



Institute for **Community** Engaged **Scholarship** (ICES)

The **Research** Shop



**Report to Transition Guelph: Feedback on the Resilience 2011
Awareness and Engagement Campaign**

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1. Introduction

In late 2010 and early 2011, three graduate student interns from the Research Shop at the University of Guelph developed and carried out an outreach campaign designed to help achieve a successful launch of Transition Guelph in the local community. This report outlines considerations underlying the campaign strategy, the campaign strategy itself, reflections on lessons learned, and recommendations for similar undertakings. This document can be used to inform additional awareness and engagement building for Transition Guelph and similar grassroots organizations.

The Research Shop supports community engagement, or the “collaboration between institutions of higher education and their larger communities (local, regional, national, global) for the mutually beneficial exchange of knowledge and resources in a context of partnership and reciprocity”¹. As student interns, we gained the opportunity to think about how our academic work and knowledge can be applied in real-world circumstances. As graduate students in psychology, we report here on psychological considerations underlying our outreach and engagements efforts. We report also on how this knowledge was translated and adapted through collaboration with Transition Guelph members for use in the final outreach strategy.

Transition Guelph (www.transitionguelph.org) consists of members of the Guelph community who have come together with the shared vision of creating a resilient and sustainable community in response to the challenges of climate change, peak oil, and global economic instability. Part of a global network of Transition Initiatives (www.transitionnetwork.org), Transition Guelph was formed with a first public meeting December 1, 2008 and was declared an official Transition Initiative in May, 2009².

As an official public launch, and to celebrate Guelph’s progress towards the goal of a more sustainable and resilient society, Transition Guelph held *Resilience 2011: A Community Festival*, on Friday, March 25 and Saturday, March 26, 2011³. The *Resilience 2011* festival was made possible through collaboration between community members and local organizations. The goal



of Transition Guelph's public launch was to inform, build momentum, and inspire people to take action to help build resilience and sustainability, both personally and in the community at large.

2. Background Work

Although many forces (e.g., economic, political) can contribute to creating a successful grassroots movement, as students being trained in social and industrial/organizational psychology, we focused our attention on relevant psychological factors in creating our outreach and engagement strategy for the *Resilience 2011* festival.

We began by considering the potential strengths and weaknesses of Transition Guelph as an organization and as a group of people motivated by a common purpose. Furthermore, we considered potential psychological barriers to outreach and engagement efforts, in particular the psychology of environmental initiatives. These considerations served as sensitizing factors when creating the outreach campaign.

Potential Strengths and Opportunities

- *People.* Individuals working with Transition Guelph are passionate about building stronger, more resilient communities, are willing to volunteer their time, and have connections with many potential partners in the community.
- *Partners.* Transition Guelph has a number of existing community partners and many potential partners with similar interests (e.g., organic farms, alternative energy providers, etc...). Many local businesses and organizations already have highly positive attitudes towards their own and other environmental initiatives in Guelph.
- *Traditional and Social Media.* Transition Guelph has an established web presence and a mailing list of community members. Leveraging these contacts by targeting both traditional and social media may help to further enhance awareness of Transition

Potential Weaknesses and Challenges

- *Time.* The outreach and engagement campaign leading up to the *Resilience 2011* festival took place from December 2010 until March 2011. Given the festival deadlines, there was limited time to do research for outreach, identify targets for the campaign, and create a targeted outreach plan.
- *Funding.* The outreach campaign began without dedicated funding.
- *Planning.* At the beginning of the outreach campaign, there was as yet little consensus on details of the event, which made it difficult to begin outreach.
- *Target groups.* Selection of multiple and diverse target groups presented a challenge in tailoring the *Resilience 2011* event to each group and having a cohesive outreach campaign.



The Psychology of Outreach and Engagement: Understanding Barriers to Participation

The success of any community or grassroots movement rests on their ability to engage the larger community in shared concerns and shared action. One way of predicting engagement in grassroots initiatives like Transition Guelph is to consider psychological barriers to participation and potential solutions. Through understanding the barriers to taking action, we sought to facilitate their navigation, thereby encouraging community activism and engagement.

