



Vancouver Aquarium and World Wildlife Foundation's Great Canadian Shoreline Cleanup: Increasing Volunteerism by Targeting Social Networks

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Katherine C. Lafreniere and Michael D. Basil

Chapter Overview

Shoreline litter is one of the most widespread pollution problems today. Since shorelines represent very sensitive and large geographical areas, any organized cleanup event requires considerable manpower in order to be successful. This case study illustrates how Vancouver Aquarium and World Wildlife Foundation recruited, organized, and retained tens of thousands of volunteers in order to build a shoreline cleanup movement across Canada.

Introduction

By some accounts, the shoreline cleanup movement began in 1986 when a Texas resident was collecting garbage along a beach and realized how much of it kept washing ashore. Something had to be done. Since then, shoreline cleanup events eventually caught international attention, growing from 12 sites along the Texas coast to more than 6000 sites in more than 100 countries. Shoreline litter is one of the most widespread pollution problems today. It threatens not only water quality, but also wildlife population as a result of ingestion or entanglement. Birds often pick up shoreline litter, such as cigarette butts, and use it for their nests. Many think it is food and ingest it, which can result in poisoning, starvation, and even death. Other animals or plants become entangled with bits of shoreline litter, and this

K. C. Lafreniere (✉)

Alberta School of Business, University of Alberta, Edmonton, Canada

e-mail: klafreni@ualberta.ca

M. D. Basil

Dhillon School of Business, University of Lethbridge, Lethbridge, Canada

e-mail: michael.basil@uleth.ca

hampers their mobility, often resulting in life-threatening consequences. Importantly, the threat of shoreline litter is largely preventable. This case examines an event that was originally initiated by the Ocean Conservancy and named the International Coastal Cleanup. This case study examines how Vancouver Aquarium and World Wildlife Foundation (WWF) successfully introduced the shoreline cleanup movement across Canada. Their Great Canadian Shoreline Cleanup is recognized as one of the largest direct-action conservation programs and as the most significant International Coastal Cleanup in Canada.

The Great Canadian Shoreline Cleanup

The Great Canadian Shoreline Cleanup (GCSC) began in 1994 when a small group of Vancouver Aquarium employees decided to participate in the International Coastal Cleanup by tackling a local shoreline near Stanley Park in Vancouver. At the time, VA employees were actively researching conservation stewardship and therefore joined the initiative in order to “walk the walk.” This small event was such a success that the aquarium decided to invest some resources in order to grow the program. Within a few years, VA employees were organizing and recruiting site coordinators and volunteers to clean up initiatives across the province. By 1997, 400 volunteers were participating in 20 sites across British Columbia as part of the Great BC Beach Cleanup.

In 2002, the GCSC emerged as a national program, providing all Canadians with the opportunity to make a difference in their local communities. Cleanups started to appear in every province and territory, and by 2003, more than 20,000 volunteers were actively participating in the program. Over the years, the program continued to expand its reach and influence, aided by the support of sponsors, donors, and partners (such as WWF Canada, who became a full partner of the Shoreline Cleanup in 2010).

SWOT Analysis (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats)

Strengths

The International Coastal Cleanup is a functioning nonprofit that has a positive reputation.

Vancouver Aquarium employees are knowledgeable and have positive attitudes toward environmental protection and stewardship.

The Vancouver Aquarium has good credibility in the greater Vancouver area, which can attract sponsors, donors, and partners.

Weaknesses

The Vancouver Aquarium is not widely recognized in other communities across Canada.

Resource limitations mean that the program requires volunteers to organize their cleanup in their own local community.

Opportunities

Shoreline cleanups can be very flexible and customizable. The geographical size can be tailored to fit the needs of each volunteer group. There is also no need for a minimum number of volunteers per shoreline. Volunteers could organize a private group cleanup or open it up to the general public to drop in.

The growing popularity of the Internet and social media makes it faster, cheaper, and more efficient to distribute information than traditional methods.

Group leaders can recruit their own friends, family, and colleagues in the program.

Shoreline cleanups instill a great sense of pride in the community.

