

Final Report

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&
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FOOD SCRAPS FOR FUEL: UNDERSTANDING AND INCREASING HOUSEHOLD PARTICIPATION IN THE COSTA MESA CURBSIDE ORGANICS PROGRAM

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Summary of Study Design, Analysis, Challenges, and Recommendations:

This study engages residents served by the Costa Mesa Sanitary District (CMSD) with the Curbside Organics Collection Program (COCP) to better understand how households are responding to in-home food scrap separation and to improve participation.

The Food Scraps for Fuel study, designed and led by Sally Geislar, M.A., is based on a proven approach to improve pro-environmental behavior. Simply communicating the actual behavior of others has been shown to improve energy conservation and recycling behavior, even more than information or financial incentives alone. The Food Scraps for Fuel study will be the first to apply these norm communication tools to the domain of food scraps to improve household participation in the COCP.

Random sampling of mail-out surveys recruited 1,079 residents, 583 completed the second survey and 499 completed the third survey. Of these 352 completed all three surveys. Phase A was a natural experiment examining change between the first and second survey, before and after residents received their curbside organics cart. Phase B was an intervention experiment examining change between the second and third surveys. For Phase B, the 583 participants of the second survey were randomly assigned to either a treatment and control group. The treatment group received norm communication for the 8 week intervention period.

Results from Phase A (June-Oct):

The original CMSD curbside organics program was a success. After receiving the organics cart, participants increased:

- Food scrap separation from 20-66% of households
 - 28% had collected kitchen pail from CMSD by Oct.
 - 44% used some improvised collector such as an empty bulk yogurt container or existing tupperware
- Support of the curbside organics recycling program from 60-69%. Participants were more likely to support the COCP if they knew that it would improve post-collection recycling efforts.
- The belief that separating food waste is the right thing to do from 67-77%

Results from Phase B (Oct-Dec):

- Communicating the food scrap separation behavior of other residents improved organics separation among treatment group participants by:
 - Increasing the percent of residents participating in the COCP from 66-77%.
 - Increasing the portion of household food waste separated from 50-63%
 - 39% collected kitchen pail from CMSD by Dec.
 - 36% used some improvised collector
- Residents receiving norm communication were also less likely to stop separating
- Participants who received this messaging also increased their support of the COCP for Costa Mesa and other cities by 7%.
- The separation behavior and policy support of the control group remained constant during the intervention period from October to December.

Cost-Effective Impact

The Treatment group increased separation by 0.16 lbs. per household per day or 1758 lbs. as a group during the intervention experiment (8 weeks). ¹ The program effects cost \$16.50 per lb. of increased food waste diverted during experiment based on the total cost of the program to CMSD (\$29,000), or \$2.75 per lb. of increased food waste diverted over one year. If we consider only the cost of implementing the treatment (i.e. incentives, mailing costs, magnet printing), the increased food waste diversion cost \$2.42 per lb. for the period of the experiment, or \$0.40 per lb. diverted over one year. This final figure best represents the cost per lb. of expanding the program to the broader community, not including evaluation of expansion.

This cutting edge research coupled with the cutting edge of organics management in Orange County has generated new knowledge about barriers to and improvement of participation in CMSD's COCP. This research has had immediate impacts in aiding the District to meet statewide mandates for diversion and GHG reductions. Yet the real value of this study is in the application of this new knowledge across the entire District.

Policy Recommendations

Expanding the new tools of norm communication will increase participation in the broader community. This can be achieved in several forms including:

- Framing messages in media (via newsletter, website, or mobile app)
- Providing magnets (either to all households or only to those with substandard performance)
- Evaluation of these efforts for reporting success to state agencies and potential grantors
- Evaluation would also aid in communicating to other cities interested in learning from the success of CMSD's Organics Recycling Program.

The following are additional recommendations based on the findings presented above.

- Provide additional information (possibly in the form of magnets) on the benefits of the curbside organics recycling program and best practices to maintain the cart and bin
- Providing resident testimonials to help share ideas on how to overcome concerns about family cooperation, maintaining the pail and cart, sufficient time and knowledge
- Addressing challenges with insufficient curb space may continue to demand a case-by-case approach.

