

ENGAGING LANDOWNERS EFFECTIVELY: CREATING A CALL BEFORE YOU CUT CAMPAIGN IN THE CENTRAL HARDWOODS REGION

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Abstract.—Social marketing tools and approaches were used to develop a Call Before You Cut campaign for six states in the Central Hardwoods Region (Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Missouri, Ohio, West Virginia). The campaign was developed from research on landowner values, objectives, and behavior, based on National Woodland Owner Survey data and landowner focus groups, and discussions with natural resource professionals in the region. The result was a strategically focused set of publicity materials, a Web site, and an informational packet common to all six states and designed to attract the attention of and be useful to the landowners most likely to cut trees without professional advice.

INTRODUCTION

Decisions made by millions of family forest owners are the key to the sustainability of U.S. forests. Collectively, their actions enhance or degrade the landscape; how they manage their forests and whether they convert them to other uses is of significant public interest. Only 3 percent of private woodland owners have a written forest management plan, and 78 percent of them fail to seek the advice of forestry professionals when conducting timber harvests (Butler and Leatherberry 2004). Reaching these unengaged woodland owners, especially when they are contemplating a timber harvest, is critical to ensuring that forest resources are sustainably managed. Woodland owners who make well-informed decisions and who are actively engaged in caring for their land help ensure that healthy forests persist for many generations and that forestry remains relevant.

The Sustaining Family Forests Initiative (SFFI)², using a social marketing approach, has developed a practical set of tools to help conservation and forestry professionals reach more landowners with effective stewardship messages and to develop programs that better serve the needs and values of the landowners. These tools were developed from survey and focus group research on landowner values, objectives, and behavior, as well as from interviews with natural resource professionals in forestry and conservation throughout the country (SFFI 2009).

Creating data and information is one thing, but putting it to practical use is quite another challenge. After completing a research project to develop more expansive information about family forest owners (Butler et al. 2007), SFFI had a wealth of new information about landowners, particularly

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²SFFI is an ad hoc collaboration of universities, government agencies, conservation organizations, forest industry companies, certification systems, and landowner groups, organized to gain comprehensive knowledge about family forest owners in the United States. More information is available at www.sustainingfamilyforests.org.

how they cluster with respect to values and attitudes toward their land. The next logical question was: How could natural resource professionals use this information to improve their landowner outreach programs? The Central Hardwoods Call Before You Cut (CBYC) campaign was initiated to test the use of landowner data and application of social marketing principles to develop a program that would change landowner behavior – in this case, getting professional help before harvesting their trees. A campaign strategy and outreach materials were developed for six states (Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Missouri, Ohio, West Virginia), in a collaborative process with the state forestry agencies, university extension, the U.S. Forest Service, and the Sustaining Family Forests Initiative.

PILOT PROJECT AND STUDY AREA

To test how to apply our social marketing research findings in an actual outreach project, we chose the six-state CBYC campaign in the Central Hardwoods Region as the pilot project. This region is suffering from widespread destructive harvesting practices that degrade the value of the family's assets and the region's forests. The six states received a grant to develop a common outreach campaign, intended to provide the landowner with a whole suite of information on sustainable harvests as well as practical help such as lists of accredited foresters and master loggers.

More than 70 million acres of complex Central Hardwoods forests in the Midwest and Lake States provide abundant supplies of some of the world's most valuable hardwood timber. These forests help clean rural and urban waterways, provide critical wildlife habitat, and bring great beauty to the region. Seventy-two percent of the woodland acreage in the six states participating in CBYC is classified as family forest (Butler 2008). Many woodlands are threatened by land use change, climate change, and poor management decisions. One of the greatest impacts on the health of these woodlands, and the subsequent protection of water supplies and wildlife diversity, often lies with decisions made about harvesting timber by these family forest owners.

