

USE OF NEWSLETTERS TO PROMOTE ENVIRONMENTAL
POLITICAL ACTION: AN EXPERIMENTAL ANALYSIS

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The managers of beach businesses were randomly assigned to receive no intervention or two newsletters per week for 6 weeks that presented economic consequences of damage to coastal water quality and how to contact politicians. The percentage of proenvironmental political contacts was significantly greater in the experimental (newsletter) group than in the control group. Logistical regression showed that contacts in the newsletter group were more than five times that of controls after adjusting for history of contacts and predisposition to take such action. Results suggest that the intervention can promote political action that could influence environmental policies and human health.

DESCRIPTORS: economic consequences, newsletters, prompts, proenvironmental political action

Environmental damage has serious consequences on health (Thorton, 2000). Policy interventions (e.g., laws) may be a cost-effective means of establishing long-lasting contingencies for proenvironmental practices (Schmid, Pratt, & Howze, 1995). The behavioral ecological model (Hovell, Wahlgren, & Gehrman, 2002), based on meta-contingencies and research showing that prompts and reinforcement can increase proenvironmental practices, suggests that newsletters might serve as prompts to increase political action. Agras, Jacob, and Lebedeck (1980) showed that newspaper prompts increased water conservation in entire communities. The present study tested newsletters as prompts for lobbying action from business leaders who depend on public beach use for their income.

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METHOD

Sample Recruitment and Assignment

Representatives of coastal businesses were identified from the telephone directory. Owners or managers were contacted by telephone and informed of the study procedures, and 14.6% ($n = 104$) agreed to participate by signing consent forms. Sequential recruitment required 3 weeks, and participants were randomly assigned to the control ($n = 43$) or newsletter ($n = 61$) condition. Comparison of demographic characteristics resulted in no significant differences, suggesting successful random assignment. Ninety-eight (98%) of the participants completed the study.

Measures

The pretest consisted of a questionnaire with 36 items related to demographics (business size, type, income, etc.), environmental and economic concerns linked to local coastal water quality, and proenvironmental practices. The posttest excluded the demographic items and included five new items concerning receipt and reading of the intervention newsletters. Proenvironmental practices, such as recycling and past contacts with po-

litical representatives, were assessed using ordinal scales and dichotomous yes–no items. Six items ($\alpha = .66$) from the New Environmental Paradigm measure of general environmental concern were incorporated into both pretests and posttests (Arcury & Christianson, 1990). A Coastal Pollution Concern (CPC) scale ($\alpha = .70$), measuring specific environmental and economic concerns linked to water quality, was created based on newsletter content. Interviews were conducted by telephone or in one case by fax.

Dependent Variable

A posttest item asked, “Have you contacted a political representative, environmental organization, or anyone else regarding an environmental issue within the past 10 weeks?” This item did not mention “coastal water quality” to limit potential response bias. A follow-up question asked the nature of the contact. Only contacts with environmental organizations or political representatives regarding water quality issues were counted as the dependent variable.

Intervention

Participants assigned to the intervention condition received by fax or mail two one-page newsletters per week for 6 weeks. Newsletter content covered economics, health, tourism, and other aspects of coastal water quality. Increased tourism income was presented as a consequence of improvements in coastal water quality, and decreased tourism income was presented as a consequence of poor coastal water quality. Address and telephone numbers to contact politicians or environmental organizations were presented along with model letters.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The percentage of participants reporting contacts on the posttest was significantly ($\chi^2 = 9.7015$, $p = .002$) greater in the experi-

mental group (46%) than in the control group (15%). Multiple logistical regression showed that the rate of contacts in the newsletter group was more than five times more frequent than that of controls ($OR = 5.65$, $p = .002$) after statistical adjustment for history of contacts and environmental concerns. The types of contact included faxes (36.5%), letters (27.3%), telephone (9%), multiple types (9%), and other (18.2%). For example, participants reported making contact by fax to a local political representative, posting newsletters on a public bulletin board, and providing copies of the newsletters to the chairman of an international environmental committee. These types of responses may prompt even larger subsets of the community to take proenvironmental political action, which might lead to policy change and improved environmental conditions. Changes in pretest to posttest CPC measures of specific environmental concerns reflecting newsletter content also were a significant predictor of contacts ($OR = 2.18$, $p = .05$). This finding supports intervention efficacy, because CPC measures were directly derived from the specific prompt provided in the newsletters. This association suggests construct validity.

Results suggest that newsletters can increase proenvironmental political contacts from business leaders with economic interests in improved ocean water quality. These results are similar to other investigations in which the use of prompts has altered behavior related to public policy (e.g., Gras, Cunnill, Planes, Sullman, & Oliveras, 2003). Future studies related to the use of newsletters should focus on more objective measures of political contacts, determine if the economic interest of the business makes a difference in response to the newsletters, and directly evaluate the effect of newsletter content on respondents' political contacts. Delivery of this intervention over a longer period for a larger population might be sufficient to

change both political actions and proenvironmental policies to affect cleaner ocean waters. This study provides a model for future research and program development to establish an environmentally safer and more ecologically balanced system of living.

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