

Rational Vs Emotional Appeals With Communications to Landholders: A Review of Focus Group Responses

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Abstract

There are many organisations that seek to communicate with landholders for the purposes of engaging them in local environmental or conservation programs and sustainable production. **This study examined whether different segments of landholders are likely to respond better to communication based on different appeals (rational or emotional), using different messages and communication channels. Seven hypothetical communication campaigns were designed with specific messages and appeals, each produced in three types of media. Focus groups of three specific landholder groups – ‘lifestylers’, traditional and absentee landowners – were held to obtain their responses to the campaigns. Findings suggest that the effectiveness of communications with landholders can be increased by using preferred messages and appeals, and selecting a combination of media appropriate to the landholder group being targeted.**

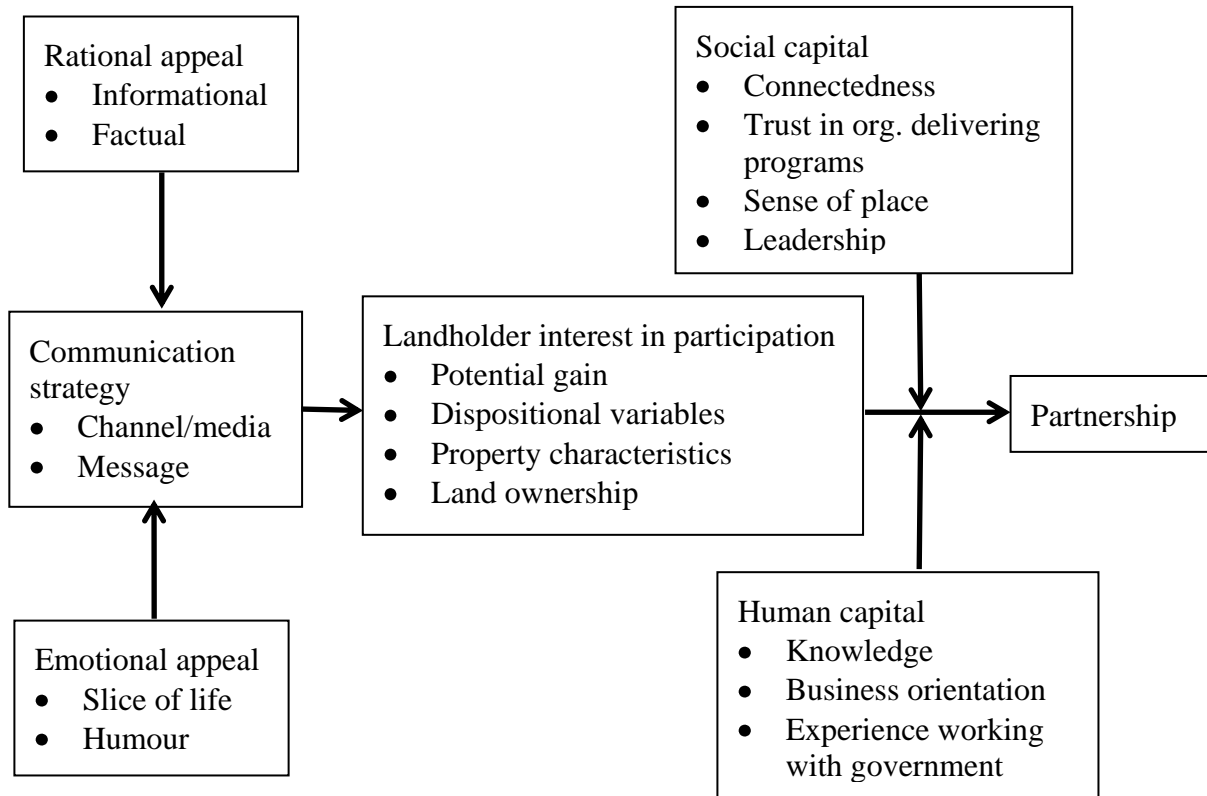
1. Introduction

For different rural authorities that organise local environmental or conservation programs, such as Catchment Management Authorities (CMAs), Catchment Councils, Natural Resource Management (NRM) Boards, and in general Local Environmental Authorities (LEAs), it is important that there is local participation and partnerships in their environmental/conservation programs (Aslin *et al.*, 2004; Howard, 2006; Millar, 2001; Pannell *et al.*, 2006). There are also industry bodies that work with specific groups of landholders to achieve production outcomes while also caring for properties. While these organisations spend a great deal of time and effort to contact and communicate messages to various landholder segments, a problem can be that some segments of landholders can be difficult to contact and obtain active participation. While many studies have examined the effectiveness of different communication channels (e.g. Kromm and White, 1991; Tucker and Napier, 2002; Rosenberg and Margerum, 2008) and those messages that are likely to most effectively motivate landholders (Rosenberger and Margerum, 2008), most have taken a mass market approach. Further, when trying to encourage participation in a conservation program, what type of appeal (rational or emotional) would be more effective to the different landholder groups? This study analyses the responses of three focus groups representing three distinct landholder groups (lifestylers, traditional and absentee) to test seven different advertising executions to discover whether rational or emotional appeals are more effective when promoting a conservation program.

2. Conceptual Model

For landholders to participate and partner in local environmental/conservation programs, they first must be aware of the existence of such programs, and then there needs to be some interest or incentive for them to be involved. Developed from Morrison *et al.* (2008), the conceptual model presented in Figure 1 explains how a communication strategy (whether using a rational or emotional appeal) can increase landholder participation in market-based instrument (MBI) and incentive programs.

Figure 1: Conceptual Model