When questioned, most woodland owners indicate they have no intention of harvesting timber (Butler 2008). Nevertheless, when faced with a financial crisis or approached by a logger, woodland owners in significant numbers opt to harvest their woods. In the six CBYC states, only 13 percent of woodland owners indicate that harvesting timber is a priority, yet 53 percent have harvested trees (37% for commercial purposes) during their tenure as woodland owners (Fig. 1) (Butler et al. 2011). Uninformed decisions, lack of planning, and ignorance of what constitutes a good harvest can be devastating to forest ecosystems and a landowners' finances. State forestry officials frequently receive calls from landowners who regret signing vague contracts that offered little financial or forest protections.

CHOOSING A TARGET AUDIENCE

Our approach was to apply targeted marketing to solve natural resource problems that are behavioral (social) in nature. What we are calling "targeted marketing" is basically the same as the more commonly used term "social marketing," but we believe it is clearer in this context. In its broadest sense, marketing means designing programs to persuade people to take a desired action, whether enrolling in a cost share program, planting more trees, or getting a management plan. Targeted marketing means designing communications to bring about a specific behavior change in a selected group of people. Otherwise put, targeted marketing differs from a broad-brush approach in that it

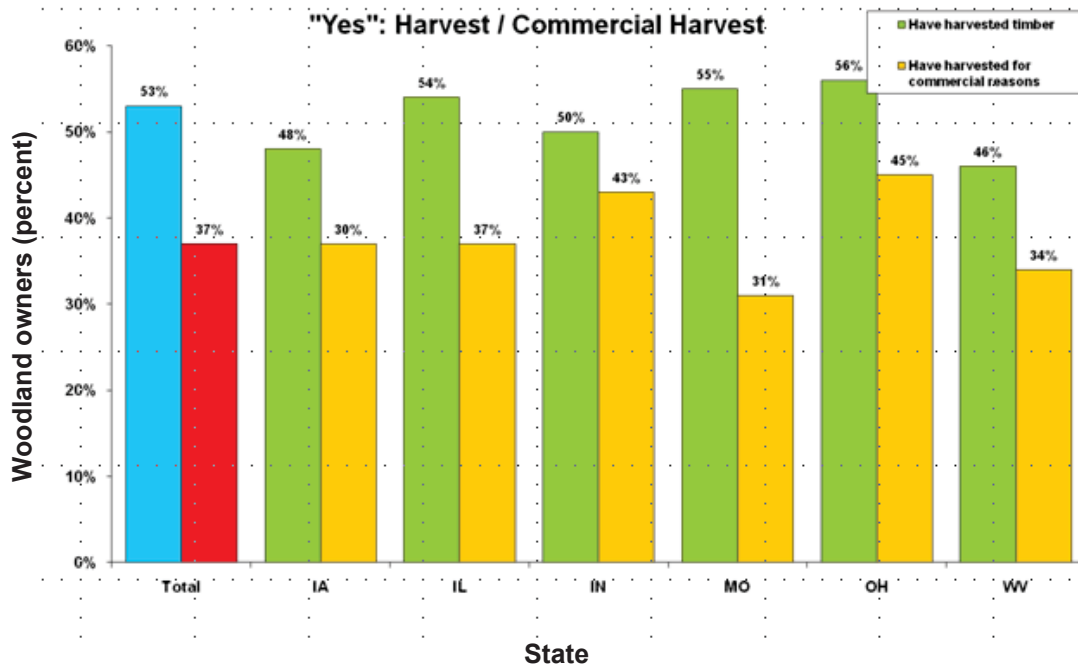


Figure 1.—Percentage of woodland owners who indicated they have harvested timber (left side of paired bars) and have harvested timber for commercial reasons (right side of paired bars). “Total” bars show average for all six CBYC states, followed by paired bars for each state.

seeks to reach subsets or groups of people with messages that are most likely to appeal to them based on an understanding of their values, preferences, and other characteristics (Bloom and Novelli 1981, Donovan and Henley 2003).