One final note on avoiding the "ick"-factor

Avoiding exposure to the ick-inducing factors such as pests and odors is key. Several residents who began separating with the new cart, gave up because they assumed these "inevitable" nuisances were simply tolerable to others, but not for them. Instead, these nuisances should be perceived as a clue that their at-home practices need to be fine-tuned a little to have the in-home food scrap separation system running smoothly. Suggested solutions provided below.

¹ See Appendix II. Table 2 for more detailed analysis

BACKGROUND

Food waste is the single largest material stream sent to landfills after recycling. Once there, it generates a quarter of the country's methane gas emissions, a potent greenhouse gas (GHG). Diverting food waste from landfills to be used in alternative processing methods serves multiple ends.

First, food waste diversion will help the district meet the demands of a series of state mandates including the following: California Assembly Bill 341 (AB 341) requiring 75% landfill diversion by 2020, California Strategic Directive 6.1 requiring 50% reduction in the amount of organics in the waste stream by 2020, and California Assembly Bill 32 (AB32) requiring a reduction of GHG emissions to 1990 levels by 2020. Secondly, alternative processing methods for organics such as compost and Anaerobic Digestion produce a valuable product. These products are currently used to return nutrients to the soil or power biogas-fleets or power water treatment facilities.

This research was organized around the new curbside organics recycling program offered by the Costa Mesa Sanitary District (CMSD) and the private hauler California Recycling and Recovery (CR&R). The research team set out to understand how households have responded to the new curbside program, and to test new tools to improve participation.

The Food Scraps for Fuel study, designed and led by Sally Geislar, M.A., is based on a proven approach to improve pro-environmental behavior. Simply communicating the actual behavior of others has been shown to improve energy conservation and recycling behavior, even more than information or financial incentives alone.

A classic example in the field of social-psychology is an experiment on hotel towel reuse. In the study, some rooms had signs with an environmental message extolling the benefits of reusing your towels, while signs in other rooms communicated group norms by stating that 75% of other guests reused their towels. Ultimately, the guests with the norm messaging reused their towels at 150% the rate of guests with environmental messaging. These hotels were able to save water and energy, not with large capital investments or education campaigns, but merely by communicating group norms.

The pilot study also suggests that spillover behaviors--those unrelated to the target behavior, in this case food scrap separation--and environmental concern develop after beginning to separate food scraps in the home. Pilot participants revealed more pro-environmental attitudes and reported increased awareness of the environmental impact of their waste after they began separating food scraps. Some reported engaging in other waste reduction efforts by purchasing goods with less packaging, for example.

The Food Scraps for Fuel study will be the first to apply these norm communication tools to the domain of food scraps to improve household participation in the COCP.

The research goal for this study was first to understand how households are affected by the COCP, including how they are adapting to or resisting participation in the COCP. Secondly, the goal was to test the use of norm communication to improve household participation.

STUDY DESIGN AND METHODS

In order to achieve the research goals for this study, the team recruited residents to participate in two experiments; a Natural Experiment and an Intervention Experiment. The experiments required participants to complete surveys at three points in time between June and December 2015. To prepare for the experiments, the team also conducted a focus group and a trial recruitment.

Sample Selection:

In June 2015, 7,400 addresses were randomly selected² from a complete list of 20,000 single-family home residents served by the Costa Mesa Sanitary District. Each residence would receive a curbside organics cart for the first time in July or August 2015. The recruitment mailer for this study included a welcome letter, the six-page survey, a postage-paid return envelope, and a link for the online version of the survey. One reminder postcard was sent to non-responders after two weeks. Of the 1,040 who responded (14% response rate), 800 used the print survey and 250 completed it online. More than 75% of the print respondents indicated at the end of the survey that they would prefer an electronic survey in the future.

The 7,500 addresses was determined based on the response rate to the print and digital response option of 14% (a relatively high response for this sort of recruitment) from the print and digital trial recruitment letters, and expected drop-out rates of 50% and 35% for the subsequent surveys (based on previous community-based studies). To ensure sufficient population size at the end of the study in Dec (approximately 400), the team determined that attracting about 1,000 participants for recruitment and mailing to about 7,400 addresses would be necessary.

