

RE3.org: A Case Study of Using New Media To Promote Recycling in North Carolina

Leslie Hamilton ¹
Kelley Dennings ²
Lorien C. Abrams, ScD ¹

¹ The George Washington University School of Public Health and Health Services

² North Carolina Division of Pollution Prevention and Environmental Assistance

Please address all correspondence to:

Lorien C. Abrams, Dept. of Prevention & Community Health, The George Washington University School of Public Health and Health Services, 2175 K St NW, 7th floor, Washington, DC 20037. Email: lorien@gwu.edu

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Abstract

The RE3.org recycling awareness campaign encourages recycling among North Carolinians ages 18 to 34. To better reach this target audience, the campaign made use of new media, including websites, blogs, and social networking sites. This case study documents the process of implementing the new media components of the RE3.org campaign and provides information on the reach of the new media components of the campaign. An initial challenge to implementation was gaining acceptance for these modes of communication from the sponsoring organization. Overall, the campaign was found to have expanded its reach through the use of new media. Through viral promotions, the campaign's TV ads received over 33,637 views on YouTube with virtually no additional campaign expenditures. The RE3.org blog received 3,414 visits and was viewed by an average of 11 people per day. Based on the number of and profile descriptions of "friends" to the MySpace and Facebook pages, the campaign appears to have been somewhat successful in attracting "friends," although more successful in reaching out to young adult females than males. Several aspects of the campaign's use of new media can serve as a model for public health campaigns targeting younger, more Internet savvy audiences.

Introduction

The RE3.org campaign is an ongoing campaign which is aimed at increasing recycling among young adults in North Carolina. This campaign, which is sponsored by the North Carolina Department of Environmental and Natural Resources (DENR), a division of the North Carolina state government, is notable for having embraced new media as a central component of its campaign communications at a time when few governmental agencies had done so. This case study reviews the implementation, maintenance and reach of the new media

campaign components. It also discusses lessons learned in implementing the new media components, which may be useful to future public health communication campaigns.

Beginning in 2000, the North Carolina Division of Pollution Prevention and Environmental Assistance (DPPEA), a division of the North Carolina Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR), adopted a recycling awareness campaign entitled Recycle Guys. This campaign,

which was originally created by the South Carolina Department of Health and Environmental Control, was aimed at elementary school children. In 2001, a survey of 600 elementary students found that 81 percent of students were familiar with the Recycle Guys campaign.¹ In 2005, DPPEA extended this program by creating a complementary campaign, the RE3.org campaign, aimed at young adult males and females. The Environmental Protection Agency and other sponsors initially funded the RE3.org campaign.

RE3.org's ultimate goal is to increase recycling participation rates in North Carolina. To do this, the campaign aims to transform recycling from a mundane responsibility into a trendy, hip and essential activity for a generation that may not see recycling as valuable or worth the time. By converting recycling into a fresh, fun activity, DPPEA hopes to increase North Carolina's current and future recycling participation rates.

Target Audience

In developing the RE3.org campaign, DPPEA believed that having a campaign targeted at an audience older than that of the Recycle Guys would eventually result in an increase of recycling participation rates and could foster a long-term commitment to recycling. After conducting literature reviews, focus groups, and surveys, DPPEA finalized a primary target audience consisting of young adults aged eighteen to thirty-four, with some material geared specifically to males. This audience was targeted because

the focus group research indicated that these persons would embrace recycling if given information about recyclable material collection systems.²

The secondary target audiences for the campaign were recycling coordinators, environmental educators, and solid waste program professionals across the state. These groups were chosen because of their ability to promote the campaign's messages and tools to the primary target audience.

Implementation

At RE3.org's inception in 2005, traditional communication channels were used. RE3.org commercials aired on television and radio. Print advertisements ran in movie theaters and on trucks and billboards. RE3.org advertisements reminding soda-drinkers to recycle appeared on Mountain Dew soda cans as product tie-ins. Finally, interactive booths promoting RE3.org were displayed

throughout North Carolina at various festivals. The use of paid media was successful to some extent, but further research found that the best way to communicate with the target audience of eighteen to thirty-four year olds was through the Internet.³ In addition, paid media was expensive and having a limited budget of less than \$95,000 meant that campaign organizers needed to

find new, inexpensive ways to promote RE3.org.