We drew on data from the SFFI research for the six states to develop a profile of landowners there. These data included basic demographics, attitudes toward their land, engagement with their land, and future plans for their land. A 1-day workshop was held with representatives from all six states to introduce them to the benefits of targeted marketing, review the data for their states, and decide which landowner attitudinal group to target for the CBYC campaign (Fig. 2) (Butler et al. 2007).

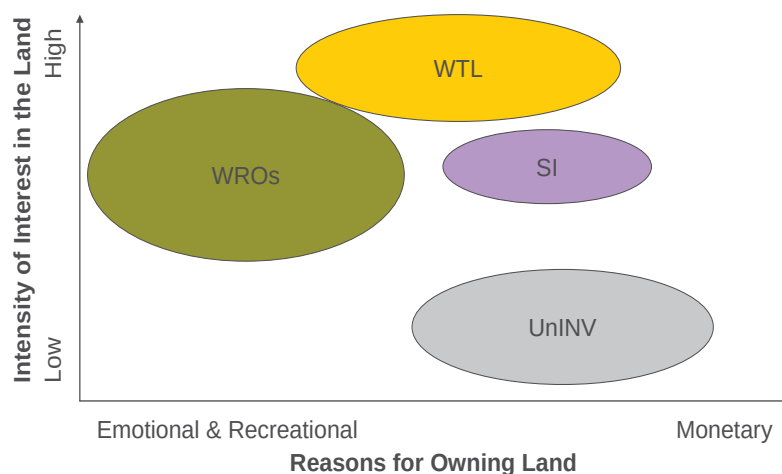


Figure 2.—The four attitudinal segments identified in the SFFI analysis for the six CBYC states showing where they fall on the scales of interest and reasons for owning. The sizes of the ellipses indicate the relative size of each group for the six states combined. WTL, WROs, SI, and UnINV refer to Working the Land, Woodland Retreat Owners, Supplemental Income, and Uninvolved, respectively.

The consensus was to target the segment referred to as Working the Land (WTL) owners. Data about the four attitudinal groups (WTL, Woodland Retreat Owners, Supplemental Income, Uninvolved) in the six states show that WTL owners have the highest intensity of interest in the land, and their appreciation of their woods is based on its commercial and recreational/emotional value. Twenty-six percent of all landowners who own between 10 and 1,000 acres in the six states fall into this segment, and they account for 29 percent of the land in this category held by family forest owners (Fig. 2).

Compared to the other large segment of landowners in the six-state region, Woodland Retreat (WR) owners, SFFI data show that:

- WTL owners are much more likely to cut trees (for any reason), and they are much more likely to harvest trees for timber (40% vs. 25%). Thus, the message of this campaign—call for information before you cut—is more relevant to this group.
- WTL owners are also more likely to believe in managing their woods proactively. They are much more likely to believe that trees, like crops, need to be tended while they are young and then harvested when they reach maturity. Nonetheless, only 16 percent have sought professional advice about managing their woodland.
- Because WTL owners see their woods as a valuable financial asset, they are more likely to be persuaded to invest more time and attention in managing their woods. They may also be more likely to see consultant forester fees as an investment in future returns, once they understand what a forester can do for them.
- On average, WTL owners have slightly larger land holdings, which means that outreach activities and land management services can be delivered more efficiently.

PROFILING THE TARGET AUDIENCE

To learn more about the target audience, we conducted six focus groups with WTL owners, two each in Ohio, Iowa, and Indiana. The main purpose was to probe their willingness to ask for advice about cutting trees and learn how best to reach them with compelling messages. Test messages were developed by social marketing professionals at the Center for Nonprofit Strategies and reviewed and modified by the project team. Landowners were chosen at random from property tax records and called by professional recruiters. A recruiting screener was used to identify people who own at least 10 acres of wooded land and self-identified as making or sharing decisions about their land. A question about reasons for owning land was used to determine which attitudinal group they fell into. There were 8 to 10 participants in each group.

