



KEEPING GRASS OFF THE STREETS CAMPAIGN

SOCIAL MARKETING PUBLIC OUTREACH CAMPAIGN FINAL REPORT

APRIL 2012

ALACHUA COUNTY ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION DEPARTMENT

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Introduction



Landscaping debris in roadways is eventually washed in to stormwater collections systems when it rains. This debris can be a safety hazard to motorists, can clog the stormwater system, increase the presence of standing water, and lead to flooding. This organic material also contributes to nutrient loading and oxygen deprivation in receiving streams, lakes, and stormwater basins, while creating conditions conducive to bacteria growth. Ideally, grass clippings should be left on lawns to provide organic fertilizer or composted on site.

Larger debris can be composted in the yard or placed near the curb (not in the roadway itself) for curbside collection. Even though the Alachua County Water Quality Code (Ordinance 02-27) and the Fertilizer Standards and Management Practices Code (Ordinance 09-06) prohibit the discharge of landscaping debris to the stormwater collection system and roadways, these policies are not always followed. The Alachua County Environmental Protection Department designed and implemented a social marketing public outreach campaign funded by the Gainesville Clean Water Partnership to encourage proper landscape debris management techniques.

Methods

One of the cornerstones of social marketing is going beyond the idea of the “general public” and determining who your target audience is and what their barriers and benefits are regarding the desired behavior. Since a literature review did not provide much information regarding yard debris, it was necessary to conduct original research prior to designing the campaign.

In depth interviews were conducted over the telephone with eight homeowners (selected from a homeowner association contact list) and seven lawn care professionals (selected from the phonebook) from February 2010 to April 2010. This data-rich method was inexpensive and led to a focus on lawn care professionals, since they are a socially normative group who seemed willing to change. The barriers to them adopting the behavior (while not easy to overcome) were at least clear and consistent and the group’s compliance would yield a large impact.

Focus groups were conducted in July 2010 and are an ideal method for exploring a topic such as landscaping behaviors, since we know these behaviors are influenced by social pressures which still exist in the focus groups. The focus group methods were pilot tested with four crew supervisors that maintain right of ways with the Alachua County Public Works Department. Two focus groups with private lawn care professionals were then conducted during the lunch

hour at a local landscaping supply business (GreenSouth Supply). The phone book and business cards collected from local landscaping supply businesses were used in the recruitment of the 11 participants, who all received a \$50 gift card to GreenSouth Supply for participating in the focus group. Holding the groups at a location they are familiar with during a convenient time, likely contributed to their attendance (64% of those that verbally committed to attend showed up and participated).

To learn more about the lawn care professionals and to determine a behavior baseline, a pre-campaign survey was conducted (Appendix A). A post card with a link to the survey was sent out to 297 lawn care professionals in October 2011 from a list compiled from the phonebook, business cards utilized previously for focus group solicitation, and IFAS Extension's Green Scene Newsletter mailing list. A follow up postcard was mailed out two weeks after the original. An e-mail with a link to the survey was also sent to approximately 53 lawn care professionals for a total sample size of 350. Follow up emails were sent out until early November 2011. Survey participants were eligible for a chance to win a \$50 gift certificate at GreenSouth Supply. The survey was completed by 21 respondents, 14 of which were lawn care professionals and used for the analysis. A sample size of 14 with a population size of 350 yields results with a confidence level of 90% and a margin of error of 22%. The results of this survey cannot be used to generalize the entire population of lawn care professionals in Alachua County, but can be combined with the qualitative results of this research to add to our knowledge of this population.

The data from the interviews, focus groups, and survey were then used by a marketing research firm (UPPERCASE Inc. out of Tampa, FL) to create campaign ideas (Appendix B) designed to resonate with the target audiences. We learned that private landscapers are influenced by the homeowners that hire them, so this group became the secondary audience. ACEPD brought preliminary materials to GreenSouth Supply and conducted six interviews with customers to market test the materials. The materials were also market tested at a homeowners association meeting to make sure that the messages resonated with homeowners, as well as lawn care professionals. The materials were fine tuned and then market tested with two additional lawn care professionals (by appointment this time) and with another homeowners association. Again this data was compiled and used to finalize campaign materials.



Campaign materials include: a postcard (an English version and a Spanish version), two posters, a 30 second television commercial, a 30 second radio commercial, a vehicle magnet, a temporary sign, a pledge, and a couple of logos and graphics (Appendix C). The research revealed that removing clippings from the road is the last step lawn

care professionals perform at a job site. Temporary signs were created to address their concern that they would look like the “bad guys” while actively working on a site.

