Effectively Communicating on the Water & Energy Nexus: Tips for Speaking to Mandarin Language Groups

Illume Advising recently concluded research about perceptions of water and energy conservation in the state of California, specifically testing messages encouraging conservation of both resources. The research was conducted in May 2014 and consisted of a survey delivered in English, Mandarin, and Spanish, and eight focus groups, two of which were conducted in Mandarin. Highlights from that research, focusing primarily on the Mandarin language results, are presented here.

#### General Awareness of the Energy-Water Nexus & Conservation Efforts

When asked about household water and energy use, both Mandarin focus groups raised issues of scarcity, waste, and the need for conservation, however, there was broad confusion on what exactly energy meant, most understanding “water” as a subset of “energy.”

**“Energy” may be too broad a term for ads and messaging in Mandarin.** The term was understood very broadly. Using specific terms for “electricity” helped clarify the confusion. However, the confusion may have had an adverse impact on message testing and the campaign overall.

* “*Energy* is a very inclusive phrase, it’s more general. It includes water, it includes gas and electricity, and in the future there may be even more energies to use in our lives.” (SF Mandarin 5/7/14, 6pm)
* “Water is just one kind of energy.” (SF Mandarin 5/7/14, 6pm)
* “When we say water is a type of energy, do you mean it’s water for home use, for drinking, or water in rivers?” (SF Mandarin 5/7/14, 6pm)

Mandarin speaking focus groups strongly agreed that it is their *personal* responsibility to save resources like water and electricity. They did not change their response after seeing the campaign, however, while many people acknowledged that they were wasteful in their own lives, they did identify “others,” specifically, “Americans” and the next generation, as groups who needed to do more to conserve.

Broad themes on collective/societal responsibility for environmental protection were apparent in the focus groups and echoed in the survey results asking questions about motivations for conservation.

#### Testing Awareness and Conservation Messaging

We tested a several different messages ranging from broad awareness “water-related energy use accounts for more than 19% of the state’s total electricity use” to messages that draw a direct connection to between household water and energy use “letting your faucet run for 5 minutes uses as much energy as leaving a 60-watt light bulb on for 14 hours.” We also tested messages with specific, actionable tips; “you can save 25 gallons of water by irrigating only in the early morning or late evening.”

We found that overall, messages with specific, actionable tips were more motivating and encouraged behavior change across all language groups. Messages that were harder for participants to relate to daily activities (i.e. messages on carbon emissions and total statewide energy use) were less impactful.

Motivations & Barriers to Action

The survey asked all respondents how strongly they agreed with statements on motivations and barriers to saving water and energy in their homes. Highlights from the Mandarin language survey include:

* In four areas, the Mandarin language group was significantly more motivated to save water and energy compared to the other language groups: protecting the environment, benefiting future generations, avoiding waste, and preventing future shortages.
* Significantly, more Mandarin language respondents indicated that not knowing where to get information (45%) was primary barrier, compared to other language groups.

Both Mandarin language groups responded positively to the message on running a faucet for 5 minutes being the equivalent of 14 hours of a 60-watt light, liking the linkage between one very mundane, concrete action to another one. They were shocked by the magnitude of the comparison and felt that it made clear not only the relationship between water and electricity but also between two everyday practices.

Visually, the Mandarin focus groups wanted graphics that were clearly linked to the text and raised concerns about certain graphics implying that taking action might cost a lot of money.

As a result of the campaign, significantly more respondents from the Mandarin-speaking group indicated a change in intention to use less water (100%) and energy (97.8%) than respondents from the Spanish- and English-speaking groups.

Key Recommendations for Mandarin Language Messaging

* Identify a different term for “energy use” when communicating to Chinese-Americans. The term “energy” in Chinese includes water and other natural resources. As a result, it introduced significant confusion around the water-energy nexus messaging.
* Increase access to Mandarin language materials that provide specific tips and information in language.
* Provide specific information that uses energy use as a benchmark for water waste (e.g. leaving a 60 watt light bulb on for 14 hours is equal to running the faucet for five minutes).
* Increase messaging and awareness around low cost options to increase energy efficiency and water conservation.
* Provide a wide array of tips in communications and use a single logo and a single reference or website to clarify where to go for more information.