



Think before for a better after

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Think before you drive. Think before you trash it. Think before for a better after. These were all slogans used in a campaign on the California Polytechnic State University campus in San Luis Obispo, Calif. Two students worked with their college union and other areas of campus to develop and implement a campaign to promote recycling and energy and water conservation.

The central goal of this campaign was to influence students to think about their actions and change their behaviors to be more eco-friendly.

The recycling opportunities at Cal Poly are plentiful. Students, staff, and faculty members each have two containers in their dorm room or office, one for recycling and one for trash. Trash cans and recycling bins are found side by side across the campus. The means to recycle were available, but people were not consistently using them. On a typical day trash cans were overflowing with recyclables such as soda bottles, newspapers, and plastic juice containers. Beside the full trash containers stood half-empty recycling bins. Why were students not recycling, especially when it required no extra effort?

Surveys and personal interviews during the summer quarter of 2002 revealed that many students were unaware of the importance of recycling or were confused about what could be recycled. The survey results also showed that many students perceived energy and water conservation solely as a way to save money. The campaign sought to combat this lack of understanding by educating students about the importance of recycling, teaching them what could and could not be recycled, and convincing them that water and energy conservation are more than just financially motivated. By uniting the entire cam-

The majority of people knew that items such as tin, glass, and plastic can be recycled in San Luis Obispo. However, they asked: “Do you need to rinse out the jars first?” “What about paper plates or plastic silverware?” “Can you put oil or batteries into the recycling containers?”

pus behind the “Think Before” ideas, students would not be able to ignore the message.

The motivation for this campaign stems from America’s wasteful habits and the need for these habits to change. According to the Environmental Protection Agency (2002), the quantity of ‘waste’ produced by the average person in the United States alone has doubled since the mid 1960s: from 2.7 to 4.46 lbs. per day. Within the next 10 years worldwide energy consumption is on track to increase by 50 percent or more. Fossil fuels, which account for 97 percent of transportation consumption in the United States, are depleted at a rate 100,000 times faster than they can be formed, and the harmful CO₂ (carbon dioxide) emissions responsible for global warming will grow by 50 percent unless major changes in energy practices can be implemented (EPA, 2002). Although Cal Poly was just a microcosm of people not “thinking before” they acted, something could be done to change the campus community’s wasteful behavior.

When attempting to prompt these types of cultural changes, a college campus is a wonderful place to target. Students use their college years as the foundation for their adult lives, using surrounding information and resources to shape their ideals. College campuses and college unions have the means to guide how this growth into adulthood occurs. Thus,

the education for a successful career should be just as important as education for a successful society. At Cal Poly, the goal was to initiate movement toward a sustainable future — to motivate one student at a time.

The biggest obstacles going into this project were students’ indifferent attitudes as well as their unwillingness to take the time to find a recycling receptacle. When dealing with changing behaviors to more sustainable ones, it is hard to compete with students’ fast-paced habits in which convenience conquers. Research for the project indicated that many students would simply throw materials into the closest receptacle, regardless of whether the materials could be recycled. Through one-on-one interviews, it was also found that many students did not recycle at home because they felt it took too much time and they did not see the related advantages. Another major challenge was that the current messages for conservation were coming from the administration rather than fellow students. College students could easily dismiss conservation guidelines as simply more rules to follow. And all the literature that was currently in place only showed what and how to recycle, but it did not convey why.

Taking action

The campaign began by locating programs with the necessary resources that would support conservation education. The groups that

To help indicate how many students at California Polytechnic State University recycle, 100 students were asked to complete written questionnaires.

When asked how frequently they recycle:

- 9 percent said they “never recycle,”
- 56 percent said they “recycle every now and then,”
- 23 percent said they “recycle most of the time,”
- 12 percent said they “always recycle.”

When asked to rate on a scale of 1 to 5

(1 being very poor and 5 being very good) their knowledge of what can and cannot be recycled in San Luis Obispo County, the average score was 3.