Landholder ‘interest in participation’ will depend on what potential gain they can see in participating, dispositional variables (e.g. innovativeness, environmental attitude, trust, satisfaction with past programs), and property issues (e.g. property size, having land that is suitable for the program and type of ownership). By choosing the most appropriate communication channels for specific landholder segments, and the most relevant message/s (given landholder attitudes, values and position in the consumer decision process) more substantial increases in participation would be expected. Further, the decision to participate is moderated by Social Capital (Connectedness, Trust in organisations delivering programs and Sense of place) and Human Capital (Knowledge, Business orientation, and Experience working with government) that act to encourage or constrain landholders’ ability to participate in programs.

3. Developing a Communication Strategy

The design of appropriate promotional messages depends on a number of factors, such as landholder characteristics, attitudes toward those delivering the program, and on the

landholder segment. Also it is important to determine the most effective message to communicate to the landholders. There are many ways that advertisers appeal to their target audience with a communication message. An appeal is the approach used to attract the attention or interest of consumers and influence their feelings toward the product/service/idea (Belch and Belch, 2009). It is the dominant theme of an advertisement, and is an important determinant for an advertisement to be successful (Mueller, 1987). Two approaches for advertising appeals are rational and emotional appeals (Holmes and Crocker, 1987; Belch and Belch, 2009). Rational appeals focus on practical, factual and logical persuasion, while emotional appeals focus more on feelings and social/psychological needs for persuasion. Leonidou and Leonidou (2009) compared rational versus emotional appeals in newspaper advertising and identified differences in execution elements in that rational advertisements usually contained objectivity, functionality, and utilitarianism, while emotional advertising elements are characterised by subjectivity, emotionalism, and value-expressiveness. When to use a particular type of appeal can depend on consumers' involvement in the product/service/idea: high involvement products (e.g. cars, computers) are more likely to include rational appeals, while low involvement products (e.g. food, drink) are more likely to use emotional appeals to persuade people to purchase (Holmes and Crocker, 1987). However, the appeal used may depend on different factors, such as the type of product, the target audience, the creative strategy being implemented, or the goals intended. Two important advertising goals are to (1) inform your target of particular information, and (2) persuade your target to act in a particular way (Kotler and Armstrong, 2008). Further, persuasion can be undertaken focusing on an individual or social/community level. In this study, seven different advertising treatments were developed to represent different advertising appeals and goals: rational/emotional, inform/persuade (individual/community). The title of the advertising treatment and its focus is shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Advertising Treatments Categorised by Advertising Appeal and Goal

