

Environmentally Friendly Landscaping: Addressing a Need for the Communications Research

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ABSTRACT

Effective communication about appropriate landscape and environmental practices is becoming more critical as numbers and types of communication channels rapidly grow. Beyond the volume of competing information, effective communications can be hindered by inadequate audience research. Messages and communication materials that have not been tested with intended recipients might be at best ineffective, or at worst they may have an adverse effect. This project was undertaken to research Floridians’ communication needs pertaining to landscape practices. Project activities resulted in a synthesis of available research pertaining to residential landscape practices. Best practices for communicating about environmentally-friendly landscaping include appealing to personal and social values and using websites and print materials for communications.

These best practices were synthesized and used to guide the development of two design concepts and three websites. The design elements were tested through a randomized web-based survey. Preliminary results revealed interactive website elements (e.g., chat or request more information features) were appealing and there was a clear preference for an Adobe Spark storytelling-type of website. Respondents strongly preferred a website ending in “.com” over free urls (e.g., ending in wixsite.com), revealing the potential importance of directing resources to secure a website people trust. Next steps include collecting additional message testing data and leveraging the current project to support a second phase to include concept finalization, adding specific complementary behaviors, and testing brand identification and specific behavior requests.

OBJECTIVES AND METHODS

The aim of this project was to develop marketing concepts that foster a sense of social responsibility to implement environmentally-friendly landscape practices as part of being part of a community (Florida). The objectives were to 1) synthesize the available communications research specific to residential landscape practices in Florida; 2) develop communication concepts following known communication best practices; and 3) conduct preliminary message testing with these concepts. We engaged a doctoral-level UF/IFAS Agricultural Education and Communication student to achieve these objectives.

Objective 1

We first conducted an in-depth review of communications research pertaining to landscape practices with Floridians using both published and grey literature. We synthesized the findings and identified the most promising communication strategies within this contextual area and also documented the communication approaches that have been ineffective. The result was a creative brief that can be used to guide communication strategy development. We took our creative brief and formatted it into an Extension fact sheet (EDIS).

Objective 2

Next, we took our creative brief and use it to inform a number of potential communication strategies. We developed a number of concepts following this research-based guidance and used team and expert panel feedback to inform and finalize a series of drafts for market testing.

Objective 3

Finally, we conducted preliminary quantitative message testing with the concepts through our professional networks. We initially hoped to conduct qualitative message testing and needed to adjust our planned message testing due to the current global pandemic situation (COVID-19).

RESULTS

Objective 1

Four key best practices were identified for communicating about environmentally-friendly landscaping in Florida:

- Appeal to normative beliefs and include both gain-frames and social-value frames. Florida residents are more likely to adopt practices if they are seen as a social expectation (i.e., something others will approve of) or are of personal value to their community (gain-frame and value-frame). Positive messaging that focuses on what audiences are “gaining” if they take action are generally more well received than messaging that is focused on what audiences are “losing” if they do not take action.
- Utilize websites and print materials for communication efforts. Research has shown that the target audiences for these messages are most interested in seeking additional information from websites, print materials (i.e. facts sheets or brochures), or television.
- Target specific key audiences. A target audience includes the individuals who are most likely to be interested in your service and information and are also the individuals who you are hoping to reach with your communication efforts. These key audiences may include but are not limited to people who care about water issues but also have room for improvement in terms of their adoption of water conservation practices, homeowners’ associations and their residents, real estate agents, and new Florida residents.
- Focus content to actions and topics that the audiences needs the most, are most interested in, and most willing to learn about. For example, Floridians are most interested in learning about topics that relate to residential landscape practices such as irrigation timing and local water quality.

These best practices and their implications are discussed in more detail in the forthcoming extension fact sheet which has been peer-reviewed, revised and accepted for publication (to appear at: <https://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/wc366>).

Objective 2

Following the best practices identified through Objective 1 activities, we developed a design for a potential overarching campaign to include interdisciplinary conservation information (i.e., water, soil, energy, food, etc.; **Figure 1**) as well as a potential image to be used in a water-specific campaign concept (**Figure 2**).

Given that audiences are most likely to go to a website for more information on water conservation, we then incorporated the concepts into three different educational websites (**Figures 3-5**).

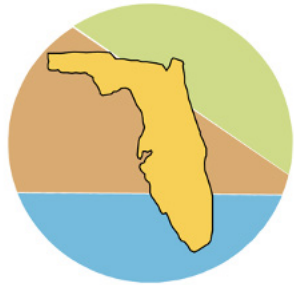


Figure 1. Design for overarching campaign to include interdisciplinary conservation information (i.e. water, soil, energy, food, etc.).

MY FLORIDA
H₂OME

Figure 2. Design for water specific concept.