The focus groups were led by professional facilitators, using a topic guide. They were first asked to introduce themselves and talk about what they liked and disliked about owning woodland. The participants were then shown a series of messages, asked to rate them on a scale of 1 to 7, cross out any words they disliked or found confusing, and circle words they liked. The messages were crafted to test the appeal of different themes: traditional values, getting a fair deal, doing right by the land and for the family, harvesting at the right time, wildlife, and resistance to asking for advice. Other topics discussed were reasons for consulting a forestry expert, possible CBYC campaign products, inclination to call a toll-free number or go to a Web site when considering a harvest, and preferred sources and channels of information.

In general, messages that appealed to WTL owners focused on healthy woods, financial benefits, recreation, value for timber, and harvests that leave the land in good shape. These owners see their woods as among their main assets and want to get the best from their land. Compared to other groups, WTL owners use the land more intensively—for timber, firewood, nontimber forest products, hunting and fishing, and other recreation. Their most distinguishing characteristic is that they cite a mix of recreational and commercial uses for their land, and they value both equally. While their approach is pragmatic, their interest in their woods is not merely utilitarian. Land ownership is a source of pride and security for WTLs. They are deeply attached to their land and, of all the segments, least likely to say they plan to sell their land in the next 5 years. Many have farming roots and see land as the only true and real wealth that outlasts all other assets. True to a traditional farming philosophy, they also believe that land should be used respectfully (i.e., sustainably) and that it is their duty as landowners to ensure that the land remains healthy for future generations to enjoy and use. Thus, they try to use the land to the fullest while maintaining its health and productivity for the future.

In this region, most WTL owners see state service foresters as the most reliable source of information on how to keep their woods healthy and safe from diseases, pests, and invasive species. Not many landowners have used the services of consulting foresters. They view loggers with a healthy skepticism. They realize that unscrupulous or untrained loggers can harm them in many ways—e.g., by underpaying for their timber, by cutting trees before the time is right, or by damaging the woods while logging. They believe that the only way to get a good logging operation is to hire a trustworthy logger and monitor the logging closely.

DEVELOPING A CAMPAIGN

Results of the focus groups were synthesized with SFFI landowner data to create draft campaign strategy recommendations that were reviewed and discussed at a second 1-day workshop with project leaders and communication specialists from the six states. The result was a campaign strategy and briefing document developed by the SFFI team for the states to use in implementing the campaign.

Campaign Goals and Desired Landowner Behaviors

The broad goal of the Call Before You Cut campaign (CBYC) is to protect the interests of landowners and improve the quality of logging to sustain forests and prevent environmental damage. This goal can be achieved if (1) landowners are better informed about the silvicultural, financial, and legal elements of planning and implementing a harvest; and (2) more landowners use the services of a professional forester to plan and manage their harvest.

Because most woodland owners harvest trees only once or twice in their lifetime, it is crucial they get the relevant information about harvesting when they need it. Therefore, the campaign's first objective was to publicize the availability of campaign materials and to position the CBYC campaign as the most comprehensive and reliable source of information and resources to help woodland owners make informed decisions about harvesting trees from their woods. This publicity was aimed at getting landowners to call a toll-free number or visit the CBYC Web site for help and guidance when they are thinking of cutting their trees.

The campaign also developed materials that would provide landowners with appropriate information and guidance to plan their harvest better and choose appropriate service providers. Among other things, these materials explained the benefits of working with a forester.

Tailoring Messages to the Target Audience's Motives

The main motivation of WTL owners in harvesting timber is to maximize the long-term value of their woodland, where the term “value” is used holistically to include financial, recreational, and emotional benefits of owning woods. The CBYC materials were therefore presented as tools to help landowners harvest trees in a way that maximizes the long-term value they get from their woods.