	Rational Appeal	Emotional Appeal
Inform	One-off grants	That's the secret
Persuade - Individual	On farm investment	My farm, my family
Persuade - Community	Time to act G.E.R. initiative	The grass is greener

4. Landholder Segments

Morrison *et al.* (2008) and Curtis, Byron and MacKay (2005) have identified a few groups of landholders that are particularly difficult to reach with existing communication programs and have very low participation in NRM programs. Morrison *et al.* (2008) identified five main landholder segments, but two such low-participating segments: "profit first" or "traditional farmers" and "smaller hobby farmers". The "traditional farmer" segment consisted of full-time farmers with medium-sized properties who had been residing in the district for a long time but have a low socio-demographic status (e.g. education), low environmental responsibility and very low trust in the groups delivering NRM programs. The second segment, the "smaller hobby farmers", as the name suggests, comprised hobby farmers, with small properties. They made little use of the standard information channels used to communicate NRM programs, and were very disconnected from their neighbours. However, they are trusting of the groups delivering NRM programs and have a high degree of environmental responsibility. A third segment identified by Curtis, Byron and MacKay

(2005) that has low participation is “absentee owners”. For this study, the focus will be on how to communicate with these three landholder groups: hobby farmers/lifestylers, absentee landholders, and traditional farmers. Each of these segments were shown seven different advertising executions and asked about their attitudes toward them.

5. Methodology

This study analyses the responses to different advertising executions on three focus groups representing three distinct landholder groups (lifestylers, traditional and absentee). The first focus group comprised four ‘absentee landholders’ (A) who lived in Sydney and owned small farms in the Southern Tablelands of NSW. The second group of traditional landholders (T) was made up of 10 full-time farmers from the Oberon district in the Central Tablelands of NSW. Most of the farmers, who were all men, ran mixed farming enterprises, including sheep and cattle and some cropping. The third group of landholders comprised small-scale lifestyle landholders (L) or hobby farmers from the Southern Highlands of NSW. These ‘lifestylers’ owned properties ranging from 2ha to 15ha and although some derived a small amount of income from their land, all had off-farm sources of income. During the focus groups, seven advertising campaigns were presented to participants; each featured a radio, television and print advertisement. After the presentation of each advertisement, participants were asked a series of questions about the advertisement and their responses to it. At the end, participants were asked to rank the seven campaigns in order of their effectiveness.

6. Results

From the basic rankings based on responses from the focus groups, in Table 2, the top three advertisements were: (1) My farm, my family; (2) That’s the secret; and (3) The grass is greener. It is important to note that all of these have an emotional appeal. Further, the least popular advertisement was the G.E.R. initiative, which had a rational appeal.

The comments from the focus groups suggested that the rational appeal advertisements were good at informing people that there were grants:

P1: Well, I wasn’t sure that I was hearing correctly, because I think you said five thousand dollar grant, first off, well that made my ears prickle, you know, I’d be looking to hear that ad a second time, to make sure that I heard it correctly. (A)

P4: I thought it grabbed you really, right up front. I think the “here’s five grand, it’s yours to take” whatever the wording was, caught your interest straight away. (L)

However, the emotional appeals overall had much more resonance with landholders. For example, the ‘My farm, my family’ advertisement struck a chord with the respondents.

P1: It mentioned a lot of words, like family, networking, what’s important to you, so they’re asking three things. (T)

P3: My thoughts are, I’ve got three kids, and all of my kids are involved in the land, like I mean, we’ve got to try and be profitable, foremost, and you’ve got to manage your land accordingly so you can keep it profitable. (T)

This treatment was also mentioned as being ‘positive’ and ‘friendlier’, as well as not just informing about the CMA:

I thought it was far more positive. I mean for me ... the agreement part of it ... was sort of said in a more friendly manner, so it might just leave you or me to make a

phone call and wonder if there is anything. But yes, it would just raise my interest, anyway. (T)
The bloke is actually speaking about his farm and his family and all the rest of it, instead of speaking about going into the CMA. (T)

Table 2: Ranking of Campaigns by Each Segment and Overall

Campaign name	Absentee Rank	Traditional Rank	Lifestyler Rank	Overall Rank
1. One off grants	6	4	6	5
2. Time to act	4	5	4	4
3. On farm investment	5	6	5	6
4. G.E.R. initiative	7	7	7	7
5. My farm, my family	1	1	1	1
6. The grass is greener	3	3	3	3
7. That's the secret	2	2	2	2

(1=most preferred, 7=least preferred)

The ‘That’s the secret’ campaign was also popular, and respondents felt the friendly neighbour advice was a good way to send the message, and was one that they could relate to.

