

Ni hao! Howdy! ¡Hola!: **Tales from Community Outreach Events**

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Abstract

As more and more jurisdictions are utilizing grassroots approaches for contacting hard-to-reach customers, the success of disseminating energy efficiency information at community events is something that many program managers need to know. This paper provides some unique evaluation approaches and conclusions about the overall success of community based efforts.

Each year the California Public Utilities Commission funds programs that sponsor energy efficiency information outreach at community events. In this paper, the authors compare two programs that involve local organizations that sponsor information booths at events like festivals, farmer's markets, job fairs, and community center openings. It introduces the innovative research methods of ethnography and intercepts (brief surveys) that were applied to collect feedback from groups who do not typically respond to "traditional" evaluation research techniques. The paper also shares some recent results after applying these methods, and puts forth ideas for program managers who are considering whether to participate in community outreach events about how they can make a more effective booth.

Introduction

In the energy efficiency field, the task of program managers is to design effective strategies that reach, inform and inspire changes in energy use in their given customer base. The task of evaluators is to arm program managers with information that improves program design and implementation strategy. Working together, program managers and evaluators can use these insights in all stages of the program life-cycle (design, start up, roll-out, and implementation). Good research can notify managers of the program's effectiveness and ignite strategy changes that better align with overall goals and objectives.

Most energy efficiency programs use traditional outreach tactics such as mailings; bill inserts; web pages; seminars; television, radio and print ads and educational programs to reach their mainstream customer base. However, some customer segments present a challenge, as they typically do not respond to traditional tactics. This failure to respond to what some term "normal" approaches may be attributed to multiple factors such as geographic dispersion, incomprehension or language barriers, inability to appeal to cultural values, lack of access to messaging, disinterest, apathy, inability to act, or distrust of the organization.

To overcome these barriers, many program managers are using grassroots approaches to contact hard-to-reach communities, the most common grassroots tactic being information dissemination at community events. This year, the State Fairs in Texas, Kentucky, North Carolina, Minnesota, and Kansas, to name a few, each featured booths that promoted energy efficiency. In another example, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency sponsored a "Change a Light, Change the World" cross country bus tour that visited ten cities in twenty days. The bus parked at neighborhood malls and featured a traveling education center that informed visitors about the benefits of compact fluorescent light bulbs.

As energy efficiency program managers consider non-traditional tactics to access certain customer segments, so too must program evaluators consider non-traditional research methods to

determine the effectiveness of chosen tactics. This paper provides insights into two California programs that target specific customer segments on a grassroots level by disseminating program information in booths at community events, and explains the mix of non-traditional and traditional research methods Opinion Dynamics Corporation applied to evaluate these programs. Based on the research, this paper highlights issues that program managers should consider to increase the effectiveness of outreach events.

Introduction to the Two Programs

This paper features two programs: the California Flex Your Power (FYP) Campaign, which focuses on many groups including rural populations and, the PACE Energy Efficient Outreach program, sponsored by Southern California Gas Company, which provides energy information to non-English speaking communities in the Los Angeles area.

The Flex Your Power Rural (FYPR) campaign is part of a California-wide effort that provides “messages on simple things individual consumers can do to reduce energy consumption and their bills,” (CPUC Decision, D03-01-038, January 16, 2003). In addition to mass media advertising targeting non-urban communities, the FYPR campaign leverages community-based organizations in rural areas to deliver the FYP message. The community organizations staff booths where they deliver energy efficiency information through interactive games (trivia questions or Bingo), discussions and/or literature dissemination.

FYPR has established an extensive network that enables them to reach rural communities on a grassroots level. Many of the rural areas in California contain small communities that are not necessarily exposed to major broadcasting and other forms of media due to geography, income and/or language barriers. The campaign extends the FYP message through community-based outreach efforts to these hard-to-reach audiences. The value of the community organizations in the FYPR program is in their pre-existing relationships within these populations and knowledge of how to best interact with them. Their existing relationship positions the community organizations as trusted sources of information and allows the program to adapt and convey the FYP message to a wide variety of audiences.