Data Collection:

Surveys were mailed to a random sample of residents. Participants could complete the survey online or by completing the hard-copy and returning it in the postage-paid return envelope. The following surveys were requested of each participant:

- Recruitment Survey, June 2015: Completed prior to receiving curbside organics carts
- Posttest Survey, Oct 2015: Completed after receiving curbside organics carts
- Post-intervention Survey (Dec 2015): Completed after 8-week intervention

Phase A: Natural Experiment (June-Oct):

Participants completed the Recruitment survey (June) before they received their organic curbside carts, and a Posttest survey (Oct) afterwards. Comparing changes in resident responses between these surveys suggests changes that resulted from **having the organics carts available**. The surveys measured participants' beliefs and opinions about food waste, environmental attitudes, and various behaviors.

Phase B: Intervention Experiment (Oct-Dec):

For the Intervention experiment (Oct-Dec), participants who completed the Posttest survey (Oct) were randomly assigned to either a treatment or control group. The treatment group

² The random selection for recruiting participants as well as the random assignment to treatment and control groups improved the generalizability of the study results. In other words, all residents of single family homes had an equal chance of being selected and participants were equally likely to be assigned to treatment and control groups. This process makes the findings more likely to represent what we would find in the general population.

received short weekly surveys to track their food scrap separation behavior over the course of the 8 week intervention period. The treatment group then received messages communicating the new norms of food scrap separation. The messages read: "76% of Households in Costa mesa Separated All their Food Scraps this week." This figure varied by week.



Those completing print surveys received a magnet indicating the first week's participation rate, and then received stickers to place over the magnet each week. Those receiving digital surveys receiving this messaging in their email.

At the end of the intervention period, all treatment and control group participants received the Post-intervention survey (Dec). Comparing changes between Oct-Dec surveys for the control group (who did not receive norm communication) indicate the changes we would expect in the general population during that same time. Any changes that occurred for the treatment group, but not the control group are a result of the norm communication "treatment". If the treatment group showed increased participation significantly above the control group, then the study would conclude that norm communication improves participation.

Focus Group:

The focus group was designed to improve the community comprehension and cultural competency of the surveys. First, our team identified local organizations in a community with a similar demographic profile as Costa Mesa. We partnered with an organization in Fountain Valley, CA which shares some key demographic variables with Costa Mesa including average household size, median household income, and education. We Recruit members of that organization to review and provide feedback on all study materials that will be received by residents served by CMSD.

Participants from a diverse Fountain Valley church reviewed all study materials prior to the focus group meeting. Participants attended a focus group with the Lead Researcher and Research Assistants and reviewed each of the study materials for clarity. Two groups of six participants received a \$25 grocery store gift card for their participation.

Focus Group Outcomes:

1. Improved and finalized Recruitment Mailing Packaging: Participants indicated that having the logo of the Food Works Lab and CMSD would help the survey stand out.
2. Improved and finalized Pretest-Posttest Surveys for experiments: Participants helped improve clarity of several questions regarding food preparation and disposal in the

home as well as suggesting questions be included that asked if residents separate recycling on their own and if residents were aware of the curbside program at the baseline (before receiving bins). Participants also improved the wording of questions assessing the impact of norms on behavior to be less off-putting to residents.

3. Improved and finalized Weekly Surveys and Norm Communication tools: Participants indicated that they would be more likely to access the internet for the short weekly surveys on their mobile device, but that older populations may not due to the small screen size.

Trial Recruitment:

The trial recruitment was sent to a random sample of 400 residents selected from the initial random sample of 7,500. The purpose of the trial was to determine whether including both a digital and a print response option for residents improved the response rate. Half received digital only, and half digital and print response options. The latter group had a significantly higher response rate and a more representative sample.

Trial Recruitment Outcomes:

1. Higher response rate with digital and print option: The group receiving digital and print response options had a 14% response rate compared to only 3% from those with print response options only.
2. More representative sample with digital and print option: The trial indicated that providing only a print response option resulted in a sample that was significantly older and less educated than the general population.

Sample Characteristics

The Recruitment survey (June) attracted 1,079 respondents from the 7,400 who received the survey (14% response rate). Of these, more than half completed the Posttest survey in Oct (583, 56% response rate). For the Post-Intervention survey (Dec), all 1,079 original participants received the survey, 499 completed it. Of these 352 completed all three surveys for a 32% response rate overall.

