

Messaging with Relevance:

Some Considerations for Communicating Issues of Sustainability to Un-Messaged Communities

BACKGROUND

As we continue to move through the first decade of the twenty-first century, paradigm shifts are rapidly evolving as issues of global climate change, food security, toxins and pollution, clean water and air, and alternative energy sources become more of a recognized reality. Many people in Seattle, including local government, non-profit organizations, community groups, students, teachers, and citizens are discussing these issues and taking action wherever possible. However, gaps in knowledge, information, and opportunities surrounding “green” issues still remain within our communities. The green movement, ostensibly, is about creating healthy, productive, and sustainable environments, industries, economies, and communities; but it will not be possible to achieve these cleaner goals without a holistic and inclusive approach. By including and inviting all people and communities into the conversation, brainstorming, education, and opportunities, we will all be in a much stronger position to attain an environmentally and socially sustainable society and world.

We stand at a very momentous and urgent period of time, where by uniting and creating an equitable plan of action, we will collectively all benefit from a cleaner and healthier natural environment. And we must realize that in order to reap these collective and global goals, wide-spread personal action must be made possible to adopt so that all communities actively participate in this process, which in turn will create new and healthier, safer opportunities for all.

The following considerations I have written about are based on my personal experiences, discussions, and observations during my summer internship at the City of Seattle’s Department of Neighborhoods. During these eight weeks, I have had a chance to personally talk with my people working on issues around Environmental Justice, Race, and Social Justice, Multi-Cultural Community Outreach and Engagement, Youth Engagement, and Green Communication within under-represented and/or low-income communities in South and Central Seattle. There are many incredible individuals, as well as activists, community leaders, City employees, organizations, and businesses working diligently everyday on all of these important issues. These issues are complex and deep, and demand a relentless and continued effort and discussion of sharing ideas, challenges, solutions, and opportunities; these are just a few to add into these evolving and dynamic conversations.

THE “TWINKLING” STAGES & THE PROSPECTS OF A GREEN ECONOMY

Along with the massive environmental challenges we all face, come bountiful opportunities for innovations in resource conservation, alternative/renewable energies, and retrofitting existing structures—just to name a few areas of potential opportunity. This emerging new “green economy” promises to bring new technologies, industry, and jobs for many in the near future. One statistic I heard was the demand for

at least 500 solar panel installers will be needed in the Puget Sound region in the next three years. With so much hope, promise, and excitement for entrepreneurs, businesses, and people who want to work in this area, a period of speculation has created a “twinkling” stage for many planning new ventures to take advantage of promising solutions with the hope of environmental and financial rewards.

In this optimism and lure of new found innovations, it is important to realize this movement is not about maintaining the status quo; and, that true sustainability will mean economic and environmental equity for all our communities—locally and globally. The green movement should be a catalyst to change the status quo of social and economic inequality as well as environmental degradation. As activist Van Jones says “[t]hose communities that were locked out of last century’s pollution-based economy must be lock into the new, clean and green economy. Our youth need green-collar jobs, not jails.”

Lifting communities out of poverty and into healthy, sustainable opportunities has been the mission of many Seattle activists, including Michael Woo, whom I have had the privilege of working with this summer. He has organized a group of young adults in the Central/South Seattle areas to begin leadership training, outreach, and environmental education. This collaborative group has named their project “Got Green?” and is dedicated to introducing “green” into their communities. These empowered youth have been able to teach their communities important environmental information, along with potential career opportunities in a language that will be heard and understood by many in their direct circles. This strategy of “training the trainer” to convey and message important information in a relevant way has proven to be a successful method of reaching many communities that may not hear and learn via mainstream media outlets.

One of the most important ways to ensure that the youth are engaged and ready to promote, be involved, and take initiative for an inclusive green economy, will be available and accessible educational programs in urban and low-income areas. We need collaboration with community colleges, vocational/apprenticeship programs, and high schools; there needs to be access and pathways for all neighborhoods to get into new green training programs--particularly in South & Central Seattle. Currently, there is one technical program for ‘solar-energy system design’ at Shoreline Community College, which is North of Seattle. There is a need for more such programs in South and Central Seattle, along with pre-requisite course tracks to bridge barriers many youth may face towards entrance into more technical or advanced programs.