The campaign launched during April 2011. A 60 second radio ad played 250 times between 4/11/11 and 5/1/11. The 30 second TV commercial aired 345 times between 4/11/11 and 5/1/11. Materials were distributed to lawn care professionals at Kangaroo Express gas stations (as these were identified as popular places for lawn care professionals) during the mornings of 5/16/11 through 5/20/11. Staff delivered materials to the offices of the larger landscaping companies in the region. Posters and postcards were delivered to lawn care supply stores. Additionally, staff presents the campaign at the Green Industries BMP Training Course (training that is required by the Alachua County Fertilizer Code for all commercial applicators of fertilizers) held at the IFAS Extension Office.

A post survey (Appendix D) was repeated after the campaign and was open from late June 2011 until August 2011. Lawn care professionals were invited to participate in the survey initially through the Green Scene newsletter sent from the Alachua County Extension Office. Several emails with links to the survey were also sent out to 146 lawn care professionals, including some that signed the Keeping Grass off the Streets Pledge during the campaign. Due to a low response rate of 22, a phone survey was conducted in which the five most critical survey questions were asked. A list of phone numbers was compiled using the phone book and business cards and each number was called five times in August and September, 2011. The telephone survey produced 19 responses, for a total sample size of 41. The survey has a confidence level of 90% with a margin of error of 12%. Again, these results should not be used to make assumptions about the entire landscaping community of Alachua County, but can be used to help evaluate the campaign.

Results

As it happens many times in social marketing campaigns, research revealed that one of the primary reasons ACEPD and the Gainesville Clean Water Partnership set out to develop this campaign – environmental impact – was almost the LEAST important issue to our target audience. Many professional landscapers reported in interviews and focus groups that they did not even believe that grass clippings in the roadways harmed the environment in any way. Table 1 summarizes the barriers and benefits that landscapers mentioned regarding keeping grass clippings out of the streets, and below is a summary of some of the things we learned about lawn care professionals:

- Lawn care professionals are independent and like being their own boss
- They take pride in their work , *"We are in the business of keeping things clean"*
- The last thing you do on a job is blow clippings off pavement
- It reflects well on your business to clean up clippings
- They think it would be impossible to enforce codes
- They did not know it is against local laws to leave landscaping debris in the roadways

Table 1: Lawn care professionals perceived barriers and benefits to keeping landscaping debris out of roads

Barriers	Benefits
The government does not do it, why should we?	Looks Better
It is not important, this is not an issue, doesn't affect the environment	Reflects well on business- it is professional
Time is limited	It is the right thing to do
Hot	Less work in the long run if you keep them out of the road- mow away from the road
Lazy	
Clippings look bad on mulched beds	
Traffic	
Rain	

Through the qualitative research it appeared that fines and the enforcement of codes would not be an effective motivator. We continually heard participants report "that everyone else leaves clippings in the roads, but they don't". We learned that private lawn care professionals believe that City, County, and Department of Transportation agency employees are the worst offenders of mishandling landscaping debris. These findings were used in a creative effort to get the agencies on board with the campaign as positive role models and leaders in a normative effort. In addition, agency crews became a primary place to promote our messages since we learned that many professional landscapers were already watching these agency employees.



We learned during the research that it is essential to ensure that Department of Transportation, City, and County crews are keeping grass clippings out of roads while maintaining right-of-ways. Staff met with the following departments to distribute materials and to relay the importance of the campaign: Alachua County Public Works Roads and Bridges and Parks and Recreation on 5/10/11, City of Gainesville Public Works on 5/16/11, Alachua County Facilities Maintenance on 5/17/11, and City of Gainesville Parks and Recreation on 5/25/11. The Department of Transportation modified contract language for mowing crews to ensure that clippings would be handled properly by using mulching pull behind mowing blades.

The City of Gainesville street sweeping crews were asked to record the time, date, and location of excessive landscaping debris beginning in February of 2010. From 2/17/2010 to 3/5/2012 fifty-two complaints of excessive debris were logged by staff. Warning letters explaining the issues and regulations were sent to the addresses. The number of complaints increased each year (2010 = 10, 2011 = 12, 2012 = 30), indicating either an increased awareness by staff or an increase in the frequency of debris being disposed of in the streets.

Additionally, the street sweeping crew provided logs which quantify the material they collect as they clean 12,000 curb miles in the greater Gainesville area. These data are a rough indicator, as they are highly dependent on weather. Intense storms increase the amount of debris that naturally ends up in the roadways. The data is broken down into residential areas and main transportation arteries and is summarized in Table 2. The amount of material collected in residential areas has been decreasing, while the volume in major arteries drastically increased in 2011. The street sweeping crew boss noticed this trend also, but did not have an explanation. It is possible that the campaign influenced the reduction in residential neighborhoods, but there are too many factors (including possible street sweeping route changes, weather, etc) to explain this pattern.