In 2007, DPPEA surveyed high school and college students to determine the most effective communication channels to reach its target audience. The results indicated that the Internet had become a key source for news and a dominant way to spend leisure time among the eighteen to thirty-four year old demographic. The survey results also provided insight into the best methods to reach the target audience via the Internet. Sixty-four percent of the respondents used Facebook and forty-six percent used MySpace, both forms of online social networking.³ The survey results suggested that

communication over the Internet would be an effective channel to reach the target audience and that creating a profile or an identity on social networking sites would be an effective strategy.³

Due to the target audience's strong presence on the Internet, DPPEA's limited campaign budget, and the low cost of interacting and broadcasting online, DPPEA staff member Kelley Dennings, who works as an Education and Outreach Project Manager, proposed using new media as a means of expanding the reach of the RE3.org campaign. Despite the endorsement of Ms. Dennings, getting approval to implement new media tactics took time and effort.

Challenges to Using New Media

The use of new media was a novel idea to DENR, and Ms. Dennings had to make her case to senior staff that the new media techniques would be beneficial to the RE3.org campaign. Concerns included that the time burden involved in implementing and maintaining the new media would be too great and that objectionable or offensive posts and comments would be made on campaign blogs and websites by the target audience. Also, the supervisors themselves didn't have personal experience with new media and were not sure that the target audience would make use of new media applications.

To overcome supervisors' apprehension, Ms. Dennings provided descriptions of what blogs, YouTube, and social networking sites were and how they could be used to communicate with the demographic. Ms. Dennings also documented for supervisors examples of other governmental agencies,

non-profit organizations, and environmental groups that were blogging, posting videos on YouTube, and creating and maintaining profiles on MySpace and Facebook. Some of these organizations included the NC Conservation Network, the NC Department of Health and Human Services, and the White House Office of National Drug Control Policy. Demonstrating that other government agencies and environmental organizations were using new media provided evidence that the use of blogs and social networking sites were legitimate and appropriate forms of communication.

In addition to convincing members of her own staff to use new media, Ms. Dennings also had to convince recycling coordinators working throughout North Carolina that the target audience would want to receive information via the Internet. To assure the coordinators that the target audience would positively accept a communication campaign

with a large online presence, DPPEA provided them with the focus group and survey information describing the target audiences' activities online and use of the Internet as a

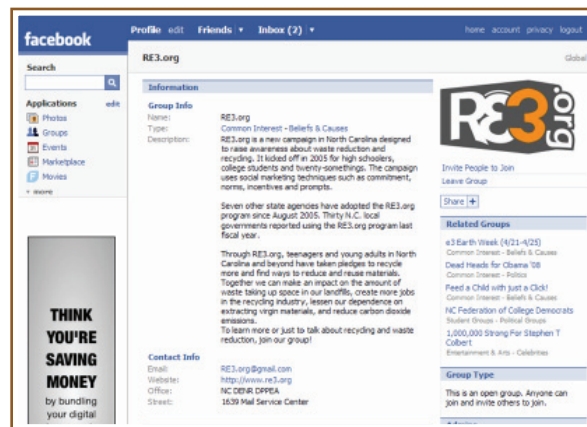
source of news. This information was provided to coordinators via the RE3.org blog, at a NC recycling conference and through personal interaction.

