



Utilizing Opinion Leaders to Affect Goal Achievement for FYN Objectives¹

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Background

The Florida Yards & Neighborhoods (FYN) program partners with national, state, and local agencies to teach Florida-Friendly Landscaping. The target audiences for FYN are Florida homeowners, landscaping professionals, and property developers (Florida Yards & Neighborhoods website, 2009). The major program goal is to conserve water and reduce over-fertilization in landscapes. FYN focuses on the homeowner audience, homeowner associations, and property managers.

The objective of this document is to inform FYN coordinators how to identify and utilize opinion leaders to increase adult participation in their programs. The information presented is aimed at assisting educators in learning about individuals who can directly and indirectly influence program participants' adoption of FYN principles.

Promoting, inducing, and sustaining change is not effortless. Bringing about behavior change in individuals, groups, and organizations is a challenging task (Burke, 2008; Kirton, 2003; Kotter, 1996). FYN coordinators act as change agents in the

process to bring about behavior change in clientele. Change agents are individuals who persuade participants to make innovation-decisions recommended by the change agency (Rogers, 2003). Cooperative Extension serves as the change agency responsible for FYN.

Cooperative Extension utilizes opinion leaders regularly to promote behavior change to clientele. The extent to which an individual is able to affect others' attitudes or behaviors in a preferred manner is opinion leadership (Rogers, 2003). Opinion leaders are affiliated with a social system within which they wield their influence. The unique facet of opinion leaders is their position of influence as "the hub of individualized social communication systems" (Rogers, 2003, p. 27).

Exploring the Role of Opinion Leadership in the FYN Program

The Florida Yards and Neighborhoods program promotes nine main principles or best management practices for a Florida-Friendly Landscape:

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1. Right Plant, Right Place
2. Water Efficiently
3. Fertilize Appropriately
4. Mulch
5. Attract Wildlife
6. Manage Yard Pests Responsibly
7. Recycle Yard Waste
8. Reduce Stormwater Runoff
9. Protect the Waterfront

Sixteen FYN program coordinators were interviewed in focus groups to explore their perceptions of how opinion leaders in the community affect the adoption of FYN's best management practices. Three focus groups were conducted during the spring of 2009.

Although this study is limited in scope and therefore not generalizable, several key findings emerged from the interviews with FYN coordinators. Synopses of the emerging themes are presented in the sections that follow.

Results

Opinion Leaders' Influence on the Adoption of Best Management Practices

Opinion leaders were a great resource in motivating homeowners to participate in FYN. The make-up and diversity of opinion leaders were exposed in this study. The effect of homeowner associations and individual board members was uncovered. Joshua said:

Homeowner associations have a large influence on whether people participate or not. Even if the whole board is not behind what we are teaching, one individual on a neighborhood board can make a big difference on my program being delivered to homeowners. I had an experience where one local board member carried the torch of FYN in that community. I was able to build a good relationship

with that individual and put them on my advisory committee. She does a great job of placing FYN recognition signage in her community. We need more advocates like her.

Other coordinators had opinions on the influence of homeowner associations. Coordinators were asked how homeowner associations influenced FYN program delivery. Mary said:

I have noticed after I present an FYN program through the help of homeowner associations, it has seemed more participants adopt our BMP's. On the other hand, information I have taught without the assistance from a homeowner association has been less successful in leading FYN participants to accept our BMP's. Because of this experience, I have learned to use homeowner associations or their boards, when appropriate, to prepare residents before I show up and teach about FYN, and to follow-up with participants to make sure they are implementing our principles.

Other groups besides homeowner associations were revealed to have an impact on the marketing of FYN objectives to the target population. One group of opinion leaders was already a member of the Cooperative Extension "family." Peter believed:

Those [homeowner association] boards are essential to our jobs, but others are important, too. Master Gardeners are very helpful in supplying FYN information to people. Master Gardeners serve as peers for homeowners, and I think they can gather more information from homeowners than I could at times. They have a large impact in homeowners accepting [the] BMP's we teach, in my opinion.

James agreed and added, "I rely on Master Gardeners to deliver my FYN curriculum and report back to me how successful it was. I have had Master Gardeners canvas neighborhoods to see if people were changing their behaviors."

Conclusions

The findings indicated opinion leaders were important aspects of FYN according to program coordinators. Moreover, the relationship of change

agents and opinion leaders emerged as a highlight of the study—change agents, or FYN coordinators, felt the support of opinion leaders critical for delivering FYN's principles to the intended target audiences.

Implications for FYN Programming

Individuals influencing neighbors served as opinion leaders in FYN delivery. Opinion leaders act as integral parts of the diffusion of innovations. Rogers (2003) identified opinion leaders as individuals that influence a peer's attitudes or behavior in a preferred manner. In this study, neighbors, friends, homeowner associations, and Master Gardeners served as opinion leaders for FYN participants. Change agents need opinion leaders to diffuse information regarding the recommended change (Rogers). Consequently, a quicker rate of adoption of FYN BMP's could occur if program coordinators identify and utilize their community's opinion leaders as advocates for FYN.

Knowledge on opinion leadership is beneficial for FYN coordinators struggling to get their information to others. In this study, informants noted a lack of reaching some audiences. The aptitude of change agents in communicating a proposed change leads to the adoption of the change by program participants (Rogers, 2003).

Recommendations

The findings in this study indicated diffusion of innovations elements existed in FYN programming. FYN coordinators should be proactive in attaining knowledge and skills related to planned change strategies, such as utilizing opinion leaders, to help increase the rate of adoption for best management practices. Resources such as EDIS publications (Harder, 2009), Journal of Extension articles (e.g., Rogers, 1963a; Rogers 1963b), and the Rogers 2003 text (see citation) are options currently available for coordinators with an interest in learning more about opinion leadership and the diffusion of innovations. In addition, professional development opportunities should be offered to assist FYN coordinators. These facets will enhance the likelihood of accomplishing the long-term objectives of FYN.

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