Demographic data				
	June	Oct	Oct	Dec
<i>Sample Size</i>	1,079	583	583	499
<i>Retention Rate</i>		56%		86%
	Phase A		Phase B	
	<i>n = 583</i>	<i>Percentage</i>	<i>n = 352</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
Female		68		67
Non-Hispanic White		78		na
Aged 55 and over		46		61
Bachelor's or higher		50		73
Household size (avg)		2.6		2.6
Children Present		26		26

Nevertheless, some demographic differences remain in the sample compared to the general population in Costa Mesa.

- The study participants were more likely to be non-Hispanic White (78%), female (68%), aged 55 and over (46%), and having earned a Bachelor's degree or higher (50%)
- Average household size for participants was similar to that of Costa Mesa at about 2.6 persons per household.
- About a quarter of participants had children in the home.
- Those participants in Phase B who completed all three surveys (352 participants) had an even greater portion of older (61%) and more educated residents (73%).

**OUTCOMES:
PHASE A
(JUNE-OCT)**

Changes in Behavior and Attitudes

After receiving the organics cart, participants increased:

- Food scrap separation from 20-66% of households
- Support of the curbside organics recycling program from 60-69%
- The belief that separating food waste is the right thing to do from 67-77%

Determinants of Participation

Participants were more likely to separate if they:

- Had a positive attitude toward separating food scraps, or had some prior experience doing so.
- Believed they had control over separation in their home--including the belief that it would be an easy thing to do and that the decision in the household was theirs to make.

Participant Concerns

Participants had some concerns about separating food waste in their home. These concerns changed after receiving the curbside bin and varied by who was responsible for household tasks.

- Insufficient kitchen space (47%)
- Lack of knowledge about how to separate food waste (27%). *Decreased after cart*
- Difficulty gaining household cooperation (25%) *Increased after cart*
- Insufficient time to separate food waste (23%)
- Insufficient curb space (20%). *Increased after cart*

Other concerns raised included:

- Knowledge of how best to maintain the kitchen pail and the cart to avoid pests and odors.
- Not making "enough" food waste for the smallest curbside cart, many wanted an even smaller option
- Some had concerns about the added cost of compostable bags, perhaps not realizing they could use paper bags or that they will use fewer regular garbage bags

Providing tips on how to keep the pail and cart clean and odor free including daily (or every other day) emptying and rinsing of the pail. Share stories from residents on how they successfully encouraged cooperation among other household members. Addressing challenges with sufficient curb space may demand a case-by-case approach.

Program Support

Participants were more likely to support the COCP if they

- Knew that organics separation would improve recycling
- Believed that separating food waste is the right thing to do

While the latter is of no surprise, the former suggests that new efforts to inform the community about the effects of the COCP on post-separation recycling efforts may increase participation.

Other Effects of Participation

Participants reported additional changes in the home:

- More aware of how much food is wasted, some are changing shopping behaviors to waste less food
- Pleased to eliminate one trash cart or have more room in trash cart, fewer trash bags used
- More thoughtful about where trash goes
- More aware of food packaging—avoid plastic bags for produce and groceries

OUTCOMES: PHASE B (OCT-DEC)

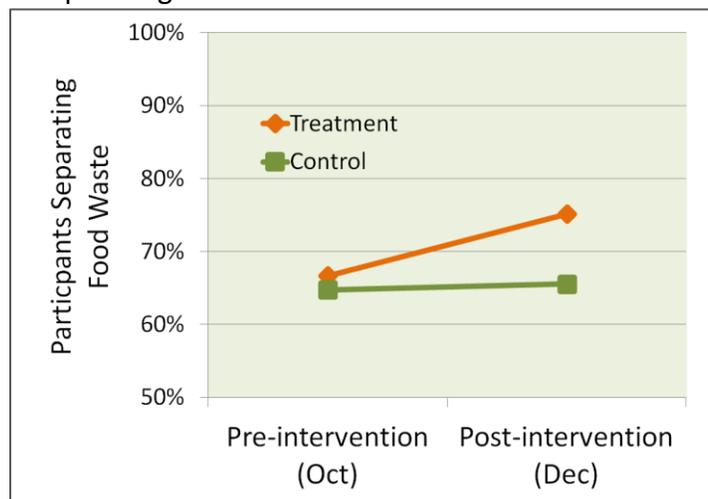
Effects of Norm Communication

The treatment group received weekly messages communicating the new norms of food waste separation. The treatment group improved in behaviors and attitudes significantly more than the control group. This indicates that norm communication does increase participation and should be incorporated into future communication efforts by CMSD.