By tracking the type of litter being collected, employees can identify which activities were responsible and can then develop targeted education and marketing campaigns for prevention.

Threats

The International Coastal Cleanup limits the timeframe for cleanups to late September. This timeframe is particularly challenging for recruiting larger groups, like schools, who want to clean up in the spring or summer because of the nice weather. It is also challenging for groups in other regions where this is not the optimal season. It will be especially difficult to encourage participation in bad weather.

This initiative would benefit from a wide range of volunteers. As such, the target audience for this program would ideally be very broad.

Vancouver Aquarium's association with the ocean may make people think of coastal regions instead of other shorelines. Target audiences might not see the connection to other water.

Prospective volunteers may think that they lack the knowledge or skills needed to carry out a shoreline cleanup event.

If the shoreline cleanup were to grow to a national scale, it would be very costly to provide all the supplies that are required, such as garbage bags and gloves and result in a large carbon footprint.

Target Audiences

The GCSC recognized that tailoring their promotional campaign to specific target audiences would be a challenge because their target audience was very broad as many different types of people and groups could participate in the cleanup. Furthermore, the program needed volunteers to sign up as organizers in order to reduce overhead. For these reasons, the GCSC decided to target groups and especially group leaders. Targeting potential group leaders is particularly advantageous because these volunteers not only participate in the program themselves but also recruit volunteers, often friends and family, to join them in the cleanup. This form of multi-level marketing allows the GCSC to reach audiences that are often quite costly to reach using traditional marketing methods. However, unlike traditional multi-level marketing systems, leaders are merely providing an opportunity for camaraderie and community involvement, resulting in a win-win for both volunteers and the cause.

The advantage of targeting group leaders is evident in the social network literature. First, referrals from friends and family are more influential than traditional marketing methods. Research shows that strong interpersonal ties (e.g., friends) are more likely to influence decisions than weak ties (e.g., acquaintances; Brown & Reingen, 1987) because strong-tie sources are perceived to be more credible (Rogers, 1983). Groups with strong interpersonal ties also have more homogeneous preferences for a variety of goods and behaviors because such groups are more readily available to each other as sources of information and influence (Granovetter, 1982). As such, volunteer requests from strong-tie sources are more credible and accessible than the same request from traditional marketing campaigns. Second, groups of volunteers from various backgrounds can facilitate diffusion of information about the campaign (Granovetter, 1982). Each group will have members with weaker associations to other groups, thereby serving as a bridge between groups and allowing information to travel from one group to another. For example, if one group of colleagues decided to participate in the GCSC then other associated groups (e.g., suppliers, competitors, partners) also more likely to learn about the volunteer opportunity. Finally, participating as a group can add an element of fun.

To attract group leaders (and by extension, their social networks), GCSC first targeted the groups with a traditional leadership system in place, such as schools, youth groups, and companies. Almost one-third of the number of registrants each year comes from these groups, such as Girl Guides and Boy Scout chapters. GCSC has since expanded their recruitment strategy by also targeting a wider variety of group leaders.

Campaign Objectives

GCSC has the ambitious goal to engage every person within Canada through the program by either participating in the shoreline cleanup or understanding the effects of people's daily behavior on the shoreline. In practical terms, their goal is to increase the number of participants and the number of sites registered each year. It also hopes to allow year-round participation in the program. A continuous program would encourage volunteers to feel a greater sense of ownership of their environment and actions.

Behavioral Objectives

Shoreline visitors generally clean up after themselves when they visit the beach. GCSC employees found that it was not particularly hard to generate interest in cleaning up shorelines. The real challenge for this effort was getting people to sign up for the program and to complete the tally forms used to identify which items were most collected. The GCSC believed that they could increase compliance with these objectives through group leaders.

Knowledge Objectives

The phrase 'pack it in/pack it out' was already well established throughout the province. As a result, GCSC's knowledge objectives focused on making potential volunteers aware of the cleanup and increasing the attractiveness of the program to prospective volunteers. Specifically, GCSC employees wanted volunteers to know that (1) shoreline cleanup sites could be any size—there is no minimum size required—and (2) groups can choose whether or not they want to organize a private cleanup event or open their event to the general public.