A summary from the [American Psychological Association \(APA\) task force on climate change](#) points to the following as psychological barriers to community engagement in environmental initiatives⁴:

- **Understanding of Issues.** Climate change and resource sustainability are complex processes that can be difficult for people to understand. Conflicting reports in the media can pose a barrier to people accessing, understanding, and trusting scientific consensus on these issues.
 - Focusing on engaging people and organizations who are already knowledgeable about issues related to climate change and resource sustainability can support peer-to-peer learning about complex issues.
- **Lack of Concern About the Future.** The worst effects of climate change and resource depletion lie in the future, so many people do not yet have a strong emotional reaction to these events.
 - Highlighting the current and local, regional or national impacts of climate change may be effective because they hit close to home.
- **Lack of Immediate Results.** As climate change is a global process, it can be difficult to see positive environmental results from individual or even community action. When people cannot see a direct result of their actions, it is more difficult for them to change their behaviour.
 - Some potential ways to provide positive feedback about sustainable behaviour include information about the potential for monetary savings, about the value of



learning new skills, and about the value of connections with other community members.

- **Negative Emotions.** When people are afraid or angry, they become much more resistant to changing their attitudes and behaviour. The concepts of scarcity and change are central tenets of Transition Guelph, and may cause fear, anger, or uncertainty in some people.
 - Framing messages and event descriptions to avoid ideas of loss and focusing on positive outcomes of sustainable behaviour can help reduce negative emotional responses.
- **Social Norms.** In general, people’s behaviour is guided by social norms, or societal rules and customs. Although unsustainable, carbon-heavy behaviours are currently normal in North America, the volunteers of Transition Guelph are trying to create a model of new “normal” behaviour. Research shows that framing messages in terms of what other people are *already doing* instead of what people *should not be doing* is more effective at changing behaviour.
 - By including “success stories” about sustainability efforts of from people and organizations in the *Resilience 2011* festival website and booklet, these actions become more normative to the Guelph community, and people are more likely to act in similar ways.

Key Recommendations on Addressing Psychological Barriers to Participation

- Support peer-to-peer learning about sustainability issues.
- Highlight the current and local, regional or national impacts of climate change.
- Use emotional appeals along with scientific information to encourage action.
- Provide people with positive feedback about their pro-environmental behaviour.
- Frame Transition Guelph messages and goals for the future in a positive way, to emphasize gains rather than losses associated with action.
- Rely on modelling of sustainable behaviour (e.g., success stories) to create new social norms and encourage participation in Transition Guelph events.



2. Creating the Outreach and Engagement Strategy

As part of the *Resilience 2011* planning committee, we were able to share our recommendations from the psychological literature with the group and incorporate our shared understanding of those recommendations into the outreach campaign.

Of the challenges facing the planning committee, time was non-negotiable. The festival was planned for the end of March, and we had to build all our timelines around that fact.

Planning and communication was facilitated by posting all outreach tasks and materials on the Transition Guelph Google site. This allowed all planning committee members easy access to all material, provided information on progress made by the outreach campaign, and prevented people from engaging in redundant outreach efforts (e.g., contacting people who had already been contacted).

In order to assist awareness and fundraising efforts, rebranding of Transition Guelph was undertaken to give the organization a distinctive image that could be proliferated throughout the community. The Transition Guelph planning group and Research Shop interns collaboratively designed a logo to represent the city of Guelph and Transition Guelph's global concerns that could be seen at all Transition Guelph activities and could be used to distinguish Transition Guelph ads and documents. The logo can be found on Page 2 of this report.

As planning and fundraising efforts were ongoing, the initial challenge facing outreach and engagement efforts was identification of our target audiences. We report here on the three main audiences we identified, and how these target groups shaped the outreach campaign.

Outreach and Engagement Target Audiences

Pro-environmentally minded community members. People who already have a pro-environmental and/or activist mindset are the most likely to respond positively to Transition Guelph and are the easiest audience for Transition Guelph to reach. This audience was a primary target of the outreach campaign. Mainly through word of mouth and social media, enough volunteers were recruited to successfully plan the Resilience 2011 festival and staff the festival events. Furthermore, a larger group of these community members was interested in



regular updates and contact with Transition Guelph, and can be encouraged to bring their family and friends to community events.