Another key component for community involvement in this early green economy is promoting green job initiatives from the city, state, and federal governments to increase green jobs in general and increase training for low-income people. Implementing tax incentives, small business aid, and other possible funding or advantages will perpetuate new opportunities, micro-businesses, and continued incentives for energy efficiency, resource conservation, while simultaneously promoting economic prosperity within our communities. During this period of “green growth” it is important that opportunities are shared amongst everyone and that trust is maintained by those in authority so as to provide accurate and honest information about future possibilities. Empty promises of specific jobs and opportunities will only result in broken relationships, hope, and trust and will not help heal deep historic wounds that linger between those in power and those struggling to survive; we must all follow-through to make green jobs real and obtainable for everyone.

COMMUNITY BUILDING & CREATING COMMUNAL INTERCONNECTION

Building strong communities and relationships takes time and trust. Reciprocal conversations are critical as well as increase the likelihood of potentially yielding new solutions for all stakeholders. Sustainable living will mean something different to each community and possibly even each individual. By sharing ideas, it will be possible to explore traditional and natural methods of cleaning, eating, healing, etc. that many cultures still rely on. Trust and an open dialog have the potential to dramatically increase the resources and innovations that are available to all of us to live healthier, more sustainable lives.

Many low-income households are generally already consuming less because they can't afford to buy as much; they drive less, and have smaller homes and/or yards to maintain. Perhaps the carbon footprints of those in low-income communities are smaller, but certainly there are other areas which may greatly impact their lives, such as environmental pollution, clean air and water, availability to fresh organic foods, good healthcare coverage, energy efficient homes, and lack of time to learn more about available resources which could help them in these areas.

Keeping in mind lifestyle differences and availability (or lack) of resources, be conscientious when creating generic or wide-spread messaging, so that it will be applicable and respectful for all audiences. In the youth group project, we examined a few bumper stickers, which seemingly promote green ideas. For example, "Live simply so that others can simply live" and "Hybrid Cars: so many miles, so little gas" were a few we critiqued. Both messages are fine if you have enough resources to cut-back on excessive extras and buy a hybrid car, which is substantially more expensive than a traditional car. Green messaging can not only be targeted for the well-off (upper and middle class communities); sensitivity, thoughtfulness, and relevance to the community being addressed are vital to any messaging. Think about how someone might perceive what you are saying and ask for direct feedback whenever possible.

Know your audience and craft your messages accordingly. By cultivating inter-communal/cultural relationships, it is will be possible to develop a deeper understanding of your audience; find out who in the community is most received by others and what method is best for them to hear: radio, social networks, face-to-face, flyers, elders, youth, etc. Every community and culture may be completely unique in ways that messaging is successful; and, knowing what is most important and relevant for people and communities will make for better messaging opportunities. When possible, address and prioritize the most urgent issues for each community. Then try to link these priorities in a holistic way which will create improvements all around. Rachel Smith of Seattle's Climate Action Now told me a good example of this, which came from the International District (ID). The main concern for many ID residents was public safety issues and littered, dirty streets. In an effort to create safer streets and more visibility, dumpsters in alleyways were cleaned up and streetlights were added. This process not only increased the safety for the people, but by cleaning up the environment they created healthier, safer, and less polluted environments for everyone in the ID.

By linking environmental messages with people's needs, we can help people to make connections to see what might be in it for them, why they should care, and what they can get out of it. For example, want to improve your health, or your personal economic/financial situation? These are fundamental issues for everyone, and linking environmental issues which affect people in these major ways is one method of making the message meaningful and relevant for them.

FINDING COMMON GROUND & RELEVANCE IN GREEN CONNECTIONS

From recognizing and honoring each community's differences, it is possible to also find common ground—ways we are all connected, rather than how we differ. It is in these human and collective approaches that will help overcome the barriers of communication, resources, and unified actions that are necessary. We all have a responsibility to take care of our shared natural environments, so that our natural environments can take care of us.

However, we can not expect others to be attentive and think about the environmental urgencies when they are faced with urgent daily struggles just to survive. These social divides are just as urgent and need to be addressed to achieve holistic sustainability. Low-income, under represented, and people of color should not be the last to know what is going on in their immediate environments, especially if they are greatly impacted by environmental damage; we must find equitable ways of inclusion, education, and healthy opportunities for these communities.