Increased participation:

The Treatment group was significantly more likely to:

- Separate food waste from 66-77%
- Separate a greater percent of food waste, 53-60% on average. In fact, 87% of treatment group separates 75% or more of their food waste.
- Not give up on separating food waste



Increased positive perceptions and policy support:

The Treatment group was significantly more likely to:

- Increase policy support 69-81%
- Increase the belief that separating food waste is the right thing to do from 77-79%
- Support promoting organics programs in other cities

It is important to note here that participants were significantly more likely to support the curbside organics recycling if they knew that:

- Organics separation will improve recycling
- Waste is separated after collection

Cost Effective Impact

The study resulted in significant increases in participation, both in the percent of residents participating and in the portion of household food waste diverted by residents. In estimating the value of the impact of this study, the team considered both the total cost of the project to CMSD and the cost of the administering the actual treatment. The latter is a more accurate reflection of dollar spent per increased diversion (lbs.) as this is closer to what would be spent in an expansion of norm communication tools.

Communicating the new norms of food waste separation increased the portion of food waste separated by the treatment group.³

Increased pounds of food waste separated by the treatment group

- 0.16 lbs. = Increased food waste separation (per household per day)
- 1758 lbs. = Total increased food waste separation for treatment group during experiment (8 weeks)

Pounds diverted per dollar spent based on the total cost of the program to CMSD (\$29,000)

- \$16.50 per lb. of increased food waste diverted during experiment
- \$2.75 per lb. of increased food waste diverted over one year

The following figures consider only the cost of implementing the treatment itself (i.e. incentives, mailing costs, magnet printing)

Pounds diverted per dollar spent based on cost of treatment alone (\$4,252)

- \$2.42 per lb. of increased food waste diverted during experiment
- \$0.40 per lb. of increased food waste diverted over one year

The primary finding of this research is that simply by using the language of the new norms of food scrap separation, CMSD can improve participation in their curbside organics program. Residents are more likely to participate and more likely to separate more of their food waste into the CMSD curbside organics cart if they know that others in the community do so as well.

³ For complete calculations see Appendix: Table 2

Thus, CMSD should incorporate this messaging into future communications with the community. This can be done in a variety of formats and with different standards for measurement. Some examples are provided below.

Expansion programs include communicating the new norms of organics separation by:

- Framing messages in media (via newsletter, website, or mobile app)
- Providing magnets (either to all households or only to those with substandard performance)
- Evaluation of these efforts for reporting success to state agencies and potential grantors
- Evaluation would also aid in communicating to other cities interested in learning from the success of CMSD's Organics Recycling Program.

The following are additional recommendations based on the findings presented above.

- Provide additional information (possibly in the form of magnets) on the benefits of the curbside organics recycling program and best practices to maintain the cart and bin
- Addressing challenges with insufficient curb space may continue to demand a case-by-case approach.

One final note on avoiding the "ick"-factor

Based on responses to open-ended questions, many participants assume that odors and pests in the kitchen pail is an inevitable part of food waste separation rather than a signal of some shortcoming with maintenance or pail-emptying.

With frequent emptying of the kitchen pail into the organics cart (every-other day or every day), and a quick rinsing and wiping out of the pail, residents can avoid these nuisances. Using a liner of some sort can also help in this regard. Residents may choose to purchase compostable plastic bags, but a paper grocery bag or a newspaper works as well. Similarly, incorporating brown waste in the cart and regularly rinsing out the organics cart with a garden hose or the like will reduce the build-up of residues. Residents may also choose to use existing cart-cleaning services at some interval.

Avoiding the ick-inducing factors is key as several residents who began separating with the new cart, gave up because they assumed these "inevitable" nuisances were simply tolerable to others, but not for them. Instead, these nuisances should be perceived as a clue that their at-home practices need to be fine-tuned a little to have the in-home food scrap separation system running smoothly.