Influential parties from partner organizations. The particular people who are interested in Transition Guelph and other environmental initiatives in the community are often positive and passionate about their beliefs, and tend to be community-oriented people; therefore, they are likely to spread the word in the community. In addition, community organizations and businesses already engaged in environmental issues (e.g., organic food) are a natural outreach target. This audience was targeted during outreach by generating a list of potential partner and sponsor organizations and contacting them by email and by phone. In addition, Transition Guelph members were able to directly and personally target those organizations where they had contacts or were members. This kind of personal connection yielded the major funding for the *Resilience 2011* event. In addition, even where monetary contributions were not possible, donations of products and services from local organizations, as well as hosting workshops and events, led to engagement with a broad swath of the Guelph community⁵.

General community. Because less environmentally-engaged community members may not keep events like *Resilience 2011* in mind for long, we targeted them using both traditional and social media in the weeks just prior to the festival.

General Outreach Strategy and Lessons Learned

The general outreach strategy of our festival planning group consisted of two overlapping phases. The strategy is outlined below, along with reflections on lessons learned. As shown in Table 1, during the first phase of outreach (Mid-January to Late March 2011), we focused on targeting partner organizations, potential sponsors, and community members already interested and involved in pro-environmental community initiatives. These outreach activities served the dual purposes of fundraising (both money and in-kind donations) and awareness raising, with the goal of creating a dedicated core of support for the *Resilience 2011* festival. The second phase of the outreach strategy (February – March 2011) was designed to target the



general community by using physical advertising strategies (i.e., newspaper ads, posters and festival booklets) and enhancing Transition Guelph’s web presence.

Table 1. Overview of Outreach Strategy

Timing	Phase One Activities	Lessons Learned
January 18-25	<p>Part 1: Letters to Associated Partners, Sponsors, and People.</p> <p>Design of Transition Guelph logo</p> <p>Development of a list of organizations to target as partners and sponsors</p> <p>Preliminary email to Transition Guelph mailing list</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Announcement of <i>Resilience 2011</i>, request for submission of success stories, photos and artwork about how individuals are working towards a more resilient Guelph. <p>Drafting and distribution of letters to sponsors and partners seeking funding and success stories</p>	<p>If possible, outreach planning should be started further in advance of the event. This could allow for a greater chance of getting the word out about event details, fundraising, and piquing community interest.</p>
January 25 - February 13	<p>Part 2: Mass Media Outreach</p> <p>Draft of media release</p> <p>Development of a list of key media outlets</p> <p>Distribution of media release to media outlets</p>	<p>We recommend that personalized letters be sent to each media outlet in order to enhance interest in publishing about the event.</p>
<p>March 12</p> <p>March 19</p> <p>March 19</p> <p>March 19-26</p>	<p>Part 3: Examples of Strategic Lead-up Events</p> <p>Seedy Saturday: seed exchange, exhibits, speakers, vendors and demos related to seeds and gardening.</p> <p>Maple Syrup Workshop: workshop teaching community members the traditional skills for turning maple sap into maple syrup.</p> <p>Bread-Making Workshop: workshop demonstrating how to make sourdough bread.</p> <p>Sustainability Week at the University of Guelph: a week of events focusing on empowering the community, inspiring individuals, and organizing collective capacity for positive change.</p>	<p>If lead-up event planning is done further in advance of the event, the events can be advertised more broadly in the community.</p>



Timing	Phase Two Activities	Lessons Learned
February 1 - March 25	<p>Part 1: Online Presence</p> <p>Frequent updates to Transition Guelph Facebook group</p> <p>Creation of the Resilience 2011 Facebook event page</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Social networking between friends on Facebook connected hundreds of people to the event page <p>Frequent updates about Resilience 2011 and lead-up events using Transition Guelph’s Twitter account</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Twitter posts also contained links to TG website and Facebook <p>Online advertising on Craigslist and Facebook</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Facebook advertisement was shown 278,014 times to people who have Facebook in the Guelph region 	<p>The Facebook group and event page were particularly strong outreach strategies, as people were able to engage with others who were interested in the festival</p>
March 7 - 25	<p>Part 2: Physical Advertising and Festival Booklet</p> <p>Posters advertising the event were created and distributed on bulletin boards around the downtown core, University area and other popular locations</p> <p>500 Festival booklets were created and distributed by placement in local organizations</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Booklet included a schedule of events and success stories <p>Small invitations to the event were handed out at the Guelph Farmer’s Market</p>	<p>The festival guide helped to facilitate the structure of the festival itself because it had to be finished early in the winter months so that it could be sent out for printing, which imposed a firm timeline for structuring the festival.</p>

4. Reflection and Recommendations

Although we did not have the capacity to conduct a formal evaluation of our outreach and engagement campaign, we reflect here on the outcomes of the campaign and provide recommendations for future community outreach endeavours.