In keeping with the strong independent streak in WTL owners, and their tendency to trust experience and judgment (particularly their own) over expert advice, the campaign focused on informing woodland owners about how to plan and manage a good harvest. The services of a professional forester were positioned as a resource to help landowners implement their plans and accomplish their objectives for the harvest.

In a nutshell, the theme for the campaign was: **If you're thinking of harvesting your trees, call the CBYC number to get all the information you need and understand what resources are available to you. This will help you get the best value from your woods, now and in the future.**

Under this theme, campaign materials focused on four key messages:

- 1) **Do Right by Yourself and Your Family.** You can cut a tree only once. So plan your harvests carefully to get the best value from your woodland.
- 2) **Enjoy your Woods.** Good decisions at harvest time will keep your woods healthy and productive for you and your family to enjoy. You do not have to choose between harvesting timber and enjoying your woods.
- 3) **Do Right by the Land.** Your woods are valuable; take care of them and they will serve you and your family well for many years to come.
- 4) **Be Woodwise.** The CBYC can provide you with all the information you need to make good decisions for your land and your family, and it connects you with services and resources in your community.

Overall, the CBYC campaign was clearly designed to serve the interests of landowners—not foresters, the timber industry, or other professionals. We realized that it would lose all credibility if it was seen as a mouthpiece for promoting the services of consulting foresters or other providers. We also took care not to be seen as reflecting an environmental (greenie) or commercial agenda, and we were neutral with regard to hunting. As a group, WTL owners are divided on these issues, any of which can be a hot button that leads to impassioned debates. Finally, we were clear that the CBYC is about helping landowners harvest their trees to get better long-term value from their land. Campaign materials focused on that—they did not try to push lessons in forest management, development of written plans, or enrollment in government programs.

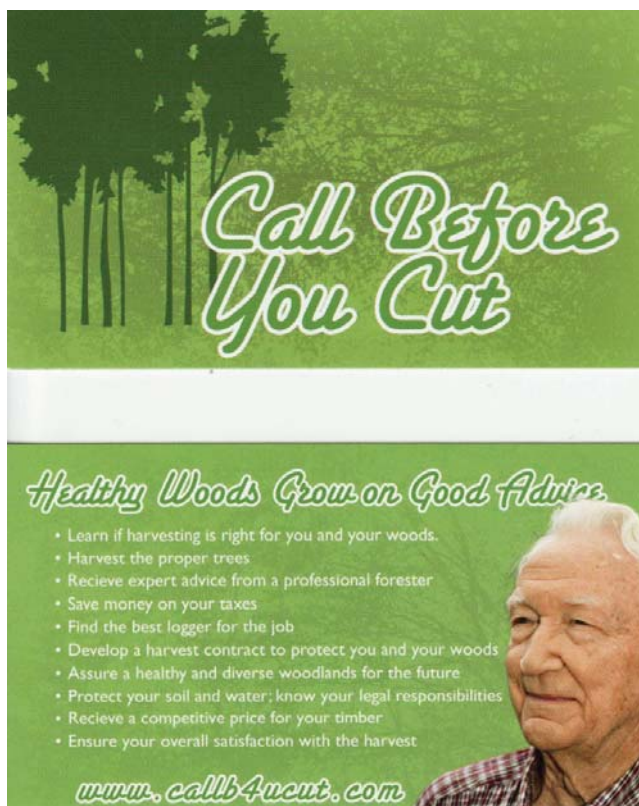


Figure 3.—Business cards developed for use in all six CBYC participating states.

