The late humorist Erma Bombeck wrote a book titled *The Grass is Always Greener over the Septic Tank*.

Even though her book title was slightly askew (grass is greener over the drainfield, right?), it almost encapsulates what many people think about septic tank systems: *there’s something nasty down there, but plants sure like it*. And just like graves, many people choose to not walk over them.

If they know they’re there.

It’s estimated that the wastewater treatment needs of almost 25 percent of U.S. households are met by some style of on-site septic tank system—that’s about 26 million households. And that’s a lot.

What historians believe was first invented by the French to handle post-Napoleonic pooh, in-ground septic tanks have changed little in design or function for more than 100 years. Properly sited and maintained, septic tanks and their drainfields provide safe and efficient effluent management for rural residents—and for fast growing suburban areas where they are cheaper to build than extending municipal wastewater systems.

Homeowners are happy; they have no sewage bills, and if they have a well, no water bills either. The septic tank is out of sight, out of mind. Until that fateful day when something just doesn’t look right, just doesn’t smell right.

And then, all the homeowner is concerned about is the expense and mess of repairs. There’s little or no concern as to environmental damages—especially if surface water is not perceived as nearby. So, as a water resource manager, how do you get people to think about what they don’t see?

That’s where social marketing comes in.

Simply put, social marketing puts traditional advertising and marketing approaches to work to create changes in behavior. Getting people to quit smoking is a change for personal good. Getting people to maintain their septic tanks is a change for social good, that is, public and environmental health.

**Changing Human Behavior is Hard, But Not Impossible.**

Social marketing delves into barriers to change and addresses those issues while delivering messages that encourage appropriate behaviors. Most research in behavior change suggests that we humans are resistant to change—and we don’t like being told what to do.

Utilities and municipal governments have for years taken a rather ham-handed approach to messaging with top-down directives. The public’s been told what not to do, rather than what they should be doing. Tips on water conservation, stormwater management or septic tank maintenance fall on deaf ears when couched in a bossy, negative tone.

How do you overcome this challenge? Keep a few simple concepts in mind.

- **Know your audience**—more than just septic tank owners, it helps to know if they are young or old? New to the area or long-time residents? Lower, middle or upper income? Regularly maintain their septic systems or not?

- **Determine barriers for change**—that means you have to talk to your audience. Market research or social marketing firms can help design and conduct surveys, community discussions, and focus groups. You need to know what prevents septic tank owners from performing maintenance. Is it cost? Confusion? Needing reminders? Or just plain ignorance?

- **What messages will stick**—your surveys can help determine if they want details on what to do, how to do it, or why it is important.

- **How to communicate with them**—that is, what media to use. Radio? Television? Newspaper ads? Direct mail? Obviously you have budget limitations, but you need to speak where they’ll listen. Sending kids home from school with coloring books on septic tank maintenance probably won’t work.
And the last, but probably most important concept, know what motivates the people you are trying to reach.

**In Social Marketing Terms, It’s Called the Exchange**

Ask your community if water quality is important to them. They’ll likely say yes. (Worry about the few that say no. They have issues.) After all, most people in the U.S. take abundant, clean, fresh water for granted.

Ask if they know that poor water quality, caused in part by septic tank failures and leachate, and fertilizer and pesticide run-off endangers aquatic and avian ecosystems and wetlands wildlife, and their response is that somebody should do something about that.

Ask if they know that poor water quality endangers their Friday night crab dinner, and they’re likely to take action. That’s what the Chesapeake Bay Program found out with their “Save the crabs—then eat ‘em” campaign.

After years of messaging to get Chesapeake Bay area residents to change their use of fertilizers and pesticides on their lawns citing a severe decline in the health of the Bay, the Program re-framed the problem in a manner that spoke to personal concerns. The blue crabs that the Chesapeake is well known for will disappear, unless everyone chips in to help.

Encouraging the exchange of one (bad) behavior for one (good) consequence is a key to successful social marketing. Showing how someone personally benefits by a new behavior works. Collectively, society (and the environment) then benefits.

Changing the time of year to fertilize was one of the key message points. At the end of the campaign more than 40 percent of people surveyed planned to alter when they fertilized.

That’s a tasty exchange.