Types of New Media Used

DPPEA was eventually granted permission to expand the RE3.org campaign into new media in the fall of 2006. They agreed to have all posts and profiles reviewed and approved by the DPPEA public information officer before being posted to the public. The RE3.org blog was created, commercials were posted on YouTube, and MySpace and Facebook profiles were made. The blog was posted on the RE3.org website and also some posts were incorporated into the MySpace and Facebook webpages for RE3.org. Blog posts were seen as important because they can provide up-to-date information more quickly than adding something to a website. An intern searched MySpace and Facebook and asked people she knew to be "friends." As a "friend" of RE3.org an individual gets immediate updates to their personal ac-

count when DPPEA adds or edits something to the RE3.org profile, like a new blog post. Having "friends" incorporates the viral marketing aspect of MySpace and Facebook; the more "friends" made by the campaign, the more people that would be exposed to RE3.org. Next, DPPEA staff members worked to get a Wikipedia page. In order to get onto Wikipedia, RE3.org needed to be mentioned on an existing Wikipedia page; RE3.org was able to be added because it is a product of DPPEA, which is mentioned on the North Carolina government page. Finally, Flickr, and Del.icio.us were incorporated into the RE3.org campaign. Images of the RE3.org website, blog, YouTube site, and Facebook site can be found in Figure 1 (next page).

Figure 1. Screenshots of RE3.org’s online presence: Clockwise from top left: website homepage, YouTube page, blog, Facebook page.



The initial implementation took a couple months to finish. Once the main features were set up, staff members had to regularly update content. Each month, staff members spent at least five hours searching for content, writing, and editing posts. When an intern was available, he or she usually provided additional updates to the blog on MySpace and Facebook, as well as worked on adding more “friends”. DPPEA continuously monitored the impact of the campaign.

DPPEA tracked the number of visitors and how they found RE3.org using various online tools, such as Google Analytics, Google Alerts, and Constant Contact. (See Table 1, next page, for a description of these tools and how RE3.org used them for the campaign.) In addition to monitoring the number of visitors, DPPEA staff read and responded to user comments on the blog and social networking sites.

Table 1. Summary of Tools for Supporting New Media Components

Monitoring Tools	Description	Use within the RE3.org Campaign
Google Analytics	A free tool that tracks hits on your blog. It analyzes the flow of visitors through a site and identifies elements of a site that could be changed to improve visitor retention. Specifically, Google Analytics tells you how visitors found your site and how they interact with it.	Used to track the number of users and their usage within the RE3.org blog.
Google Alerts	Google Alert is a free notification system that finds designated words on the Internet and sends an email when posted.	Used to alert staff whenever “RE3” or “RE3.org” is mentioned on the Internet. Allows staff to see what others are writing about RE3.org.
Constant Contact	This online tool creates e-newsletters and manages contacts.	Used to send recycling coordinators and environmental educators e-newsletters and maintain their contact information.

Campaign Reach

Since RE3.org incorporated new media, the campaign was able to expand its reach on the Internet. Table 2 summarizes the im-

pact of various new media efforts included in the campaign.

Table 2. Overview of New Media Components

Type	Description	Target audience	Use by RE3.org	Measures of Impact
YouTube www.youtube.com/re3org	A video sharing website; users can post and view video clips.	Young adults, ages 18 – 34	Broadcasts RE3.org commercials online, at no cost	Between November 6, 2006, the initial date that most RE3.org commercials were posted on YouTube, and April 21, 2008 the total number of views has reached 33,637 with the top commercial “Epiphany” getting 10,535 of those views.