The PACE Energy Efficiency Outreach program promotes Southern California Gas Company’s energy efficiency programs in ethnic minority communities with historically low participation rates: this includes Chinese, Korean, Vietnamese, and Hispanic populations. The program is implemented by the Pacific Asian Consortium in Employment (PACE), a community development organization that was originally founded to meet the employment and job training needs of Asian Pacific Islanders in the Los Angeles area. PACE receives roughly \$1 million per year to conduct energy efficiency outreach for Southern California Gas. With this funding PACE staffs energy efficiency information booths at 50 community events per year, conducts seminars and presentations, and designs, translates and distributes informational materials related to energy. At community events, the PACE booths feature employees who give informal presentations and demonstrations about energy efficiency in Chinese, Vietnamese, Korean, Spanish, and English (the languages spoken varies by the event’s target population), answer questions, and offer in-language brochures and giveaways of low-flow showerheads and faucet aerators.

Research Methods: Ethnography and Intercepts

For the evaluations, the Opinion Dynamics team examined the implementation tactic chosen by both the FYPR campaign and the PACE Energy Efficiency Outreach program: information booths, and its impact on the recipients’ awareness of energy efficiency, knowledge of energy efficiency, and intent to take action. Given these research objectives, the team selected a mixed-methodology approach that utilized ethnography techniques and traditional in-person intercept surveys.

Ethnography is a newer approach to program evaluation in energy efficiency. Typically used as a data collection technique in social and anthropological research, ethnography is beginning to be widely used in other areas, such as new product development and market needs assessments. The team decided to use a data collection technique commonly used in ethnography at and around the booths: direct-first-hand observation of human behavior. This method enabled us to study the booths as an implementation tactic: i.e. the booth representatives' approach to disseminating energy efficiency information and the interest generated by the booths.¹ This method provides a multidimensional, contextual, grounded, nuanced understanding – qualitative data, if you will – of the booths. Notably, this method also garnered information on the populations attending the events, such as some social/cultural characteristics and attitudes toward energy efficiency.

The team decided to complement the observation/ethnographic approach with a traditional research technique of brief, in-person intercepts with participants to collect their reactions to the booth-disseminated information immediately following their encounters with the booths.² This method provided the certainty of being able to locate and identify participants, which is the biggest hurdle when evaluating these types of outreach efforts. The table below shows the methods used to evaluate the booths and some key questions that were explored by each.

Table 1.1. Method Applied to Achieve Research Objectives

Method Research Objective	Ethnography /Observation	In-person Intercept Surveys
Effectiveness of booth tactic at generating interest	X	
Population characteristics	X	
Impact on awareness		X
Impact on knowledge		X
Impact on intent to take action		X

For the FYPR campaign, we utilized the ethnography techniques and surveys at 15 events (one for each community based organization) across California; for the PACE program, these techniques were applied to 4 events (out of 150 that were funded by the program) in the Los Angeles area. Due to the budget size the team selected the PACE events by limiting the events to October 2008, and choosing one event for each of the program's languages: Chinese, Korean, Vietnamese, and Spanish.

Research Methodology Pros and Cons

¹ Opinion Dynamics prepared a ten-page guide for observers to document and describe the event, booth, staff, information provided, attendee-types, and the attendees' level of interest in the program information. This involved taking detailed notes, careful listening and watching human behavior – such as actions, reactions, facial expressions and body movements – to answer the questions included in the guide. Each event observation lasted two hours.

² The intercepts consisted of 25 questions and took approximately 10 minutes to complete. They were self administered and they probed for participants' reasons for visiting the booth, their knowledge of energy efficiency, the usefulness of the information provided, the likelihood that they will take specific actions as a result of visiting the booth, their awareness of specific information campaigns, and included psychographic and demographic questions. In return for completing an intercept, each participant was offered \$5.

Observational and intercept survey research each have their pros and cons. Observational research is a qualitative, and sometimes subjective, data collection method. As such, observations can provide data that is directional, much like focus groups, but it is not meant to be representative or quantitative. Further, observations cannot be used to make generalizations as they only reflect what is seen or heard on a specific day, at a specific time.