**Changing Septic Tank Maintenance Behaviors**

Just north of Tampa, Florida’s west coast begins its long slow curve to where the peninsula ends and the panhandle begins. Along the way the coastline flattens to breathtaking scenes of salt marshes and clear, spring fed rivers. Home to commercial and sport fishing, scuba diving in the springs, and a lifestyle in step with the tides, it was considered a sleepy part of the state. That is, until the 1990s, when the population exploded.

The Southwest Florida Water Management District (SFWMD) monitored changes in water quality especially in the Crystal River/Kings Bay Watershed. Once iconic crystal clear waters, the Crystal River and tributaries were becoming clouded from increased nitrogen loads and other stressors of urbanization. With research, the District determined that nonpoint source pollution needed to be addressed—not only use of lawn fertilizers and pesticides, but septic tank problems as well.

That prompted the launch of the “Know Where it Flows” campaign. This social marketing effort combined multiple messaging channels with information about simple lifestyle changes that can make big differences.

The SFWMD employed an education outreach coordinator who conducted workshops and presentations for the community, while the campaign used newspaper ads and inserts, direct mail, radio ads, outdoor billboards, and even a crawling message on the local weather station.

Messages were clear, direct and used a little humor to get the point across. In one set of ads, a bride’s outdoor wedding proved to be the wrong time for septic tank failure. An outdoor billboard of a child rafting on an inner tube, reminded people they need to “Know Where it Flows.”

The exchange? With proper septic tank use and maintenance, the outdoor and water-related activities that drew people to live there would be maintained. (Oh, and the environmental stressors abated.)

Post campaign research showed significant increases in people being aware of their responsibilities of owning septic tanks and for getting maintenance done.

**How to Put Social Marketing to Work for You**

Now that you’ve gotten your feet wet, let’s talk about application of best practices.

But first—a truism. Almost every social marketer will tell you
the same. No matter what the issue, no matter how important it is for your community, there exist two populations you’ll never reach. Imagine them sitting at either end of a perfectly shaped Bell Curve. (You enjoyed statistics class, right?) These are The Choir and the Never Wills. The Choir you know. They already show up at all the workshops and seminars you give—and clamor for more change. The Never Wills, you may know, but they fall on the other side of the curve as stubborn, egocentric, or possibly just anti-social.

Don’t waste your resources on either group.

Here are five keys to making septic tank maintenance social marketing sparkle (so to speak).

- **Make Sure the Problem Fits the Target**—If you’ve identified poor septic tank practices as being a problem, don’t forget that presently, it’s just your problem. To make it your target’s problem, it has to be real, it has to be fixable, it has to have a simple solution, and you have to tie it to a personal benefit. Protecting your water source may be your issue, but preventing expensive repairs or embarrassment may be the target’s.

- **Identify Reluctance to Change**—Compliance with good septic tank maintenance may be a simple matter of reminders. We’re told to test the batteries in our smoke detectors when Daylight Savings Time begins. Why not something similar for tank inspections? If reluctance is due to costs, you may consider a rebate program for part of the cost of an annual inspection.

- **Find a Credentialed Spokesperson**—You may find having a person of trust speak on behalf of your efforts can go a long way to success. The person doesn’t need to be technical, just believable. Keep in mind that the person has to be real and somewhat recognizable, otherwise he or she could be disregarded as an actor. Politicians and pitchmen usually don’t work. (My apologies to your county officials.)

- **Make Your Messages Vibrant and Memorable**—Tell the truth. You turn away from dull advertising, too. Most people do. The use of humor or upbeat messaging usually works best. Fear only works if something tragic has happened (and even then it’s only temporary; after threats pass, we all lull ourselves into some feeling of security). Don’t forget to tell, show or imply why the action you want taken is necessary—for the individual and for society.

- **Know How to Measure Success**—Will you gather maintenance reports from septic tank inspectors? Will you survey your target to gauge compliance? What would be considered a first-year goal? A second-year goal? Behavior change takes time. You need to be realistic in projecting goals, and committed to long-term messaging. If hearing one message was enough to change our minds, we’d all be driving Chevrolets and drinking Coca-Cola.

Successful social marketing is not easy. Throwing out messages and hoping they stick is. When you do your homework—and are sincere in your expectations—good, the social good, will happen.

Thanks for fighting the fight.

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More information about social marketing may be found at http://www.social-marketing.org/sm.html.