Belief Objectives

GCSC established a belief objective that they hoped would reduce the barriers to signing up as a group leader. A central internal barrier preventing group leaders from joining the program is the fear that they lack the knowledge or skills needed to organize a successful cleanup event. Consequently, GCSC employees want prospective group leaders to believe that they will be given all the tools need to easily carry out a cleanup event.

In the hope of encouraging participation across Canada, GCSC employees wanted Canadians to believe that shorelines are anywhere that land meets water, including ponds, swamp land, drainage ditches, rivers, and sewers. One of the biggest challenges in the program has been to convince people who live inland that

all the estuaries across Canada needed to be cleaned—not just the coastal areas. GCSC employees also wanted Canadians to believe that all our water is connected. For example, if litter goes into the river in Edmonton, it could flow through the North Saskatchewan River, across the prairies and into the Hudson’s Bay, where it would end up in the Arctic Ocean.

Positioning

There are other small-scale cleanup programs, often the initiatives of cities or neighborhoods. However, judging from a quick online search of “Canada cleanup” the Great Canadian Shoreline Cleanup is probably the best known and best recognized. Further, the tie-in with the Ocean Conservancy’s International Coastal Cleanup has helped to provide more awareness and status to the effort. As a result, the GCSC is likely positioned as the *market leader* in cleanup efforts across Canada, and other efforts, while they pose some threat, can be considered market followers.

Research

The foundational research for the GCSC and the Vancouver Aquarium’s participation in the International effort was primarily the evidence on the amount of pollution and litter in the ocean and evidence of its threat to fish and wildlife. Volunteers are likely primarily affected by the esthetics of litter in their environment and secondarily the damage done to fish and wildlife. The Vancouver Aquarium staff are primarily responsible for knowledge of this damage and therefore could serve as experts for media stories on the damage done to the environment. By serving as a spokesperson, Olympian Andreanne Morin, having swam across the Atlantic Ocean, provided a compelling story of someone who was personally affected by ocean pollution and helped to popularize media stories on the topic.

Strategies

Product Strategies

To attract potential volunteers, GCSC employees designed a comprehensive website where users could reserve a cleanup site that suited their needs. (The GCSC website can be found at <http://www.shorelinecleanup.ca/en>.) More than 50,000 cleanup locations were presented on a map with a description so users could see where all the potential cleanup sites were located across Canada. The cleanup sites available were approximately one kilometer long. Each site then had varying levels of garbage. When group leaders sign up as a site coordinator, they are asked to

estimate their group size and provide an event date, ensuring that (1) the site is not cleaned by another group right before their event date and (2) the site fits the group's needs. GCSC staff also offers one-on-one support to troubleshoot potential problems. For example, some shorelines might not have enough garbage for the size of group in the reservation. Group leaders are encouraged to call GCSC staff to help resolve these types of issues. Some solutions include adding another cleanup site that was nearby or finding another suitable cleanup location.

Augmented Products

When the program first started, GCSC provided a lot of supplies, such as garbage bags, gloves, waiver forms, and data cards, in a cleanup kit in order to attract volunteers. However, as the program grew, they were not able to maintain that. Some kits had enough gloves and bags to accommodate groups of 200 people. The staff realized that the kits were creating more garbage, particularly in terms of packaging, instead of eliminating it. Plus, group leaders were often reporting that they had their own supplies; it was quite easy for volunteers to get garbage bags, and many of them wanted to use their own gloves. As such, the transition away from cleanup kits was a natural progression. Now group leaders are only sent a welcome letter, a waiver form, a data card, and a return envelope. All the other, the paperwork, is made available online. After discontinuing the cleanup kits, GCSC staff has been able to devote more resources toward recruiting volunteers and promoting conservation messages.

However, new group leaders still need guidance on how to do their job effectively. Volunteers therefore have access to everything they need to organize and promote a shoreline cleanup in their area on the website. The website includes an interactive training program, curriculum guides, promotional materials (posters, banners, etc.), donation letters, award announcements, and various supplemental information (e.g., infographics) to reduce the burden of organizing a cleanup. GCSC employees also provide ongoing support and responses for frequently asked questions. For example, staff members know where volunteers can dispose of garbage or acquire supplies in each participating municipality.