Table 2 (cont). Overview of New Media Components

Type	Description	Target audience	Use by RE3.org	Measures of Impact
<p>MySpace www.myspace.com/re3org</p> <p>Facebook www.facebook.com/group.php?gid=4722719197</p>	<p>Social networking websites; users can post personal information, blogs, videos, music, etc. and interact with other users</p> <p>Organizations can also create a profile.</p>	<p>Young adults, ages 18 – 34</p>	<p>Increases awareness of the RE3.org campaign</p> <p>Communicates directly with the target audience</p> <p>Allows target audience to ask questions and provide feedback</p> <p>Broadcasts commercials for free</p>	<p>Between December 2006 and May 5, 2008, the MySpace profile has 176 “friends” and as of April 21, 2008, 1,439 people have viewed the RE3.org blog posts on MySpace.</p> <p>As of April 21, 2008 the Facebook group has 122 members.</p> <p>Comments are supportive of recycling and the RE3.org campaign</p>
<p>RE3.org Blog re3org.blogspot.com</p>	<p>A web log; a website where informational entries can be posted.</p>	<p>Recycling and Environmental education coordinators</p>	<p>Communicates with recycling and environmental education coordinators</p>	<p>RE3.org staff members post recycling and waste management information of interest to coordinators; the posts usually provide social marketing techniques to encourage use by coordinators; highlights how local governments are promoting recycling.</p> <p>Between July 31, 2007 and April 21, 2008, the RE3.org blog had 3414 visitors</p> <p>Currently averages 11 visitors per day</p>
<p>RE3 website www.re3.org</p>	<p>A web site about recycling in NC.</p>	<p>Young adults, ages 18 – 34</p> <p>Recycling and Environmental education coordinators</p>	<p>Young adults: Provides facts about recycling and why it is important</p> <p>For coordinators: Provides outreach and campaign materials</p>	<p>In March 2008, the website had 2,256 visits, representing a 108% increase from March 2006.</p>
<p>Flickr www.flickr.com/re3org</p>	<p>A photo sharing website</p>	<p>Recycling and Environmental education coordinators</p>	<p>Shares RE3.org campaign graphics and clip art</p> <p>Allows local coordinators to personalized RE3.org materials for their community</p>	<p>As of July 10, 2008, 1426 people have viewed RE3.org’s pictures on Flickr.</p>

Table 2 (cont). Overview of New Media Components

Type	Description	Target audience	Use by RE3.org	Measures of Impact
Wikipedia en.wikipedia.org/ wiki/RE3.org	Online encyclopedia that can be updated by users	Young adults, ages 18 – 34 Recycling and Environmental education coordinators	Allows users to gain information about the RE3.org campaign Networks with other similar programs through links	<i>Not tracked</i>
Del.icio.us del.icio.us/re3.org	A social bookmarking web service for storing, sharing, and discovering web bookmarks	Recycling and Environmental education coordinators	Lists RE3.org Internet bookmarks Networking	9 people have saved the RE3.org website as a bookmark

YouTube

Most impressive is that its TV commercials have received much attention without additional expenditures from the campaign. Since November 6, 2006, the initial date that most RE3.org commercials were posted on YouTube, the total number of views has reached 33,637 with the top commercial “Epiphany” getting 10,535 of those views. There are currently 11 commercials posted on YouTube. The “Jerry and Amanda” commercial has the most comments posted about the ads. Of the 9 comments posted,

comments include “excellent,” “nice,” and “lol! i love his expression.” The viewers who posted comments ranged in age from 16 to 37. Comments to the other commercials are also positive and supportive of RE3.org efforts. RE3.org was able to track YouTube commercial ratings to get feedback about the commercials posted. Viewers can rate commercials on a one to five scale. The most viewed commercial, “Epiphany” was rated a four out of five stars.

Social Networking Sites

On MySpace, between December 2006 and April 21, 2008 the RE3.org profile had 170 “friends.” There have been 8 comments posted on the MySpace page between December 11, 2006 and April 21, 2008. Most user comments posted include links to

other recycling programs and encourage the work RE3.org is doing. For instance, one user stated, “RE3, you rock. I don’t know what the world would do without you. Just keep on preaching your waste reduction ways and hopefully one day everyone will

listen. You know you're right." Of the 170 MySpace friends, 16 appear to be males between the ages of 18 to 34, based on their self-described profiles. The Facebook group

has 119 members. Based on posted profile pictures of the 119 Facebook members, 33 are male.

Re3.org Blog

Between July 31, 2007 and April 21, 2008, the RE3.org blog had 3,414 visitors, based on visits counted by Google Analytics. The blog currently averages 11 visitors per day. Between November 13, 2006, the first blog post, and April 21, 2008, 13 posts were commented on. The comments posted to the blog are encouraging to the campaign, such as "nice effort, keep it up," and provide feedback to blog entries. For example, when prompted to give their opinion on

new artwork for the RE3.org campaign one comment was "i really like it! it is attn[sic] getting; it is appealing; it hits the exactly right demographic!" To date, all blog comments have been positive and there has been no need to censor any posts. The posts that were commented on the most prompted readers for their reactions or thoughts, rather than the posts that just provided information.