I thought it was one of the best ads so far ... it sets the scene that his pasture is bad, and, with native, it was all about the farmer, and that we can go and ask the CMA to help. You're helping us on the farm. I think that was one of the better ads. (T)

I thought that was a good advert. It was clear, I liked the conversational style. (L)

There was some evidence of the importance of designing treatments with respect to landholder values. For example, the lifestylers and absentee owners were more responsive to “Time to act” which had a strong environmental message, while the traditional farmers were relatively negative toward this treatment.

It felt more sincere ... it didn't leave us with the money, it left us a concern, a concern for the environment. (A)

I think the emphasis on the sustainability and the reason for it is probably better to appeal to people than the financial. (L)

As soon as they say conservation organisations, I would be very, very sceptical. (T)

The opposite, however, was true of the “One off grants” campaign. Further, it was apparent that some respondents turn off the information quickly if there are terms or words that are inconsistent with their values, such as ‘conservation’, ‘climate change’ or ‘covenant’. However, given differences in values across segments, we expected more difference in segment preferences than we observed. We had anticipated, for example, that the lifestylers would have higher preferences for “Time to act” or the “G.E.R. initiative” given their strong environmental values. It appears that the emotional appeal of the three most preferred treatments was more influential than designing a treatment to be consistent with environmental values for this segment.

A further finding is the importance of designing treatments with respect to each segment’s position in the consumer decision process. Members of the lifestylers’ focus group frequently commented that they were unclear about their eligibility (as they were not farmers and on small properties) and that they were unsure about what activities needed to be undertaken on their properties. It was apparent that if a treatment had been designed specifically for

lifestylers and which clarified these issues, then this would have been the preferred treatment for this segment.

Most of us are like, so what? How does that apply to me? However, if you'd said something like erosion is a huge problem and we need your help ... even small landholders, we need your help ... that might make me think, oh well, maybe that applies to me. (L)

I wouldn't even bother listening, because I don't think it applies to me ... I don't think I'm a farmer so I don't think it applies to me. (L)

If you had the family with the dog running beside them and the horses in the background ... more lifestyle than farm business sort of thing. (L)

7. Conclusion

This study analyses the responses of three landholder groups to seven different advertisements to determine whether rational or emotional advertising appeals are more effective in encouraging participation in environmental/conservation programs. Of the seven campaigns developed, three of the campaigns developed all of which used emotional appeals (“My farm, my family”, “That’s the secret” and “The grass is greener”) were consistently the most preferred by landholders in the focus groups. This is an interesting finding as the literature suggests that rational appeals are likely to be more appropriate with higher involvement goods, such as involvement in NRM programs (Holmes and Crocker, 1987). Yet while these three emotional appeal campaigns were found to be consistently most preferred across all of the focus groups, it was also found that the rational appeals were effective in making the landholders aware of the basic program, and the emotional appeals motivated them to take the next step. Differences in landholder values were found to be of some importance in influencing landholder preferences for treatments, but overall much less than anticipated. For the lifestyler segment, designing treatments that clarified key information issues (and hence recognised where they were in terms of the consumer decision process) appeared to be much more important than developing a treatment that is consistent with their environmental values. Community focused appeals were less effective than individual appeals.

Further research is recommended to better understand how to encourage landholders to participate in environment/conservation programs. A larger internet survey to test the effectiveness of different campaigns across landholder segments is planned. Using some of the focus group results will provide insights into the relative effectiveness of potential campaigns, as further testing is needed to ensure future participation of landholders in worthwhile environmental/conservation programs.

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