When asked whether Styrofoam could be recycled in San Luis Obispo,

33 percent said “yes” and 18 percent said they “did not know.” Styrofoam cannot be recycled in San Luis Obispo.

When asked why at times they do not recycle certain items,

45 percent said they do not see the benefits, 32 percent said they do not think it is important, and 11 percent said they think it is inconvenient.

were contacted were the utilities department, facilities and programs departments of residence life, campus dining, college union, Student Community Services' Environmental Council, Integrated Waste Management Authority of San Luis Obispo, and the City of San Luis Obispo. Every group was extremely supportive of the campaign, and each was willing to give what it could to work toward the common goal of promoting sustainability on the Cal Poly campus.

The campaign leaders targeted their first initiatives toward three areas of campus that are particularly vulnerable to extreme waste — the utilities department, campus dining, and residence halls. In a fiscal year, residence hall dwellers use 39,062,000 gallons of water, averaging 90 gallons per student each day (Johnson, 2002). Energy use is high as well. The residence halls spend \$307,000 a year on electricity alone (not including heat), resulting in the 1,643 kilowatts per hour used by each student for three academic quarters (Johnson, 2002). This amount of energy is equivalent to having a television on for 12 hours every single day of the year.

During meetings with the manager of energy and sustainability programs, the campaign leaders considered the current situation on campus while brainstorming the most effective means to reach the students. To combat excessive water and energy con-

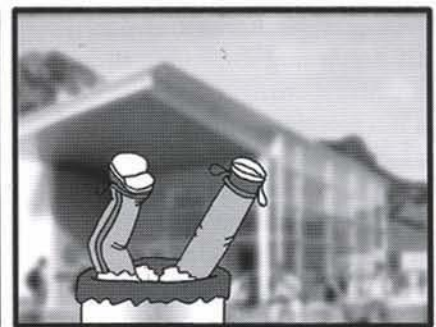
sumption, the manager of energy and sustainability programs placed stickers on all office-sized or plastic curbside recycle containers throughout the campus indicating what could and could not be recycled. He also created yellow and green magnets that stated: "Cal Poly: We Recycle" for all residence hall room refrigerators.

Campus dining, the organization in charge of recycling containers in food service areas, was another critical resource for reaching students. The associate director demonstrated overwhelming support for the cause and granted permission to display informative table tents in various dining areas. He was conscious of the need for awareness and behavioral change and knew that many students were not recycling items, even when containers were conveniently located near trash cans. In compliance with the California State AB 75 law, which mandates all state universities and offices recycle half of what was wasted in the past year, campus dining and facilities had used grant money to enhance the recycling containers. They did so by engaging the concept of co-mingling and posting larger readable signs indicating what could be recycled in San Luis Obispo. But motivating students to consistently recycle and take advantage of the available facilities was still a challenge.

Establishing an important connection with the residential life department was also necessary. The campaign leaders received the required

permission to spread their "Think Before" message to the community of students living in the residence halls. Requests to display materials in the main halls, distribute fliers to each resident's mailbox, include an article in the campus *First-Year Connection* newsletter, and post fliers behind the bathroom stall doors were all approved.

The campaign leaders next took their "Think Before" promotional ideas to the incoming residence hall advisors during their week of training. They wanted to get the advisors excited about environmental conservation and have it fresh in their minds as they started planning activities for the year. The campaign leaders encouraged the advisors to have contests between residence halls to see who could recycle the most or use the least amount of water or electricity. These could be monitored by checking how full the recycling containers were each week and by using water meters for each residence hall. Reaching the individuals who have daily one-on-one contact with the residents was important in trying to set a precedent for sustainable behavior. If freshmen viewed recycling and conservation as a way of life at Cal Poly and they continued to recycle throughout the rest of their college career, perhaps the wasteful behaviors of the overall campus could be decreased. To accomplish this, education of those who could influence the freshmen had to occur. Facts about



recycling, conservation, and the environment were presented to more than 80 residence hall advisors. These were received with support and curiosity and many people asked questions.