Even though observations do not lead to number-rich data; they can provide some unexpected, contextualized information. This method can be used to gather data anecdotally to answer questions that one might not have known to ask prior to data collection. For example, the observational findings revealed some social characteristics of rural populations in California (discussed more below). Although social characteristics were not part of the initial research objectives they provided some insight, and could prove helpful to program managers and evaluators.

The observations enabled the evaluation team to observe the implementation method and participants' reactions to the program information in real-time. Thus, observations are particularly attractive in program evaluation because this method allows researchers to answer key researchable issues while the program is underway, as opposed to pre- or post- implementation data collection. The observations also afforded viewings of participant and non-participant behavior, which was essential to understanding of the effectiveness of outreach events as an implementation tactic.

One limitation of the observational approach was that it did not and could not assess the participant's likelihood to take energy efficient actions, a key metric in determining the effectiveness of information booths run by community organizations. In light of this known short-coming of the observational approach, the team incorporated intercepts (brief surveys) into the evaluation plan.

The intercept survey approach helped to off-set, and even validate, the qualitative findings and to gather more objective information from the audience itself. As with all surveys, intercepts are only as good as the questions that are written and the people administering them. Intercepts typically gather a convenient population sample and, as such, a generalization to the greater population is cautionary. However, the intercept method applied while a program is underway is often a preferred approach to collecting market feedback because it almost eliminates the "recall" factor required in telephone and internet surveys. Furthermore, the intercept method does not require us to collect participation contact information, something that is often lacking from outreach events, and difficult (if not impossible) to accurately collect.

Outreach Events in Rural Communities

Many of the Flex Your Power booths at the rural events incorporated energy efficiency themed games and prizes to attract the attention of the events' attendees. Once at the booths, staff from community based organizations tried to engage the attendees in conversation about energy efficiency and provide them with literature to take home. The data showed that, among all of the people that passed by the booth at the rural events, there was a high level of interest in the games (trivia, prize spinning wheel, Bingo) and prizes (CFLs, FYP frisbees, FYP pens, etc.), showing that the games and prizes were an effective tactic in attracting this population. Notably the games lured many children who were often accompanied by adults. Although children were not the main target of the program, games and prizes seemed to be an effective way of getting adults to approach the booth by way of their children's interest.

The observations further uncovered that although the games and prizes were an effective method to attract people, people did not often stay to engage in a conversation with the staff about energy efficiency or take literature. Therefore, other tactics might be considered at outreach events to spark audience interest in energy efficiency education and then convince them to stay and listen, e.g., videos, informal classes, or product demonstrations. Observers documented the following behavior indicators that led to these findings:

- Attendees looked around, avoided eye contact with the booth attendants, and tried to get away from the booth once they discovered that the booth was offering information on energy efficiency.
- Attendees quickly grabbed prizes and ran away before they could engage in conversation with the booth attendants.

The observations also showed that the level of interest was enhanced if a prior relationship existed between the attendees and the staff at the booths from the community based organizations. When a staff person greeted an attendee by first name, the attendee actively engaged in a conversation and listened, with eye contact, to everything the booth attendant was communicating. This finding showed the strong likelihood that the community based organizations were in fact the right channel for accessing these tight-knit rural communities as they tend to be trusted sources of information.

The observational approach allowed measurement of how actively the booth staff engaged attendees during the events in rural areas. Specifically, questions in the observation guides helped to assess whether the level of interest in energy efficiency information was driven by the booth’s level of engagement with attendees. Based on body language and verbal reactions to the booth attendants, the observers of the events rated the booth attendants’ engagement with attendees on a scale of 1 to 3, where “1” meant “too little,” “2” meant “just right” and “3” meant “too much” engagement for that audience.³

The data show that 80% of the booth attendants engaged the attendees “just right” at the rural events. This shows that the community-based organizations adequately engaged attendees and allows speculation that levels of interest were likely driven by other factors such as demographics, attractiveness of how energy efficiency information was presented at the booth, and previous exposure and/or attitudes toward this type of information.