GCSC also created an award program to recognize outstanding site coordinators. Various studies have shown that the target of flattery (i.e., the award winner) has better evaluations the flatterer (i.e., the organization) because humans have a basic desire to believe compliments about themselves (Chan & Sengupta, 2010; Gordon, 1996). As such, the Site Coordinator Achievement Award was designed to celebrate the dedication, effort, and commitment of site coordinators by honoring individuals who exemplify the spirit of volunteerism, both in their own community and during the shoreline cleanup. Nominations are made in one of two categories: new site coordinators and returning site coordinators. Award winners are then profiled on the website, given a gift package and certificate, and featured in a special section of final report. Anyone can easily nominate a site coordinator by submitting a form online or by mail.

To further motivate volunteers, GCSC employees organize a celebration event each year. At first, the event was used to kick-off the shoreline cleanup week. It has since evolved into a celebration of cleaner shorelines. The party gives volunteers the opportunity to participate in the larger markets that might not have enough shoreline or site coordinators. In 2013, GCSC held five different celebration events in different markets, attracting almost 1500 event patrons in total.

Pricing Strategies

In order to minimize barriers for participation, people could access GCSC services and participate in the shoreline cleanup at no cost. To reduce the cost of acquiring cleanup supplies, GCSC employees tried to identify common household items that could be used to aid a cleanup instead of requiring volunteers to purchase their own supplies. They also tried to identify establishments in each municipality that provided the necessary supplies at minimal to no cost for volunteers.

Place Strategies

A key place strategy is to offer groups more options in terms of cleanup dates and sites. Up until about five years ago, GCSC had been organizing shoreline cleanups only in September. However, GCSC employees have started broadening the event dates in order to reach their goal of offering the program all year long. In 2010, they started to encourage groups, particularly schools, Boy Scouts, and Girl Guides, to participate in the spring. The following year, groups in Ontario were encouraged to join the program. In 2014, the GCSC program was open Canada-wide from April 1 until the end of July.

A more recent place strategy is to make cleanup sites more appealing. GCSC employees recognized that a lot of groups, particularly community and corporate groups, wanted to clean up nearby shorelines because they want to give back to their own community. Furthermore, many groups wanted to be responsible for a particular shoreline for the whole year so that they could adopt it and make it their own. Popular cleanup sites were booked so often that volunteer morale began to decline. Specifically, volunteers felt like they weren't making a difference because they did not have very much garbage to pick up. By automating the site reservation system on the website, GCSC could ensure that volunteers would feel like they are helping their community by allowing groups to reserve their desired shorelines at a time when the shoreline needed it most. GCSC recommends a minimum of four weeks between cleanup events.

Promotion Strategies

Promotion strategies focused on getting prospective group leaders to sign up for the program. Given that many prospective volunteers feared that they lacked the resources needed to carry out a successful cleanup event, GCSC primarily employed various direct recruitment strategies. For example, employees often set up booths at local festivals in order to get people interested and answer any questions in person. Through face-to-face interaction, they encouraged event patrons to check out their website and consider signing up as a group leader or as a participant. At these events, patrons were also encouraged to sign up for their newsletter in order to learn more about shoreline cleanups and receive practical conservation tips.

GCSC also appointed a staff member to lead the direct recruitment strategies. This job involved contacting various headquarters, municipalities, schools, and corporate head offices, with the goal of executing a top-down distribution strategy. For example, in order to recruit volunteers from schools, GCSC first offers a K-6 curriculum guide. Employees from both GCSC and WWF reach out to every single school board across Canada on a regular basis, promoting the curriculum and, by extension, the cleanup program. This strategy allows them to explain how easy it is for teachers to organize a cleanup and to engage their students.

