



Gathering Community Input on Preventing Wasted Food

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As a nonprofit community-based organization, Eureka Recycling strongly believes that the most successful waste-reduction programs (that result in the most effective behavior change) address the specific values, interests, and needs of the community for which the program is being designed. We believe the best way to get that information is to listen to community members!

Social marketing principles suggest that for most people, just increasing knowledge is not enough to change behavior. Instead, we need to appeal to personal values and understand the barriers that prevent behavior change, so we can design programs and messages that target our specific community's values and encourage them to act on the behavior we are promoting; in this case, preventing wasted food. Using this approach doesn't have to cost a lot of money, but because food habits can be personal and cultural, getting input and feedback from the specific audience and community you are targeting is critical.

These recommendations were formed through Eureka Recycling's recent experience engaging three groups in the City of Saint Paul to help create our first set of wasted food prevention tools. This work is also deeply informed by more than a decade of community engagement on our variety of zero-waste programs and services.

Asking Fruitful Questions

When designing a wasted food prevention program specifically for your community, it is important to know the motivating factors and barriers that are specific to your community members. The most information-rich dialogue came from our focus group participants when we asked the following types of questions. This list also includes some recommended questions that we did not ask but have since learned the value of including.

- **Attitudes and motivations to reduce food waste**
Knowing the motivations of your target audience can help you encourage participation in the program; for example if their primary motivation is to save money, messaging about the environmental benefits won't be very effective.
 - How do your participants feel about the food they waste?
 - Do they see it as a problem? Why?
 - Do people think others waste food?
 - Is it acceptable, or do people aspire to waste less?
 - Do they think they saved/would save money by participating in the program?
 - Where do they rank it among other issues they would like to address?
 - What are the benefits they can see from wasting less food?

- **Cultural relationships to food**
Find out what works and doesn't work for them to prevent wasted food. For example, in our conversations with some participants in our pilot, we heard about their cultural expectations to have enough food on hand to prepare meals for large groups of people at any time (which can result in large amounts of unused wasted food). This group found food storage tips particularly useful.

- **Barriers to change (real and perceived)**

If you are pilot testing, we recommend you discuss barriers with participants both before and after the program is tested. Identifying barriers can help you design a program and messaging targeted to your audience. Barriers can be attributed to the individual (such as a lack of knowledge to carry out the behavior) or they can be attributed to the external world (such as the grocery store being located far away, so larger and less frequent shopping trips are required).

- **Current food habits**

What kinds of conscious actions are people already taking to prevent food waste? What are the specific challenges they feel they face in using up all the food they bring home? Are there specific foods they have more problems with? Do they already use meal planning tools? This can help you focus your resources on developing tools that are most needed.

Finding the Right Methods

To get quality responses and greater participation in providing feedback, we recommend being ready to use a variety of methods to collect responses. This allows you to be flexible to the comfort and needs of your participants.

We used some typical methods to gather feedback with some success, such as focus groups and emailed surveys. However, through conversations with our community representatives who helped us to recruit program participants, we learned better ways to contact program participants.

Community representatives who serve as your point person to participants are critical in gathering feedback. These representatives not only helped us recruit program participants, they guided us in connecting with participants to get meaningful feedback at the end. For one community, we first sent postal mail invitations and began communications via email after participants opted in to the program. In another group, community representatives suggested contacting participants via postal mail and through telephone calls conducted by the staff of a familiar and popular community center.

We learned that some participants were more comfortable with one-on-one interviews, so we followed up with our first group in the pilot using individual interviews instead of focus groups, which were conducted by members of that community who were trained by Eureka Recycling. When some participants had a strong connection with our community representative, we had our representative conduct one-on-one follow up interviews rather than conducting focus groups.

Overall, if you are interested in developing education about preventing wasted food or connecting people in your community to existing tools, you will get more of the useful information and feedback you need by catering your methods to the needs of your participants.