Table 1.2. Observation Engagement Rating of Rural Community Based Orgs

	Too Little	Just Right	Too Much
Rural Events (n=15)	20%	80%	0%

Impact on Awareness, Knowledge and Intent to Take Action

To accurately assess whether the booth-disseminated information had an impact on participants’ awareness and knowledge of energy efficiency, the team conducted in-person intercepts with people immediately after they engaged with the staff at the booths. These interviews indicated that the outreach events are having a positive impact on people’s awareness and knowledge of ways to save energy. These interviews show that three out of four people learned something new about energy efficiency from the booths.⁴ Interestingly, 60% said the booth increased their awareness of ways to save energy,⁵ perhaps indicating that some of this population was already aware of ways to save energy (at least the specific ways that the booth was disseminating).

³“Too little” meant that many people came by the booth but the attendant did not engage them or draw them in. “Too much” meant that booth attendants were too pushy with information. Observers used their best judgment, based on what they saw, when assigning these scores.

⁴ The intercept asked: “As you think about the information provided, how much of it was NEW to you?” Respondents were given a seven point scale, where one equals “none,” and seven equals “all.” Responses of 5, 6, and 7 summed to 75%.

⁵ The intercept asked: “As you think about your experience at the booth today, how much did the information increase your awareness of ways you can save energy at home?” Respondents were given a seven point scale, where one equals “not at all,” and seven equals “very much.” Responses of 5, 6, and 7 added up to 60%.

Table 1.3. Booth’s Impact on Rural Individual’s Knowledge and Awareness

	Information at the booth was new (5-7 rating on a 7 point scale)	Booth information increased my awareness of ways to save energy (5-7 rating on a 7 point scale)
Rural Event Intercepts (n=74)	75%	60%

Furthermore, the interviews with participants indicate that the outreach events can also have a positive impact on people’s likelihood to take energy saving actions at home. Interviews with the participants themselves collected valuable data in this area and showed that almost three out of four participants who visited the booths were likely to take some energy efficient action at home.⁶ Notably, there is a difference between a respondent’s intent to take action, and a respondent’s actually taking action. We know from previous studies (and personal experience) that a respondent’s intent to take action is often higher than those that actually take action and adopt these changes. Because these questions were posed in intercepts immediately following the booth, we could only ask questions that measured a respondent’s intent to take action, and we could not ask about actions taken.

Table 1.4. Booths’ Impact on Rural Individual’s Intent to Take Action

Rural Event Intercepts (n=74)	Rural % Likely to take action (6-7 rating on 7-point scale)
Install energy efficient lights	73%
Change my behavior with regard to how I use energy	69%
Install energy saving appliances	61%

Population Characteristics

Observational research has the ability to unearth some interesting market characteristics that can help guide program decision-making. Observations for this evaluation effort only noted anecdotal comments and reactions from the attendees over a two-hour time period. This data helped to illuminate some population characteristics, at least among those that attend these types of events. Some rural population characteristics discovered were:

- Much of this adult population speaks Spanish but the children often speak English. Many of the children acted as interpreters for their parents at the events.
- Some of this population has a complacent attitude towards energy efficiency and feels they have already done everything they can to save energy.

⁶ The intercept asked: “Based on the information that you received today, what is your likelihood to take the following actions at your home?” Respondents were given a seven point scale, where one equals “not at all likely,” and seven equals “very likely.” Responses of 6, and 7 added up to the percentages shown in Table 1.4.

- Much of this population was exposed to energy efficiency information for the first time, despite mass media advertising in the community, e.g., how much water dishwashers use, features of new CFL bulbs.
- Much of this population is concerned about the mercury in CFLs.

Outreach Events in Non-English Speaking Communities

Booths that were sponsored by the PACE Energy Efficiency Outreach program were similar in many respects to those that were sponsored by the FYPR campaigns; however, they did not feature games or trivia. PACE staff discussed energy efficient appliances; listed programs and seminars regarding energy use; answered questions from attendees; linked people to the available rebates; offered brochures in Chinese, Korean, Vietnamese, Spanish and English; and provided giveaways of low-flow showerheads and faucet aerators. PACE employees also delivered informal presentations and demonstrations about energy efficiency in up to five languages, depending on the predominant languages spoken at each community event.