To get GCSC's message out to the media, GCSC partners with spokespeople and dive groups to create attention-grabbing media stunts. For instance, they worked with the Ottawa Police Service's Marine, Dive, and Trails Unit to show what kind of garbage ends up the water. Police officers dived into the Ottawa River at the Rideau Canal and pulled out different items that they would find under the water. They pulled out bottles, wrappers, containers, bicycles and even oil tanks. GCSC also partnered with local spokespeople, such as the Olympian Andreeanne Morin and other athletes who swam across the Atlantic Ocean.

Message Design

When GCSC transitioned into a national campaign, they had to update their communication materials (Fig. 22.1) to attract volunteers across Canada. In order to meet their belief objective that all the estuaries across Canada needed attention, GCSC had to minimize any affiliations with the western coastal region. The program was promoted as a joint conservation initiative that was separate from Vancouver Aquarium or WWF. Furthermore, the primary messengers to deliver their message became animals and aquatic creatures that all Canadians could relate to, such as ducks and turtles, instead of coastal creatures, such as crabs, sea lions, and whales. Finally, each advertisement included a call to action, which encouraged people to sign up as site coordinator or participant at a shoreline cleanup.



Fig. 22.1 Email footer advertisement. Photograph available at <http://shorelinecleanup.ca>

Another Important Strategy: Data Collection

Collecting information on the garbage picked up during a cleanup event is a critical aspect of the GCSC. Recognizing and recording litter items helps determine their origins and leads to creating solutions to reduce the amount of garbage that ends up on Canadian shorelines. Once data from each cleanup event was submitted online, GCSC employees summarized the data for each region across the country. The national results were then sent off to the International Coastal Cleanup to be compared globally. The reports were shared with policy makers, businesses, schools/colleges, and the general public to illustrate the problem of aquatic garbage and the importance of a clean environment. From analyzing these data, GCSC has begun to put together a campaign to discourage people from disposable water bottles and grocery bags but instead to carry reusable water bottles and grocery bags.

Program Evaluation

GCSC's primary goal was to increase the number of participants and cleanup sites each year. GCSC keeps track of the number of registrants in the program and at each site as well as an estimated number of people who actually participated in the program. These measures show which areas have the most growth and which areas require special attention. GCSC also keeps track of the number of sites that were cleaned across Canada. In 2013, 1950 sites were cleaned across Canada that covered 3035 km of shoreline. That is approximately the length of the Saint Lawrence River. The data showed that groups were often cleaning up areas greater than their registered one-kilometer site. However, these estimates only include cleanup events affiliated with the shoreline cleanup program. There are other cleanup programs that are not affiliated with GCSC which are not included in these measures. GCSC also

keeps track of various secondary measures, such as the number of media hits and positive impressions from the media. They also record activity on their social media channels to ensure that these channels continue to grow and whether people are sharing their information.

Discussion, Lesson Learned, and Future Directions

In 2012, GCSC celebrated its nineteenth anniversary with more than 57,000 volunteers and expanded the cleanup event to include school groups in Ontario and British Columbia. Today, it is recognized as one of the largest direct-action conservation programs and the largest contributor to the International Coastal Cleanup in Canada.

GCSC provides a clear example of the advantage of analyzing the social marketing environment and identifying market benefits and barriers, to minimize threats and capitalize on opportunities. For example, GCSC identified and reduced the threat of the limited timeframe on volunteering opportunities by expanding the program into the spring and summer months. This solution further reduced the threat of competing for popular cleanup sites by making it possible for different groups to clean up the same areas of shoreline throughout the year. The emphasis on research to guide marketing strategies has allowed GCSC identify and test potential future campaigns. For instance, GCSC is currently testing a program to clean up microplastics (plastic beads, fibers, pellets, or other pieces generally less than 5 mm in size) from local shorelines in British Columbia. This test market will let them see whether or not it would be feasible to introduce this campaign at the national level.

Discussion Questions

1. What *exchange* is offered to participants?
2. How could recruitment be improved?
3. In some urban areas, there are more volunteers than shorelines that can be cleaned up. What sorts of opportunities could this provide for expanding the program?
4. How else would you suggest improving this social marketing effort?
5. What would the advantages and disadvantages be of extending the time frame for the program outside of the initial month of September?
6. What forms of evaluation would be helpful? How could these be done? Explain.

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