Evidence for the success of the *Resilience 2011* outreach and engagement campaign comes from the number of successful events, including:



- 12 lead up events for the festival were held throughout March, hosted by both Transition Guelph and by partner groups and organizations;
- 250 people attended Friday's keynote addresses, with greetings from Mayor Karen Farbridge and MP Frank Valeriote;
- 40 local business exhibitors at the Ecomarket, which was attended by up to 500 people
- 150 people attended the keynote on Saturday afternoon;
- 250 people attended the Earth Hour candlelight dinner and concert Saturday night, filling the space available to capacity.

A key success commented on regularly was the social networking strategy. It was clear that our various forms of internet presence, and the links set up between them, led to a quickly growing number of people interested in Transition Guelph during the three months leading up to the festival. This was apparent from the growing number of people joining the Transition Guelph Facebook group, the number of people indicating that they would attend the festival on the Facebook event page, and the number of followers on Twitter.

According to positive feedback from participants at *Resilience 2011*, our outreach campaign was a success. It should be noted that it is difficult to pin down which aspects of the campaign were successful in attracting people to the events. However, we believe that the outreach campaign enhanced the presence of Transition Guelph in the local community and facilitated their future endeavours for community action.

In reflecting on the outreach campaign, the benefit of hindsight helped us identify limitations of our outreach strategy. We suggest that future Transition initiatives and other similar community outreach endeavours:

1. *Have an Outreach Committee.* We recommend that future Transition initiatives have a well-defined subgroup of the planning committee that focuses solely on building awareness and engagement in the community during the lead-up to launch events or community festivals. This can allow the rest of the committee members to focus solely on designing the festival, which is an enormous task in itself.



2. *Tailor Outreach to Local Media.* In the case of the *Resilience 2011* festival, we may have made a mistake in sending off a general media release to all media outlets. Greater tailoring of the letter to specific outlets and sending personalized emails would likely have led to better media coverage.

3. *Focus on Relationships: Emphasize Social Networking.* Social networking and social media were key to the success of the *Resilience 2011* outreach campaign and festival. Transition Guelph had a strong web presence before festival planning began. However, frequent creation of new content about festival events, distributed through Facebook and Twitter, drew in hundreds of supporters. Although not all social media supporters attended the festival, the outreach campaign connected people and raised awareness of Transition Guelph's message.

Transition Guelph has the goal of creating a resilient and sustainable local community; communities are built by creating and supporting relationships. Grassroots mobilization has traditionally been built by word-of-mouth contact. In contrast to the limitations of in-person communication, social networking (e.g., Facebook, Twitter) allows word-of-mouth contact across a much broader sphere of influence. The benefits of a social media outreach campaign are twofold: creating awareness of a specific community initiative (like Transition Guelph), and connecting people with similar values and concerns as a catalyst for community action. Social networking allows people to share their values and beliefs with others in a way that does not typically occur in face-to-face contact, thereby creating new social norms and models for behaviour⁶.

Social networking also creates an opportunity for peer-to-peer learning. Regular outreach efforts through diverse social networking channels will help keep Transition Guelph's message at the forefront of people's attention. Ideally, social networking outreach begins to create itself, as community members post their own updates about Transition Guelph initiatives.



5. References

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(4) Swim, J.K., Clayton, S., Doherty, T., Gifford, R., Howard, G., Reser, J., Stern, P., & Weber, E. (2009). Psychology and Global Climate Change: Addressing a multi-faceted Phenomenon and Set of Challenges. A Report by the American Psychological Association's Task Force on the Interface between Psychology and Global Climate Change. Retrieved February 28, 2011, from

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(6) Kotler, P. & Lee N. R. (2008). *Social marketing: Influencing behaviors for good (3rd ed.)*. Los Angeles, CA: Sage Publications.