

Survey and Focus Groups on California Minorities

Attitudes Towards Recycling

Introduction

The California Department of Conservation administers the State's comprehensive beverage container recycling program. Public education is an important part of this effort. To help ensure effective communication with California's ethnically diverse population, the Department engaged the Rose Institute to conduct a public opinion survey and series of focus groups among Latinos, African Americans, and Asian Americans. The results, summarized here, will be used by the Department to develop culturally relevant information and advertising to increase recycling rates among these groups.

It is significant to note that the perceived language barrier among respondents is minimal, with only one percent of those surveyed suggesting that people do not recycle because of language problems; in fact, 71 percent speak English at home. Other findings include: many of the respondents were extremely pleased to be consulted about recycling and other environmental issues; a consensus mentioned that education and youth are the most promising path to recycling success; and 86 percent of respondents were aware of the California Redemption Value program.

The combined utilization of focus group and survey research has proved to be a valuable and enlightening endeavor. The focus group study helped to refine the survey instrument and contributed its own independent research value to the project. The following is a summary of both focus group and survey research.

Latino

Latino respondents are more likely (as compared to the total) to suggest that the State Department of Conservation promote recycling through information and education. Focus groups mentioned that education is especially vital in inner-city areas. Also, the local newspaper is more likely to be their primary source for information on what and how to recycle. Latino respondents are less likely to say that they rely on the government for such information.

When asked to state the most important environmental problem in the state, "general pollution" is the response more likely made by Latino respondents. Latino respondents are more likely to say that they recycle plastic the most and less likely to recycle paper the most. Focus group studies reveal a consensus among the ethnic groups that over-packaging and the decreasing capacity of landfills are very significant environmental problems.

African Americans

African American respondents are less likely to suggest that the State department of Conservation promote recycling through new programs or by making recycling more convenient. They are more

likely to explain that people don't recycle because they don't know how or where to recycle or because it takes too much time, rather than it is inconvenient.

African American respondents are less likely to have a city or county recycling program, but those who do have such a program are more likely to rate it as "very effective."

When asked, "What first comes to mind when you hear the term 'environmental protection,'" African American respondents are more likely to respond with the terms air pollution, recycling, EPA or environmentalism. The focus group was particularly concerned about exhaust from city buses. African American respondents are also more likely to rate crime/drugs/gangs as high priorities.

African American respondents are less likely to respond that the member of the household who recycles or does the shopping is a spouse. The shopper is also less likely to be another adult member of the household. African American respondents were more likely to say that they recycle cans the most and less likely to state that they recycle "everything" the most.

Finally, African American respondents are less likely to state that they personally or that a member of their household recycle and they are less likely to be aware of any products made from recycled materials.

Asians

Asian respondents are more likely to rely on "other" for information on what and how to recycle. Focus groups suggested that these "other" sources should include Korean, Chinese, Vietnamese, and Japanese television programs, radio stations and newspapers; billboards; mailing; celebrity endorsements; and "word-of-mouth" communications through churches and community centers.

Asian respondents are less likely to be willing to pay 5% more for a recycled product of equal quality. Korean and Vietnamese focus group participants felt that recycled products are dirty and used and that they should cost less because they are recycled. Korean participants said they would consider buying recycled products if they are cheaper; Vietnamese participants are willing to pay more for the non-recycled product. In the Filipino group, a distinction was made between personal and professional purchases: one would be willing to pay more for personal recycled products but would choose the lowest price for office acquisitions. The Chinese participants indicated a willingness to pay more for environmentally friendly products but questioned whether the extra cost should be passed entirely to the consumer in order to preserve corporate profit margins.

Asian respondents are more likely to recycle paper the most and less likely to recycle plastic the most.

When asked to state the most important environmental problem in the state, "general pollution" is the response less likely given by Asian respondents. In focus groups, the Chinese and Filipino participants mentioned that overconsumption in the United States is a major problem.

Other Contrasts

Latino respondents are more likely to rate their local recycling program as “somewhat effective”; African American respondents are less likely to do so. In general, focus groups revealed criticism of curbside recycling programs. Participants complained that the bins provided are unsightly and too small.

The Latino respondents are more likely to explain that people don't recycle because of personal attitude, while African American respondents are less likely to supply this explanation. Focus group participants offered many reasons for not recycling: it requires too much time and effort; it becomes dirty, smelly and attract bugs; and it is generally inconvenient. The Latino, Korean, and Chinese focus groups brought up the problem of homeless people rummaging through recycling bins. Language, however, does not appear to be a problem. Only 15 of those surveyed suggested that people do not recycle because of language barriers; 71% speak English at home.

African American respondents are more likely to state that they personally are the member of the household who recycles and less likely to state that everyone helps with the recycling. Conversely, Latino respondents are more likely to state that everyone helps and less likely to state that they personally do the recycling.

Latino and African American respondents are more likely to be willing to pay 5% more for a recycled product of equal quality. However, Latino and African American focus group participants indicated that they could not afford to pay more for recycled or environmentally friendly products. If the products were equally priced, they would purchase the recycled or environmentally friendly product.

Latino and African American respondents are less likely to be the member of the household who does the shopping, while African American respondents are more likely to be the shopper of the household.