Non-English speaking participants were drawn to the PACE booths for two main reasons: the giveaways of the faucet aerators and low-flow showerheads and because they overheard new information being provided in their native languages. Photographs taken by observers show that these tactics were effective in catching people's interest. At these events, the evaluation team recorded:

- Most people came to the booths in search of free items.
- The PACE booths were among the most popular at events designed for adults (not families).
- At Asian community events, the PACE booth was one of the most popular booths. Attendees were drawn to the booth because they heard Chinese/Vietnamese/Korean being spoken. People physically changed direction when they realized that they heard information being given in their native tongues.
- One family event in a neighborhood with a high density of Spanish-speakers indicated that participants – mostly mothers with younger children – were less interested in the PACE booth than other booths that had games that gave prizes to children. Those that stopped by the booth asked if anything was free and did not seem to be seeking any information. Some people came to the booth because they learned from others that they could receive free showerheads. Overall, people seemed distracted by free food, raffle giveaways, children's games and entertainment nearby.

As expected, the completed observation guides showed that the crowds' interest in the PACE booths varied from event to event depending on the weather, booth location relative to the main focus of the event (e.g., the stage), nearby distractions and the time of day. Generally speaking, the PACE booths seemed to generate a higher level of excitement and curiosity at the three Asian events than the event that took place in a Hispanic neighborhood.

The observation guides for the PACE events were similar to the guides for the FYPR events described earlier, and can provide descriptive data, though the results from the two programs cannot be directly compared because the populations are not large enough. Questions in the guide for the PACE events asked each observer to rate the booth attendant's level of engagement with attendees on a scale of 1 to 3, where "1" meant too little," "2" meant "just right" and "3" meant "too much" engagement.⁷ For

⁷ "Too little" meant that many people came by the booth but the attendant did not engage them or draw them in. "Too much" meant that booth attendants were too pushy with information. Observers used their best judgment, based on what they saw, when assigning these scores.

the four events observed, 100% of the observers rated the booth staff as providing a “just right” level of engagement. In addition, each of the four observers noted that the PACE booth staff seemed quite knowledgeable and were able to answer all of the questions from the crowd.

Impact on Awareness and Knowledge

Similar to the FYPR evaluation, the Opinion Dynamics team also measured whether the booth-disseminated information had an impact on participants’ awareness and knowledge of energy efficiency by conducting in-person intercepts with people immediately after they engaged with someone at the booth. For the PACE study, researchers were bi-lingual with English and at least one other language (Chinese, Vietnamese, Korean or Spanish). Researchers observed the event attendees visiting the booths from 10-20 feet away, then approached individuals in the language they spoke at the booth and asked them to complete an intercept, in return for \$5. The responses to the intercepts were translated into English and then analyzed.

The intercepts indicated that the outreach events are having a positive impact on people’s awareness and knowledge of ways to save energy. The intercepts showed that more than half of the respondents learned something new about energy efficiency from the booths.⁸ Interestingly, over 80% said the booth increased their awareness of ways to save energy.⁹

Table 1.5. Booth’s Impact on Non-English Speakers’ Knowledge and Awareness

	Information at the booth was new (5-7 rating on a 7 point scale)	Booth information increased my awareness of ways to save energy (5-7 rating on a 7 point scale)
Non-English Speakers Intercepts (n=55)	56%	86%

Lastly, the in-language intercepts indicated that the outreach events can also have a positive impact on people’s likelihood to take energy saving actions at home; almost three out of four participants who visited the booths were likely to take some energy efficient action at home.¹⁰

⁸ The intercept asked: “As you think about the information provided, how much of it was NEW to you?” Respondents were given a seven point scale, where one equals “none,” and seven equals “all.” Responses of 5, 6, and 7 summed to 56%.

⁹ The intercept asked: “As you think about your experience at the booth today, how much did the information increase your awareness of ways you can save energy at home?” Respondents were given a seven point scale, where one equals “not at all,” and seven equals “very much.” Responses of 5, 6, and 7 added up to 86%.