Table 2: Volume of debris collected by the City of Gainesville during routine street sweeping

Year	Residential (cubic yards of material collected)	Major Arteries (cubic yards of material collected)	Total (cubic yards of material collected)
2009	6,700	2,000	8,700
2010	5,700	1,900	7,600
2011	2,200	8,700	10,900

The pre and post survey response rates were low, as is often the case with surveys. Even though the data should not be extrapolated to make assumptions about the whole landscaping community in Alachua County, the results still provide valuable feedback for assessing the campaign. Below is a summary of the survey results.

Keeping Grass Off the Streets Campaign Awareness

More than eight out of every ten respondents (84%) surveyed in the posttest said they heard of the “Keeping Grass Off the Streets” campaign promoting the importance of keeping grass clippings and other yard debris off the streets.

Of the 84% that heard of the “Keeping Grass Off the Streets” campaign, most respondents heard about it on the radio (38%), at work (31%), on TV (28%), or saw the magnets on the public vehicles (28%).

After being shown the campaign logo, most respondents recalled seeing it on the magnets on the public vehicles (42%) and at work (37%).

Behavior Change

In both the pretest and the posttest, most respondents reported that they, “blow clippings back into the yard” most often over all other choices. The frequency in which they reported “always” engaging in this behavior increased substantially (79%) from the pretest to the posttest.

Three out of four respondents (74%) reported that if they were training someone to maintain landscapes, they would tell them to blow the clippings back into the yard.

Seven out of ten respondents (69%) who saw the campaign said they have been more careful to keep clippings out of the roadways since seeing the campaign. One in four (24%) of those that saw the campaign said they were already very careful to keep clippings out of the road.

Issue Awareness

When given a list of statements about grass clippings and the environment, the greatest increase in agreement (where 5 = strongly agree and 1 = strongly disagree) occurred among three of the key “Keeping Grass Off the Streets” campaign statements:

- *“Clippings left in the road can harm local lakes, rivers, and creeks.”*
3.86 pretest, 4.49 posttest = **16% increase in agreement**
- *“Grass clippings left in the road will eventually end up in the closest water body.”*
3.71 pretest, 4.26 posttest = **15% increase in agreement**
- *“Clippings can clog storm drains and cause flooding.”*
4 pretest, 4.47 posttest = **12% increase in agreement**

Agreement decreased on only one statement. The campaign was designed to decrease agreement with this statement:

- *“Grass clippings are biodegradable, so it is fine to leave them in the street.”*
2.14 pretest, 1.68 posttest = **21% decrease in agreement**

Law Awareness

Around six out of ten (63%) respondents believe that they can receive a ticket from Alachua County for leaving clippings in the road, up 75% from the 36% who believed they would get a ticket in the pretest.

Discussion

It was valuable and relatively inexpensive to conduct research for the purpose of designing the campaign. Conducting phone interviews with homeowners and lawn care professionals helped with the selection of a target audience for the focus of the campaign. Partnering with a local landscaping supply store added credibility to the research and a trusted venue for researchers to meet with the target audience. Prior to the focus groups, it was assumed that the campaign would focus on enforcement of County Codes. While listening to our target audience we realized that this may not be the most effective and efficient method. Research led to the campaign tactic of using public employees as role models. This method appears to be effective, as 42% of the post test respondents reported seeing the campaign logo on public vehicles. This tactic also allowed us to involve public employees who have been known to be part of the problem in the past.

Since most of the lawn care professionals professed that they never leave clippings in the roads (but everyone else does), we designed the campaign to look like it was more from them rather than directed to them. We wanted to create a sense of partnership, togetherness, and social norming. The goal is to make cleaning up clippings the normal behavior, and leaving them in the road the "bad" or abnormal behavior.

It was essential to stay focused on the goals. We were tempted to address leaf litter, as Gainesville has a dense tree canopy and a large volume of leaves during certain times of the year, which may influence the data collected by the street sweepers. Since leaves are treated differently than grass clippings (they are raked and either bagged up or composted instead of left on the grass) and have less available nutrients, we decided to not include mention of leaves in the logo and major campaign messages. Instead leaves were addressed in presentations, discussions, and materials with more room for discussion.

Typically we do not like to demonstrate the bad behavior in campaigns, but in this case it clearly illustrated the problem and grabbed the attention of lawn care professionals. The image with clippings in the road was used in the post cards and one of the posters. The yard signs were designed in response to the lawn care professional's concern of appearing like they were going to leave clippings in the road while actively working on a site. While many lawn care professionals and public employees liked the idea of the signs, they are also a little cumbersome since they have to be put out and removed at each site. Staff has seen the signs in use around town, but not as frequently as desired.

Future Efforts

ACEPD plans to continue to present information on the campaign at the Green Industries BMP trainings offered at the Alachua County Extension Office. Campaign materials will be distributed at these events. ACEPD will encourage public agencies to put vehicle magnets back on their vehicles in the spring of 2012 (the start of the next mowing season). To continue to build momentum the television and radio

ads should be aired again in the future, as 38% of those that recalled the campaign remembered it from this mass media effort.