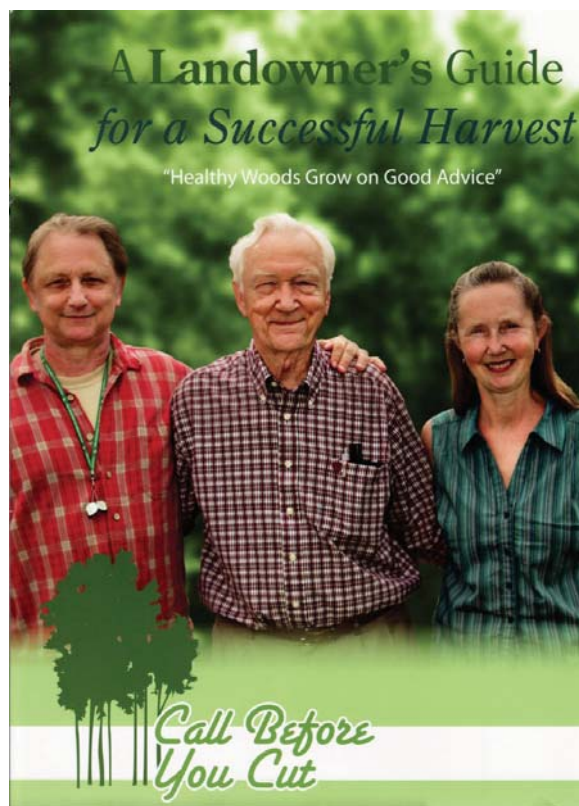


Figure 4.—Standardized folder to be used in all participating states in the CBYC campaign. Tabbed inserts were customized for each state.

DESIGNING CAMPAIGN MATERIALS

Materials were developed to create awareness of the CBYC campaign (Fig. 3, business cards, posters and billboards) and items to aid in implementing the campaign (folders for dissemination of information and Web pages for use in participating states). All materials were designed as templates that could be customized for use in each of the six participating states. For example, tri-fold folders were developed (Fig. 4) with a generic message that was valid in all participating CBYC states, but they were designed to accept inserts that could be customized to the needs of each state. A common launch Web site was developed to allow for the use of a single, simple URL for all participating CBYC states, and a Web site template was developed to provide uniformity among CBYC Web sites (Fig. 5). The language, look, and feel of materials were also tailored to the characteristics of the target audience. Because WTL landowners are independent and resistant to taking direction, the tone of this packet was informational—i.e., CBYC is providing landowners with good information to help them make decisions. Rather than make forceful recommendations (which this target audience is likely to resist), we offered ideas and suggestions (along with a rationale).

The language of the materials was also simple and folksy, peer-to-peer rather than expert-to-novice. We focused on giving landowners practical advice rather than theoretical information and used anecdotes, peer testimonials, analogies, and parables to get our point across. Because WTL owners generally tend to be well informed and seek out different points of view, we carefully acknowledged controversial or different points of view and addressed them directly. Also, WTL owners are typically not enthusiastic readers; therefore, we minimized the text and used bullets and other means to simplify and organize it.



Figure 5.—Web pages for CBYC campaign. Left: Launch site for all participating CBYC states (<http://callb4ucut.com>). Right: Ohio's CBYC Web page (<http://callb4ucut.com/Ohio/tabid/107/Default.aspx>).

EVALUATION

Evaluation is a key, although often overlooked, part of social marketing. It is imperative to assess what is working and what is not in order to improve the communications campaign. The evaluation should be tailored to the specific project, include both short-term and long-term measurements, and be a continuous process.

For the CBYC campaign, the immediate metrics will be simply the volumes of traffic on the Web site and the toll-free number. From June 2010 through May 2011, the Ohio CBYC campaign received about 1,650 requests; more than 95 percent of those requests were by email via the Ohio CBYC Web page (Ohio Division of Forestry 2008). We will also keep track of when specific campaign elements, e.g., newspaper articles, are run to see how this impacts these volumes. In the longer term, we will use a short survey, such as a postcard, to contact those who have contacted CBYC to evaluate how they heard of it and how useful were the materials they received. Although not currently planned, more in-depth work could be done with the people contacted to better understand these topics and a broader survey could be done to understand awareness of CBYC by those who had not contacted the program.

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