Other new media resources

The RE3.org website had 2,256 visits in March 2008, which represents an increase of 108% from March 2006. DPPEA made

use of Wikipedia, Del.icio.us, and Flickr as part of the campaign, but these resources were not heavily promoted.

Discussion

The RE3.org campaign has been successful in expanding its reach through the use of new media. Most impressive is that by posting the campaign ads on YouTube, the campaign was able to generate over 33,000 more viewings than it would have been able to achieve otherwise with no additional expenditures. Also, impressive is that new media components along with traditional media helped to more than double traffic to

its existing website. The campaign appears to have been somewhat successful in attracting "friends" on MySpace and Facebook pages, and more successful in attracting young adult females than males.

That YouTube was successful in generating a large number of ad views may be the result of a variety of factors. The YouTube site was promoted via the RE3.org blog, DP-

PEA e-newsletters, mass emails to contacts, MySpace, recycling and social marketing conferences, and other recycling and social marketing blogs. From there, the further promotion of the ads was viral. Fans of the ads shared the ads with others in their social network. This became apparent when the ads were found to be featured on various Web pages which were unrelated to the campaign. It remains unclear to what extent the viewers of the YouTube ads were members of the target audience, although based on posted comments they appear to be in the right age group.

The RE3.org blog set out to inform North Carolina recycling coordinators and educators, of whom there are at least 600 in North Carolina, about new developments in recycling. Given that about 77 people visited

the blog per week, it may be inferred that at most 13 % of this audience is reached. Future efforts should be aimed at further promoting the blog and, perhaps educating older members of the target population about how to access and benefit from it.

Neither the RE3.org blog nor the MySpace and Facebook pages have received much feedback in the form of comments. A review of comments to the blog found that remarks were more likely to be made when blog posts prompted a response rather than just provided information. To increase feedback and have users more connected with the campaign, blog posts and interactions on social networking pages should engage users more by encouraging responses and discussion with the campaign and other users.

Lessons Learned

Some additional lessons were learned by DPPEA staff members while implementing the campaign which may have applications for future public health campaigns:

- 1) For simplicity and succession planning, create one on-line email account (i.e. Yahoo or Google) that can be used to log into all the new media components.
- 2) Have an intern or staff member within the target audience's demographic who is familiar with new media, make regular updates to content.
- 3) Post to blogs on Tuesdays, Wednesdays, and Thursdays. After evaluating traffic to

the RE3.org blog, staff members found that blogs are read mainly on these days.

- 4) Adding blog posts to the RE3.org MySpace account increases the number of views to the page.
- 5) To convince supervisors that blogs and social websites are valid forms of communication, document the prior use of new media by other government agencies and organizations with similar goals. Also, provide evidence that the target audience already uses these types of communication platforms.

Conclusions

The RE3.org campaign was able to expand the campaign's reach with new media. This was largely through the posting of ads on YouTube and their viral promotion. With the use of online tools and resources, future public health campaigns can communicate their campaign messages at a low cost to

their target audience. The RE3.org campaign should continue to build on its successes. In the future, it may benefit from actively promoting the RE3.org blog to recycling coordinators and increasing efforts to attract more primary audience members as "friends" on MySpace and Facebook.

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Author Information

Leslie Hamilton is an MPH student in The George Washington University's Health Communication & Marketing MPH Program. Kelley Dennings is the Education and Outreach Project Manager for the North Carolina Division of Pollution Prevention and Environmental Assistance, who spearheaded the new media efforts described in this article. Lorien C. Abrams, ScD, is an assistant professor at The George Washington University School of Public Health and Health Services. She is the supervising editor for Volume 2 of *Cases in Public Health Communication & Marketing*.