

Effectively Communicating on the Water & Energy Nexus: Tips for Speaking to Spanish 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 Spanish. Highlights from that research, focusing primarily on the Spanish language results, are presented here.

General Awareness of the Energy-Water Nexus & Conservation Efforts

While all focus groups identified the connection between water use and energy in the agricultural and industrial context, the Spanish speaking groups were the first to identify the connection within the household without prompting. Participants frequently identified government rationing of both water and electricity in the countries where they grew up as the reason for their awareness, and motivation for conservation.

Most participants identified specific actions (i.e. turning off lights or the faucet while brushing teeth) that they were taking to conserve water and energy around the house, however, there was not a consensus that saving money was a primary objective of, or directly related to, conservation efforts. One participant mentioned that it was more important to him to purchase the cheaper version of a new appliance (not an Energy Star appliance) because he could save money now. Another participant mentioned that the only energy saving actions she considered were for large purchases, the bills she “just paid.”

While all focus indicated a broad desire to conserve resources both before and after the campaign, Spanish language focus groups typically strongly agreed that it was their personal responsibility to conserve, but after the session, several changed their scores, *shifting the responsibility* from themselves to “others,” specifically, “Americans.” There were also sensitivities around water use in rural areas where the economy was agricultural and a drought meant more economic uncertainty.

MOTIVATIONS & BARRIERS TO ACTION

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

- * Spanish language group respondents were significantly* *less motivated by saving money* (66%) compared to the English (76%) and Mandarin (77%) language groups.
- * *Lack of cooperation* with members of the household (32%) and *lack of time* (37%) were the primary cited barriers to conservation efforts.

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

Participants wanted **clear visual representations of waste** showing the magnitude of waste associated with specific activities:

“I would like to see 25 gallons. What can I do with 25 gallons? I can cook for a week, or wash my clothes on the washing machine X number of times. That would stick to my mind more easily.” (LA Spanish 5/1/14, 6pm)

“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.

Visually, most focus group participants wanted to see bright colors on the advertisements and commented that if you want to get the attention of the older generation, place ads on commercials during soap operas. For the younger generations, ads on the internet might be more effective.

Some participants observed that children are the best target for messages and ads on water and energy conservation, because they are then raised with those habits and serve as constant reminders to their families to conserve: “they are like cops” in their zeal to make their parents abide to the rules.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS FOR SPANISH LANGUAGE MESSAGING

- * 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).
- * Ensure that all messages have specific time measures (e.g. running your faucet for five minutes vs. running your faucet).
- * Find ways to communicate conservation messages carefully in agricultural communities, who feel adversely affected by restrictions on water use.
- * Increase family-oriented conservation messaging directed towards children who can bring those messages home and “police” the household.
- * 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.