Some steps to encourage this perspective include:

- Communicating that odors and pests are a sign that something is not quite right with the at-home food waste system and that there is a solution to odors and pests (e.g. on an attractive magnet or flyer to be hung on the fridge)
- Providing resident testimonials to help share ideas on how to overcome concerns about maintaining the pail and cart, family cooperation, and having sufficient time or knowledge

Appendix I.

Table 1: Estimates of study impact and impact of district-wide expansion

Figure #		Figure	Calculation
Population			
1	Households in final sample	352	
2	Treatment group households	186	
3	Treatment group percent of sample	53%	(#2/#1)
Waste and Food Waste Generation			
4	Total waste accounts Oct 2015 (CR&R)	21880	
5	Total waste generated (in tons) Oct 2015	2650	
6	Total waste generated (in lbs.)	5300000	(#5*2000)
7	Lbs. of waste / household / month	242.23	(#6/#4)
8	Lbs. of waste / household / day	8.07	(#7/30)
9	Lbs. of foodwaste / household / day (CalRecycle)	1.21	(#8*.15)
Food Waste Separation (lbs. / HH / day)			
10	Control group separation (50%)	0.61	(#9*.50)
11	Treatment group separation (63%)	0.76	(#9*.63)
Increased separation (in pounds):			
12	Per household / day (lbs/hh/day)	0.16	(#12-#11)
13	Treatment group / day (186 HH) (lbs/day)	29	(#13*#8)
14	Treatment group / month (186 HH) (lbs/month)	879	(#14*30)
15	Treatment group / year (186 HH) (lbs/year)	10543	(#15*12)
Cost-Effective Impact			
16	<u>Total Study Cost to CMSD</u>	\$ 29,000	
17	Dollars / lb. over experiment	\$ 16.50	(#16/(2*#14))
18	Dollars / lb. over year	\$ 2.75	(#16/#15)
20	<u>Treatment Cost to CMSD (treatment group alone)</u>	\$ 4,252	
21	Treatment dollars / lb. over experiment	\$ 2.42	(#20/(2*#14))
22	Treatment dollars / lb. over year	\$ 0.40	(#20/#15)

Appendix II.

Table 2: District-Wide Expansion of Norm Communication Tools to Increase Participation in Broader Community

 Program Option	Service available through the Food Works Lab	Messages communicate community participation	Community outreach, education, and feedback	Utilizes existing communication structures	Lasting exposure of new norms to community	Evaluates effect of new norms for reporting to state agencies or grantors
1a	Provide magnets with the new norms of separation	X	X		X	
Ex. 1 To all households Ex. 2 Only to households in communities where participation is sub-standard.						
2a	Media communicates the new norms of food waste	X	X	X	X	
Ex. 1 CMSD (i) Quarterly Newsletter, (ii) Website, (iii) Mobile Application						
1b	Evaluation of norm communication expansion <u>with magnets only</u>	X	X		X	X
2b	Evaluation of norm communication expansion <u>with media only</u>	X	X	X		X
1b+2b	Evaluation of norm communication expansion <u>with magnets & media</u>	X	X	X	X	X
Ex. 1 Partner with CR&R to measure carts at the curbside before & after expansion Ex. 2 Short surveys of new r&om sample of residents before & after expansion						

(i) Quarterly CMSD newsletter: Include a regular column that reports the participation rate of the community and features resident testimonials about overcoming challenges to adopting new habits and avoiding nuisances. The Food Works Lab could continue to interview participants who have volunteered to share their stories.

(ii) CMSD website: Include a regular column that reports the participation rate of the community and features resident testimonials about overcoming challenges to adopting new habits and avoiding nuisances. The Food Works Lab could continue to interview participants who have volunteered to share their stories. This could be prepared for weekly or monthly entries and include an opportunity for others to share their stories and ask questions.

(iii) CMSD mobile app: Include a regular blurb reporting the participation rate of the community and features resident testimonials about overcoming challenges to adopting new habits and avoiding nuisances. The Food Works Lab could continue to interview participants who have volunteered to share their stories. This could be prepared for weekly or monthly entries and include an opportunity for others to share their stories and ask questions.