There are many ways to increase and foster this inclusion. When planning community events/workshops/outreach, make it accessible by providing childcare, food, translation, even transportation if necessary, so that everyone has an opportunity to participate if they choose. Provide opportunities and events in all communities to enable youth, families, businesses, etc. to become involved and engaged in local natural local environmental stewardship programs (such as the Mayor's Clean & Green Seattle events). Create networks and partnerships of Community Based Organizations which will develop pathways and direct connections into communities and regard these liaisons as valuable consultants.

Make sure to follow a transparent, consistent, and honest approach towards messaging. Whenever possible, get involvement and feedback on important issues from all communities; use this feedback to make modifications so that people are informed of issues and know what and why something is happening. A good example is the current shopping bag fee which will be implemented in Seattle early next year. Some people do not agree with this initiative, not because they want to continue the energy consumption and waste pollution that excessive bags yield, but because many have not been able to participate in the early stages of these discussions. Perhaps messaging can be done in proactive ways where people are involved so that mutually beneficial solutions can be attained.

In this continued process of community building, there are many City operated energy efficiency programs which provide reciprocal benefits for customers and the environment. Some of these programs include: Homewise (low-interest loans for home improvements), free weatherization, free green/energy home audits/evaluations, and reduced-utility rates. These are important resources for many people who are struggling to make ends meet financially and through these helpful programs, individuals and families can benefit while gaining a new level of appreciation for their City government.

There are currently also existing City of Seattle tools such as: RSJ, DON toolkits, EDNA Frameworks—all good places to start when planning community outreach and messaging. Certainly, these are only the first steps in a highly evolving process. By continuing to work and discuss collectively and cooperatively, we will discover the next steps, gaps, and establish baselines for successful interconnection.

SUMMARY OF CONSIDERATIONS

- Foster productive creativity, exchange of ideas, innovations, information—reciprocal dialog
- Introduce green to all communities; create opportunities for direct interaction with nature: community tree planting, create stewardship, personal connections to the natural environment all around (some local examples: Clean & Green Seattle community events, Community P-Patch gardens, and Department of Neighborhood's Tree-Fund program)
- Create a unified system where materials, supplies, or other items can be stored for re-use. Example may be old street signs—make the materials/products available for others to re-use
- Make invitations to communities, individuals, and organizations, make this a two-way street and conversation, so that sharing can occur and that other values, perspectives, cultural practices can be considered as equally important contributions to the collective environmental challenges
- Call out climate related information whenever applicable on written messages, tailor messages to include this environmental piece to help audiences to link and make connection regarding climate change and the impact of their actions (example is the CFL twist & save brochure, which equates the CO2 reductions that the consumer will contribute when switching to a CFL bulb) People need to know they are making a positive difference—for themselves, and for the environment
- Make outreach and community engagement events accessible for everyone, provide: childcare, food, translation, even transportation if necessary to eliminate barriers for many to participate
- Create and nurture networks of Community Based Organizations (CBO) as pathways and connections into diverse communities; regard these vital liaisons and community builders as valuable consultants, important assets, whom should be compensated and regarded accordingly
- Utilize existing City of Seattle tools and resources for outreach and community engagement: Race and Social Justice Guidelines, Department of Neighborhoods toolkit, Environmental Justice Network in Action Framework; share successful strategies and methods with others in City departments so that redundancy can be reduced and efficient and strong relationships can develop for all community stakeholders
- Tell people about free resources which are available, such as the City of Seattle's energy efficiency programs which are mutually beneficial for customers and the environment (Some of these include: Homewise--low-interest loans for home updates/renovations, free weatherization, free green/energy home audits/evaluations, reduced-utility bills)
- Link environmental messaging with other needs and motivations; attach your message to the needs/s that relate most with each person/community
- Realize these are first steps in a highly evolving process and conversation; continue to explore the next steps, gaps, and baseline and share experiences with others; promote interconnection

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ABOUT ME

I am just about to complete my BS degree in Technical Communication from the University of Washington's College of Engineering. I am passionate about environmental sustainability and user centered design. This internship has allowed me to conduct design research into communities that I am not (regularly) a part of, which has allowed me to make personal connections and gain a deeper understanding into communicating complex issues to diverse audiences. Through this experience I have broadened my understanding of sustainability and see the gaps in communication surrounding many issues as well as opportunities in the "green" field. I hope to continue my career focus in an area of environmental and social sustainability while promoting equity and justice for all.