The campaign leaders were successful in gaining the backing of these different departments on campus, but in a world flooded with images and messages, marketers' ability to be innovative is crucial in influencing people's behavior. So an unusual event was prepared to reinforce the "Think Before" message.

Every Thursday Cal Poly holds a University Union (UU) hour in which many student organizations gather to listen to a band and promote current events and/or hold fundraisers, rallies, or demonstrations. This is a popular event that draws hundreds of students.

The "Think Before" campaigners gained approval to lead activities during UU hour on the day before America's Recycle Day. They were provided a booth, and a press release was distributed. One goal for the hour was to educate people about sustainability through a game that would positively reinforce such behavior in a humorous manner. The campaigners began asking sponsors to donate prizes for a game they were going to play during the UU hour. Trips to local businesses yielded more than 120 items ranging from tea bags to \$10 gift certificates. For the event, the campaigners and many other

volunteers dressed up as superheroes with costumes from local thrift stores and capes handmade from sheets donated by a local hotel. Others joined in the effort by wearing the capes marked with a huge print of the recycling triangle. Those who came to the booth were greeted by superheroes armed with questions for inquiring minds. The superheroes "quest" during the event was to capture the audience's attention while also saving waste from the landfill. The volunteers kicked off the campaign by handing out fliers around campus at the start of the hour and gaining the attention of bystanders. When the game began, such questions as "How can you save energy in your house?" and "What items cannot be recycled in San Luis Obispo?" were followed with possible answers that students could choose from. If students answered correctly, a prize was given; if not, the students received a consolation gift as well as valuable information to study and share with friends.

While people were learning, the campaigners were also doing their part to rescue recyclable items from

the trashcans. As their prior research had indicated, trashcans that were conveniently placed next to recycling bins were full of recyclable items. So, equipped with yellow rubber gloves, the superheroes tore through the garbage saving all they could from

Save this date

Earth Day: April 22

America Recycles Day: Nov. 15

Visit this site

www.epa.gov

www.earthday.org

www.environmental.org

ending up at the landfill.

Having a light attitude about the serious subject of environmental destruction proved to make students more receptive to the "green" ideas presented. *Mustang Daily*, the campus newspaper, covered the event with an article the following day entitled: "Students Try to Save the World."

After the campaign, the facilities department had a noticeable increase



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in the amount of recycled material compared to material in the trash containers. The increase was approximately 5 percent. The amount of nonrecyclable materials in the recycling containers also went down about 1 percent. Students were learning what they could and could not recycle and were putting things in the appropriate places. There are also plans within the student government to continue the campaign with large on-campus events for future America Recycles Days and Earth Days.

Do something on your campus

On almost every university campus there are groups pursuing the idea of sustainability. Imagine if a college union could bring all that energy together. The resources exist at any university. Here is some advice from the students who created the “Think Before” campaign:

- Get anyone involved who is willing. Art and marketing professors are usually looking for proj-

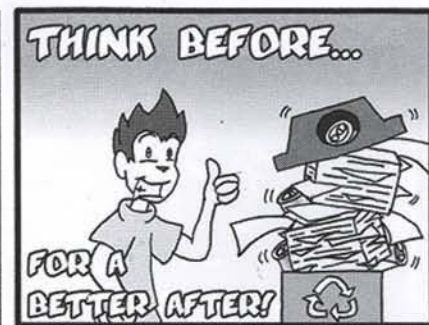
ects for students to work on.

- Create a plan early on and try to get all the different groups using similar signs, slogans, or logos. Consistency is the most important aspect in this type of campaign.
- Try to plan an event around a day such as Earth Day or America Recycles Day to increase awareness.
- Be creative and excited. It is a wonderful feeling when you are contributing to something that will make positive changes.

If you would like any further information, tips, or have questions please contact Brooke Diskin at brooke_diskin@yahoo.com or Kyla Mullen at kmullen@calpoly.edu.

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