Consensus

Focus group research indicates general agreement on a number of points. Latino, African American and Korean participants suggested that cities could create new jobs by sorting trash themselves. Every group called for enhanced incentives for recycling. African American participants suggested an increase in monetary returns on recyclable materials; a Latino participant commented that community recycling funds could be used to support homeless shelters or to help poor families; Korean participants felt that the convenience of free curbside pickup was more valuable than a financial incentive.

Several groups emphasized penalty as a more effective motivator than reward. A Japanese focus group participant suggested that people be charged if they exceed a predetermined limit on the amount of trash generated by their household. The Vietnamese, Latino and Korean focus groups also mentioned that fines or tickets for failing to recycle or for littering should be instituted.

In emphasizing the importance of education and information in encouraging people to recycle, focus group participants suggested the use of (as an African American participant put it) “shock therapy.” Latino participants explained that making people aware of the drastic consequences of failing to recycle would be an effective educational tactic to promote environmental awareness. The Korean focus group agreed that a certain degree of fear about an unhealthy planet in the future might motivate people to act to preserve the environment now.

The Latino focus group brought up the issue of responsibility of “big business” as well as government. African American participants agreed that government, as a major employer, should set an example of environmental awareness and responsibility and suggested that businesses be made to recycle. The federal government was condemned by the Japanese focus group as the “worst waster.” Chinese participants said that business establishments like the large Chinese supermarkets should be called upon to set an example of recycling and environmental consciousness in the community.

Korean focus group participants made an important point related to the role and responsibility of business in recycling. They said that it is particularly difficult to recycle in the office, and that there is a reduced incentive to do so because one’s actions in the office do not financially impact the individual. Several groups concurred that there is a significant failure to recycle in the workplace. The survey results support this proposition in that, while 73% of respondents said that they recycle at home, only 3% claimed to recycle at work. African American focus group participants indicated that a tendency to waste at work may facilitate similarly wasteful behavior in the home; as a result, it is even more important that businesses establish recycling programs in the workplace.

Demographics

The differences between the three ethnic groups surveyed should be discussed with close attention to the demographic characteristics of the survey respondents.

In terms of residence, Latino respondents are more likely to have lived in their current residence for less than two years and less likely to have lived there for 6-10 years; and they are more likely to live in single-family homes as well. African American respondents are less likely to have lived there for 11 or more years. African American respondents are less likely to live in single-family homes and more likely to live in apartments and are also more likely to rent their residences. Asian respondents are less likely to have lived in their current residence for 11 or more years and more likely to own their residences.

The highest level of education completed may be a telling indicator. Latino respondents are more likely to have completed high school or less, or some college; they are less likely to have completed college or above. African American respondents are more likely to have completed high school or less; they are less likely to have completed college or above. Asian respondents are less likely to fall into the high or less category and more likely to have completed some college, college or above, or post-graduate study.

The Latino and Asian respondents are more likely to be between 18 and 39 years of age (or, they are less likely to be 60 years of age or older.) African American respondents are more likely to be 60 or older; they are less likely to be between 18 and 39 years of age.

Latino respondents are more likely to have incomes of either less than \$20,000 or between \$20,000 and \$50,000; they are less likely to have incomes of \$50,000 or more. Similarly, the African American respondents are more likely to have incomes of less than \$20,000 and less likely to have incomes exceeding \$50,000. The Asian respondents are less likely to have incomes of less than \$20,000 or between \$20,000 and \$50,000 and more likely to have incomes exceeding \$50,000.

The Latino respondents are more likely to be located in "other Southern California areas." Asian respondents are more likely to be located in the Bay Area and less likely to be from the Los Angeles area. African American respondents are more likely to be located in the Los Angeles area.

Asian respondents are more likely to be male. African American respondents are more likely to be female.

Conclusion

The socio-economic circumstances of each ethnic group may be as important as ethnicity. For example, the African American respondents are less likely than the total to recycle, either personally or within their households. They are also more likely to live in apartments and less likely to have city or county programs. Focus group research has indicated that recycling programs are not widely available to apartment dwellers and that recycling is significantly more difficult for those living in apartments due to such consideration as lack of space. The characteristic of living in apartments may be the more likely explanation for a lack of recycling.

The Department of Conservation is to be congratulated on its efforts to reach out to members of California's diverse ethnic groups. Individuals conducting the phone survey reported that many of the respondents were extremely pleased to be consulted about recycling and other environmental issues. In addition, the Department's success in educating and informing Californians about recycling is evident in the generally high awareness of recycling among respondents; specifically, 86% of the total number of persons surveyed was aware of the California Redemption Value program. Focus group studies reveal an awareness of a wide range of environmental problems, from ozone depletion to overpopulation; radioactive waste dumping to rain forest destruction. Both the survey and focus group results indicate the support for continued information and education by the Department. Emphasis was placed upon environmental education in school, starting at the elementary level. Several focus group participants mentioned that their children are the consistent and dedicated recyclers in their households. As the preservation of the environment for future generation was frequently identified as a primary motivation for environmental action, a focus on children and education may be the most promising path to recycling success in California.

This report reflects the results of 1000 telephone interviews conducted with minorities in the State of California. The purpose of the survey, conducted on October 22-30, 1994, was to elicit the opinions of members of California's most numerous minority groups with regard to recycling and other environmental problems.

Only the Executive Summary is reprinted here. For the full survey results, including frequency tables and cross-tabulation tables, please contact the Rose Institute.