¹⁰ The intercept asked: “Based on the information that you received today, what is your likelihood to take the following actions at your home?” Respondents were given a seven point scale, where one equals “not at all likely,” and seven equals “very likely.” Responses of 6, and 7 added up to the percentages shown in Table 1.6.

Table 1.6. Booths’ Impact on Non-English Speakers’ Intent to Take Action

Intercepts with Non-English Speakers (n=55)	Non-English Speaking % Likely to Take Action (6-7 Rating on a 7- Point Scale)
I will install energy efficient lights	71%
I will change my behavior with regard to how I use energy	78%
I will install energy saving appliances	72%

Population Characteristics

At the community events attended by people who did not speak English, observers recorded that many participants wanted to save money and that they were generally aware of rebates, light bulbs and energy efficient appliances. Participants did not know about aerators and low-flow showerheads and how these items could reduce their hot water consumption and thus lower their utility bills.

Booth visitors seemed surprised at the information presented by the PACE staff during a demonstration. One observer wrote that people were “curious, bewildered, and showed disbelief” at the energy savings that could be experienced when showerheads and aerators were installed.

Participants said:¹¹

- “Is this true that showerheads and faucet aerators save water and gas?”
- “Will this save 10 gallons?”

Other participants asked about the giveaway items:

- Many said “This is free, right?” – or words to this effect.
- “How does this work?”
- “How do you put the showerhead on?”
- “Can you use the faucet aerators in the bathroom?”

The most common comments overheard by the observers related to the faucet aerators and low flow showerheads that were given away.

Implications for Program Implementers

Other than demographics, there are four key differences between the participants’ experiences at the rural booths and the foreign language booths: the prizes, information content, booth staff, and the booth’s atmosphere. The rural booths provided prizes like frisbees, pens, and CFLs; discussed energy efficient lights, appliances, fans and rebates; featured staff from 15 community based organizations; and had a game-like atmosphere. On the other hand, the foreign language booths featured low-flow showerheads and faucet aerators; discussed the giveaways, appliances, seminars, and rebates; had a common core of PACE staff at each event; and had a professional appearance that featured informal presentations on energy efficiency with practical tips.

¹¹ These quotes are translated into English by the bi-lingual observers.

The results from the all of the observations and intercepts lead to some hypotheses about what can make booths at outreach events more effective. Specifically, when designing booth-centered outreach activities, program managers should consider three things: 1) the tactic that lures people to the booths, 2), the organization and language chosen to staff the booth, and 3) the freshness and interest-holding ability of the information that will be provided.

Organizers can influence a booth's crowd appeal and ability to influence attendees' behaviors by carefully considering giveaways and activities. Our research confirmed what common sense suggests: the types of prizes can affect the number of people attracted to booths. However, our research seems to indicate that prizes do not provide a guarantee that people will tolerate long exposure. For example, it appeared that the fun prizes offered by the FYPR booths drew crowds but did not convince them to stay long enough to receive the campaign's messages. On the other hand, the showerheads and faucet aerators offered by PACE could be viewed as luring people to the booths, capturing their attention to the point that they stay to hear more tips and information, and serving as a "takeaway" message that inspires immediate energy savings if participants installed them.

Outreach events also seem to possess greater value when they are run by organizations or people to which the target audience can relate on some level. At many of the rural events, booth organizations that were well known in their communities attracted more interest from people who passed by. Similarly, at the events that informed Chinese, Vietnamese, Korean, and Spanish-speaking populations, simply having booth staff who communicated in the targeted communities' languages proved to be a method for crowd attraction amidst other booths that featured staff who only spoke English.

With regard to booth messaging, booths that featured information on ways to save energy that could be described as new, inspiring, surprising, easily done, and cost-cutting held people's attention. The observations indicated that CFL-heavy message did not seem to hold many people's attention. It can therefore be surmised that this is because the participants have heard these messages before – the information and approach is no longer "fresh," whereas the booths that emphasized showerheads and aerators seemed to draw bigger crowds. With observation data, it is difficult to make this assertion with certainty. So, for now, this is a hypothesis worthy of future research.

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