strike a much stronger chord with everyday citizens than pictures of athletic males enjoying the outdoors alone.

- **Fear Fighters.** If people have exaggerated or unfounded fears that their work means they won't be able to fish, hunt, farm, post no trespassing signs, snowmobile, or whatever—put those rumors to rest by showing pictures of them doing just that.



Step Three: Swap the Shop Talk

For most everyday citizens, professional terms like “riparian,” “watershed,” and “impervious surface” amount to a foreign language. The more you throw this kind of vocabulary around, the less at home they feel. And providing an “on the spot” vocabulary lesson can often sap their confidence even further.

You'll get a better response if you swap out your shop talk and insert plain English substitutes. You'll give up some nuance and precision, but you'll also get more actual responses and fewer blank stares.

Here's the shop talk test: Could your mother define the term for a stranger without your help? If yes, you can leave the word in. If no, take it out and replace it with something easier to understand. On the Water Words That Work blog, there is a helpful list of professional vocabulary and plain English substitutes. It doesn't cover every term, but it's a good start and will help you get into the spirit of it.



Step Four: Use the Water Words That Work

Some words have been tested again and again, in the lab and in the field and have been found to evoke a positive response. Some words are so powerful that it's worth going way out of your way to use them. A list of 25 proven winners is provided in the sidebar.

What do these terms have in common? First, they're more general than the professional terms on the tip of your tongue. That means they are widely understood. Second, they're empowering—the list includes many terms that you can use to encourage people that their actions matter.

Conclusion

Although no amount of communications savvy can guarantee a 100-percent success, those who try this method report a noticeable difference in how everyday citizens respond. Consider these unsolicited testimonials some of your peers have shared:

Andrew Pelloso with the Indiana Department of Environmental Management wrote, “... We've begun to use the words and the concepts to retool our education of the public. It's ... much more effective than our previous approaches.”

“I have begun using [Water Words That Work] for talks to the local folks. I get a better response since I started ... I get more questions than I used to get,” agrees Ted Withrow with the Kentucky Division of Water.

It's satisfying to speak to a group of everyday citizens and find that they are interested and responsive and think your work is important. It's an even better feeling when they report back to you that they have taken some steps in their daily lives to help protect their local waters.

The next time you and your peers have come up with some important scientific, technical, or policy information to share—that satisfying feeling is just four steps away. Good luck!

About the Author

Eric is fascinated by the intersection between language, technology, and the environment. He blogs on the topic at waterwordsthatwork.com. Eric supports his blogging habit by consulting. His company, Water Words That Work LLC, assists nature protection and pollution control organizations with their behavior change, fundraising, and issue advocacy efforts.

Editor's Note: Eric Eckl retains all publication rights to the following article, sidebars, photographs. Permission to reprint, quote from, or reuse can only be obtained from Eric Eckl.

Some Words (and phrases) . . .

that work

Accountability	Law
Balance	Make a difference
Choice	Nature protection
Corporations	Planning ahead
Doing my/your/their part	Pollution control
Enough clean water	Responsible
Fair	Safe
Family and children	Save money
Freedom	Trends
Future generations	What you can do
Healthy	Wildlife
Investment	Working together
It affects you	

Learn why at:

waterwordsthatwork.com/words/

that don't

Anadromous	Open space
Animal waste	Recreation
Biodiversity	Riparian
Climate change	Run out of water
Conservation easement	Sprawl
Endangered species	Stormwater
Infrastructure	Tourism
Instream flow	Undeveloped land
Landscape	Watershed
Land use planning	Water quality
Nonpoint source pollution	
Nutrients	

Learn why and what to use instead at:

waterwordsthatwork.com/words-that-dont/

NESC Survey Online

< NEWS | contact | about | index | e-mail | 1 (800) 624-8301

National Environmental Services Center
Assistance. Solutions. Knowledge.
 West Virginia University - NEECE

ISORA/COI June 22-24
 SORA / COI 2009 CONFERENCE < Get Details

➔ Complete this and get a \$5.00 coupon!

NEWS! < Swine Flu Updates from CDC

Link (url): Search

Customer Questionnaire

Estimated Time to take this Questionnaire: Less than 2 minutes

The National Environmental Services Center (NESC) strives to provide timely, free and low-cost informational products to our customers. Please take two minutes or less to complete this short questionnaire, designed to help us help you. Your feedback will be used both as a measure of our existing product services and as a guide to help us become a more comprehensive resource for your informational needs.

To show our appreciation, **everyone who completes this questionnaire may print a \$5 coupon** toward your next NESC product purchase.

** Please, only one coupon per customer, per order. **

<< Please Click Here for Our Customer Questionnaire

If you have questions please contact NESC.
 (800) 624-8301 - phone toll-free
 (304) 293-4191 - phone
 (304) 293-3161 - fax
info@mail.nesc.wvu.edu - e-mail
<http://www.nesc.wvu.edu/> - Web site

The National Environmental Services Center (NESC) strives to provide timely, free and low-cost informational products to our customers. If you've ordered NESC products, please take a few moments to complete an online survey. Your feedback will be used both as a measure of our existing product services and as a guide to help us become a more comprehensive resource for your informational needs.

The survey may be found at www.nesc.wvu.edu/questionnaire09.cfm and takes approximately two minutes to complete. To show our appreciation, everyone who completes this questionnaire gets a \$5 coupon toward their next NESC product purchase.