



Capping Consumption: Using Stories to Make Change Stick

GLOBAL IMPACT ARTICLE SERIES

AMERICA'S FOOD PROBLEM

For a nation with five percent of the world's population, the United States has an outsized environmental footprint. Americans consume a third of global resources and create a third of the planet's waste. The food industry plays a significant role in this resource imbalance: results from the 2010 US Food and Agriculture Organization survey show that American's consumed 271 pounds of meat per person, per year, nearly three times the global average. Statistics from the National Institute of Health show that two thirds of American adults are obese or overweight.

In addition to negative health impacts, this level of consumption has serious environmental consequences. Beef production emits 57 times more greenhouse gas than potato production. It takes as much water to produce a single pound of beef as an average person uses to bathe in a year. Despite such resource-intensive production, nearly a third of annual US food production goes to waste.

Arguments for changing this unsustainable paradigm typically rely on guilt or economic factoids as sources of external motivation. However, research suggests that positive internal motivation or incentives can be more effective in changing behavior. A University of Michigan Dow Fellows project team sought to change attitudes towards overconsumption by developing and telling stories. These stories are designed to help increase healthy and less wasteful food habits, as well as highlight interesting and fun aspects of behavior change.

TELLING STORIES, INSPIRING CHANGE

Intrinsic satisfaction lies in finding personal connections. According to a U-M researcher, connections can come through one or more of the following: a heightened sense of competence; meaningful participation in problem-solving activities; sensible frugality; carefully calibrated indulgence in luxury; or a sense of fun.

When people convey their intrinsic satisfaction through storytelling, others can be motivated to enact similar changes. Good stories turn abstract concepts and statistics into authentic, memorable, and personal messages. These messages, framed around positive interactions with food and resource use, can be powerful catalysts to prompt more widespread behavior change.

TEAM MEMBERS

Dan Tish, Taubman College of Architecture and Urban Planning; Charlise Randall, School of Public Health; and Kelsea Ballantyne, Ross School of Business

FACULTY ADVISOR

Raymond DeYoung, School of Natural Resources and Environment

READ MORE

- Full Project Report: <http://sustainability.umich.edu/media/files/dow/How-To-Make-Real-Change-Stick.pdf>
- Dow Masters and Professional Fellowship: Project Reports
- Food Stories Online: www.ourfoodstories.org

SUPPORT

Made possible by The Dow Chemical Company, the Dow Sustainability Fellows Program at the University of Michigan supports full-time graduate students and postdoctoral scholars at the university who are committed to finding interdisciplinary, actionable, and meaningful sustainability solutions on local-to-global scales. The program prepares future sustainability leaders to make a positive difference in organizations worldwide.



COLLECTION OF STORIES ONLINE

The U-M project team conducted interviews through an online questionnaire to better understand how intrinsic motivations have encouraged people to practice intentional food production and consumption. They collected and categorized approximately 40 stories. Some examples of food-related behavior change included: joining a community-supported agriculture program, becoming vegan or vegetarian, learning to cook healthy food, starting a garden, working on a farm, and volunteering with community food service organizations. These stories were published online at www.ourfoodstories.org, an educational website with information about food waste and overconsumption and the concept of intrinsic satisfaction. The website also serves as a vehicle for gathering more stories.

The project team's web tool demonstrates how storytelling provides a meaningful vehicle for motivating positive behavior change in businesses, governments, and non-profit organizations. The storytelling model can also be expanded beyond food consumption and waste to target behaviors related to electronics consumption, online shopping, and more.

In addition to developing a website with stories, students developed a sophisticated infographic to demonstrate key points about the intrinsic satisfaction framework, the results of an online survey and excerpts from the stories.

"I have learned that food has the power to change the world. If we can get one person in each family to focus on the food, to have a nice meal ready three times a day for the family, then the individual family members' health begins to improve..."

Behavior changes represented include joining a CSA (community-supported agriculture, or farm share), buying local, eating healthy, gardening and having a greater appreciation for the food system. See details of the infographic, right, and read the complete infographic online.

Ourfoodstories.org



Our website takes people through the process of understanding intrinsic satisfaction, inspires them with stories from around the United States and then provides them with a call to action. The website can be found at the address above.

Call to Action!



Learn more about the problem and Intrinsic Satisfaction as the answer



Tell us your Story!



Commit to Behavior Change & follow through!

Storytelling



What is Storytelling?

A story is a form of information transfer that relies on narrative structures—based on the very human actions of thinking, perceiving and, most of all, imagining—to elicit a change in perspectives and ultimately behavior in a target audience.

By relying on the imagination, emotions and cultural biases built into the collective experience of a target audience, stories have the unique power to frame factual consequences in emotional terms, thereby appealing to the widest range of intrinsic motivators of the target audience. Stories give the pallor of facts and graphs a tangible character that can be tested and adapted to yield a precise outcome.

All is paraphrased from: Young, Raymond De, and Martha C. Monroe. "Some Fundamentals of Engaging Stories." Environmental Education Research: 171-87. Accessed October 21, 2014.

Excerpts from Stories



Traci



"I have learned that food has the power to change the world. If we can get one person in each family to focus on the food, to have a nice meal ready three times a day for the family, then the individual family members' health begins to improve and they each begin to feel very loved, nurtured and taken care of on a very deep level. This, over time, gives them the love and energy reserve necessary to begin to help others in their community, to care for the planet and its creatures."



Brent



"This all began when I first volunteered on an organic farm during the summer of 2013. I found the work so agreeable that I soon began working on the farm as my job. Having a daily interaction with food made me truly consider what I was putting in my body and realize the amount of hard work required to produce healthy sustenance. Prior to this I felt disconnected from food and it was difficult to realize its true importance."