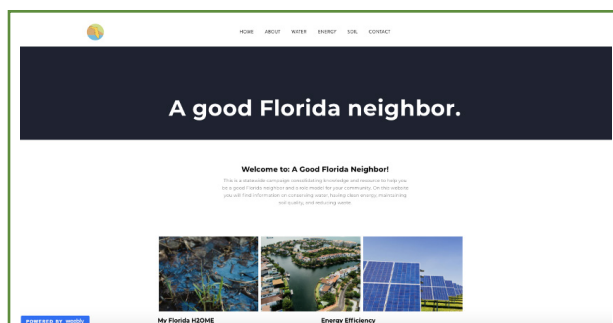


Figure 3. Weebly Website
(url: <https://agoodfloridaneighbor.weebly.com/>)

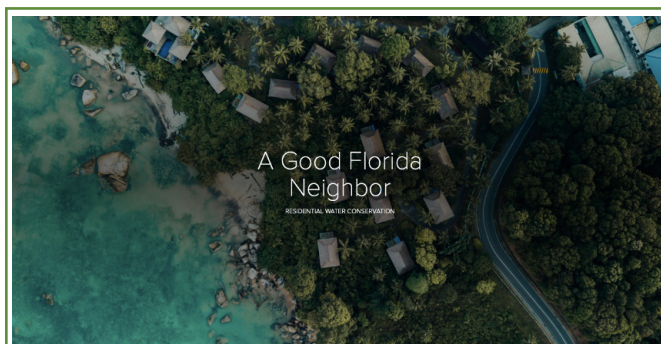


Figure 4. Spark Page
(url: <https://spark.adobe.com/page/KxaHnU4g7xdrT/>)

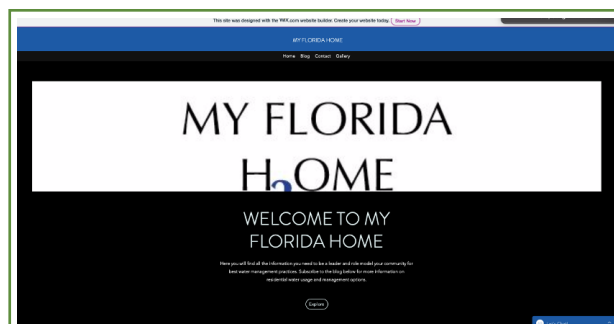


Figure 5. Wix
(url: <https://jvaenlle.wixsite.com/website-2>)

We have collected data from 54 Floridians to date. We would like to access a larger sample, and are planning to secure additional responses as part of another research project. Some of the preliminary findings are summarized below:

- Open-ended feedback from both expert reviewers and respondents showed a clear preference for the Adobe Spark story-telling type of design.
- The actual website url matters. When asked to select *Which web address would you be most willing to click on and visit?*, 100% of those responding (n = 30) selected www.myfloridah2ome.com while no respondents selected www.Myfloridah2ome.wixsite.com, <https://spark.adobe.com/page/Myfloridah2ome>, or www.Myfloridah2ome.weebly.com.
- We used heat map technology to understand the elements of the website designs respondents liked the most. Each respondent was randomly assigned to view one of the websites, and then instructed to click on the elements of the website they found most appealing. Respondents were most likely to click on interactive elements where they could chat (**Figure 6**) or request more information (**Figure 7**).

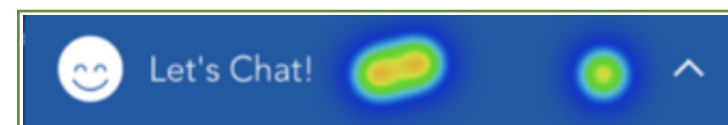


Figure 6. Heat map responses to “Let’s Chat” button in Wix website



Figure 7. Heat map responses to “Click Here” for more information button in Adobe Spark website

- Respondents were asked *If you were seeking information about water conservation, how likely would you be to choose to receive information from the following channels?* On a scale from 1 (very unlikely) to 7 (very likely), they indicated they were more likely to use an internet search (M = 5.43) over any other source. Social media sources such as Youtube (M = 3.31) and Twitter (M = 3.38) were the least preferred.

CONCLUSIONS

We have identified some key best practices for communicating about landscape practices, and the forthcoming publication conveying this information will support those with the goal of protecting Florida’s environment and natural resources to better serve Floridians and remain relevant in a time of unprecedented communications advancement, competition, and expansion. Although preliminary, we have begun to identify message elements and concepts that resonate best with Floridians which will support future work to increase Floridians’ willingness to learn more from industry members and increase the acceptability of an environmentally-friendly landscape. Most importantly, a better understanding of how to elicit environmentally-friendly behavior among Floridians can positively impact Florida’s water and other natural resources.

This project positions our team to gather additional message testing data and start a second phase (including finalizing concepts, adding specific complementary behaviors, and testing brand identification and specific behavior requests) to inform a possible statewide marketing campaign. Having completed this first phase will provide the essential proof of concept needed to conduct the next research steps and be more competitive and cost efficient in future funding requests.