7.2 Planning Your Outreach Effort

Once you have decided what you want to say to your audience, you must decide how you expose your audience to your message with sufficient intensity to motivate them to take action. Here are a few considerations for planning how to get your message to landowners.

WHAT MATERIALS AND CHANNELS TO USE

Common media to deliver messages to landowners include brochures, postcards, letters, posters, presentations, websites, and social media. Each of these has its own pros and cons. In choosing among them, consider the following:

- How much information can the medium carry? A postcard, for example, can hold very little content. It is an excellent way to introduce an idea and get people interested in learning more. On the flip side, a website can be very content rich, but it may be useless unless you have good ways to drive your audience to it. Different media serve different purposes in your outreach. In general, consider using simpler materials, such as postcards, as “hooks” to engage people in content-rich materials, such as workshops or websites.

- How targeted is the medium? Some media—such as letters and phone calls—can be finely targeted to specific landowners. Others—such as newspaper articles and billboards—are more general and will likely reach many people beyond your target audience. In general, combining the two types of media delivers the best results. Getting your program, organization, or issue mentioned in local media raises its profile and creates an environment where personalized messages such as emails or letters are more likely to be opened, read, and believed. Using a gardening analogy, think of media coverage as fertilizing the soil to increase the chances that the seeds you plant will germinate and thrive.

WHO SHOULD DELIVER THE MESSAGE

When people get the same advice from more than one person or organization, they are more likely to consider it seriously. Enlisting influential individuals and partner organizations to promote, endorse, or reinforce your message helps achieve more repetition. It also increases the perceived acceptance and credibility of your program and its message. Recruiting more unusual or surprising messengers (e.g., a church leader supporting a stewardship practice) can also add to the salience and impact of your message.

Of course, the credibility of these messengers makes a difference, and it is important to realize that different types of landowners may consider different messengers more or less credible. We know, for example, that Woodland Retreat Owners assign high value to a professional’s training and expertise, while Working the Land owners are more likely to trust people who live in the community and work the land as they do (see Section 4.3: The TELE Landowner Types). Think carefully about your audience’s preferences, and use and cite sources who are credible for your target audience.

THE BEST TIME TO CONDUCT OUTREACH

How well people attend to your message and how persuaded they are depends, in part, on when people see and hear your message and what is on their minds at the time. Some of the contextual factors that affect how a message is processed are outside your control. But there are many things you can do to get your message to people when they are most likely to attend to it. For example:

- Send information about specific practices just prior to the time of year when people should be doing them.

- Use postcards and letters mainly as hooks to encourage people to seek more information. That way, they can access the more detailed information when they’re ready to attend to it.

- Tie your information to local events or news items that are on people’s minds.
WHAT MY WISCONSIN WOODS LEARNED FROM ITS DIRECT MAIL CAMPAIGN

My Wisconsin Woods (MWW) is a public-private partnership that has successfully reached thousands of unengaged woodland owners who have subsequently taken action to become more engaged with the management of their woodlands. MWW’s relationship with these woodland owners was initiated through direct mail, sustained through e-communications and periodic mailings, and supported by a website. Thanks to the large number of landowners on its mailing list (140,000), MWW was able to try different approaches and sequences of mailings for subsets of landowners in its database. This strategy included sending different messages (such as those with a financial versus a wildlife focus), sending different offers (information versus forester visit), varying the timing (seasonal), and concentrating on different geographic areas. The key to MWW’s learning, and its ability to incorporate the learning into subsequent outreach efforts, is a landowner database that it rigorously maintains.

Through diligent tracking of direct-mail efforts and landowner responses, MWW was able to learn a lot about its materials, offers, and timing, and thus was able to gather many useful insights about different aspects of direct mail. It used four waves of mailings to engage landowners who were new to the organization and its programs. The first was an introductory postcard designed to build awareness and familiarity. The following three included offers (either for information or a site visit) that required a response. The offers that required a response included a postcard with a business reply envelope, an enveloped letter with a reply mailer, and another quad-fold postcard with an additional promotion. All these materials were of high quality and similarly branded to promote awareness and credibility.

Overall response rates to offers of a free publication were around 20 percent, and for a free property visit, response rates were around 5 to 10 percent. When the landowner publication was included in the first mailing, the response to the second mailing offering a free property visit was higher. Overall, these response rates are quite high compared to the usual rates for direct mail campaigns (0.5 to 2.5 percent).

In MWW’s campaign, across all offers and messages, it found that the highest response rates were achieved the second time an offer was presented. In addition, it found that a good rule of thumb for sending the next wave of mailers is to wait until the response from the previous piece has dropped. MWW determined that the first mailing—i.e., the introductory postcard—was helpful but not essential. Similarly, the last mailing (presenting the offer for the third time) increased the response rate by a very small amount, about 1 percent. MWW suggests that these can be dropped if your budget is limited.