

Stop Awareness Raising and Start Behavior Changing!

Stephanie Foerster, Ensemble Media



Metropolitan Mayor's Caucus Environment Committee, March 2026

stephanie@ensemble-media.com



We are a team of **strategists**,
creatives, and **researchers** driven to
do good.

ensemble
M E D I A

stephanie@ensemble-media.com



Our clients are **bold,**
big picture thinkers
working towards
climate-resilient solutions.



ensemble
M E D I A



My A-ha Moment



Information for Change?

Awareness ≠ Action

- 95% said native plants are important to biodiversity conservation



Awareness ≠ Action

- 95% said native plants are important to biodiversity conservation
- 36% had native plants in their yard



Knowledge

If people know what to do, they will do it.

Knowledge ≠ Behavior Change

Awareness

If people know the severity of it, they will change.

Attitude ≠ Behavior Change

Economic

If it is in their financial best interest, they will do it

Self-Interest ≠ Behavior Change

Copyright 2024 J. Tabanico

People aren't always rational.

HUMANS ARE TRICKY

We're easily influenced.

We're subject to bias.

People don't necessarily relate to the natural world.

So, how do we move the needle?



INFORMED

Dog owners know pet waste can harm land and waterways

City residents know composting is a free option

Employees realize the cafeteria generates a lot of food waste

VS.

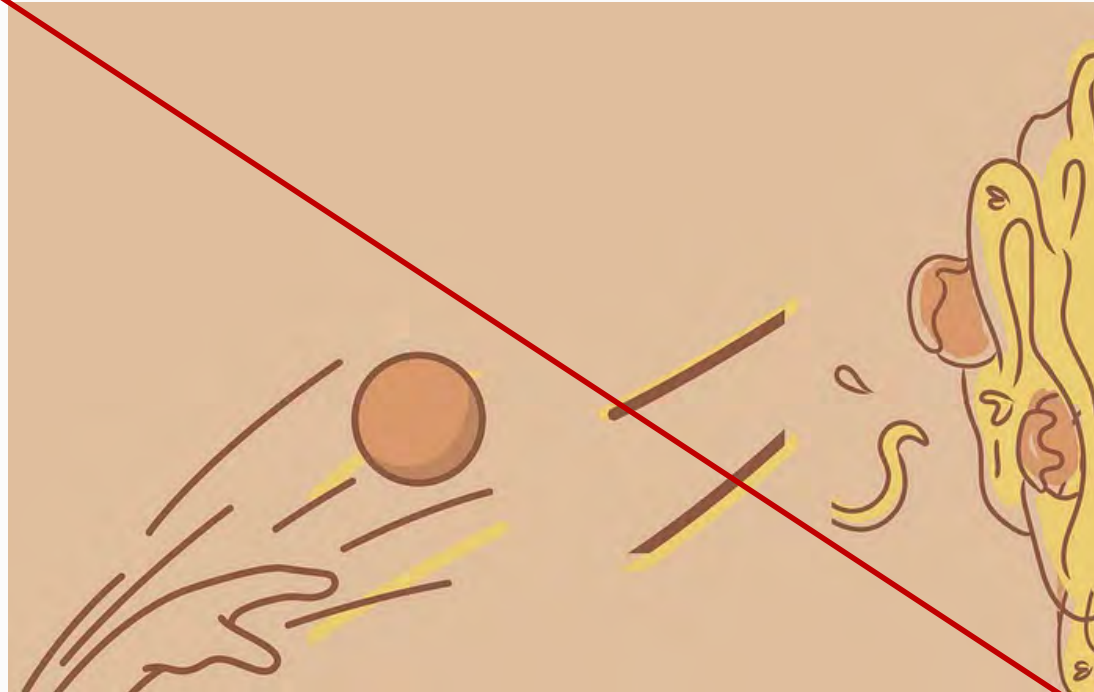
BEHAVIOR CHANGED

Dog owners bring and use poop bags on every dog walk

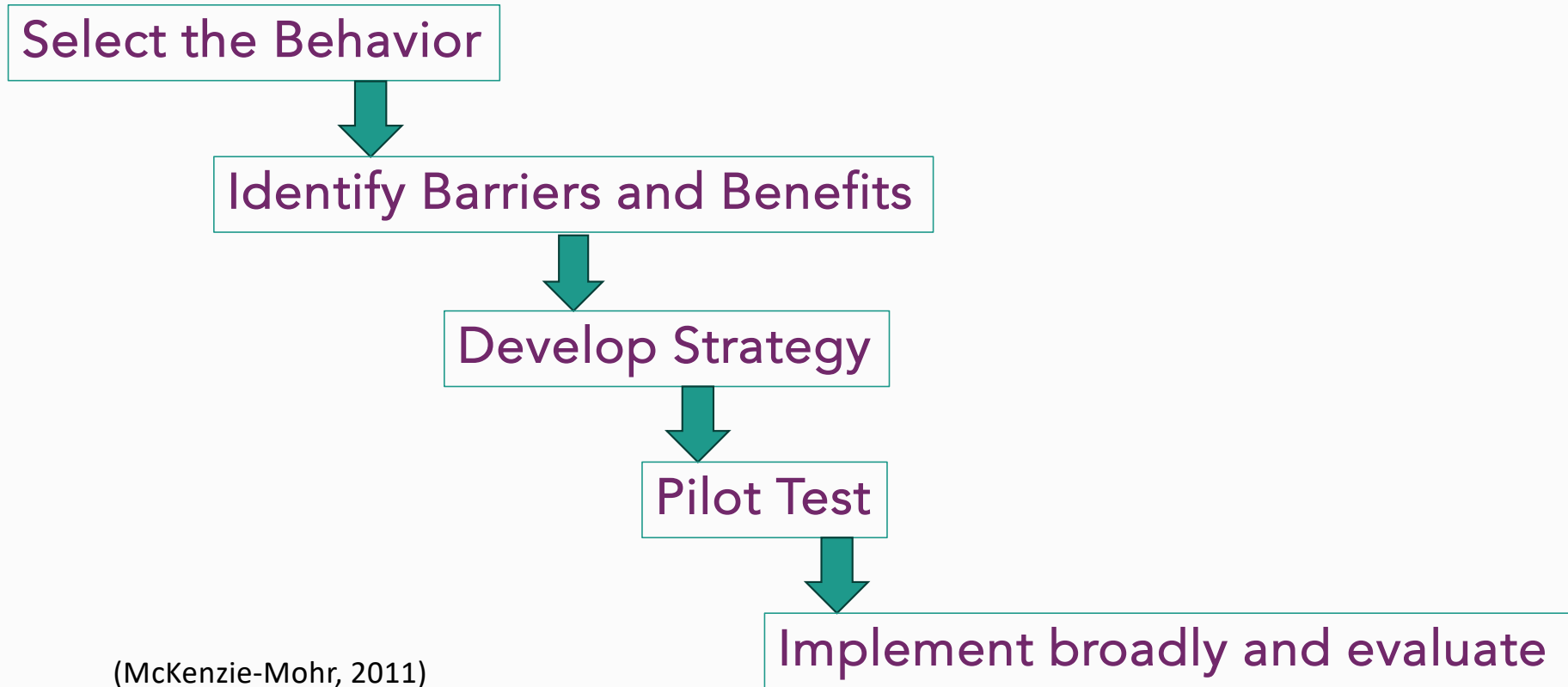
Residents compost weekly

Employees waste less food

No more guesswork!



Community-based social marketing approach



Community-based social marketing approach

Select the Behavior



Community-based social marketing approach

Select the Behavior



Identify Barriers and Benefits

Community-based social marketing approach

Select the Behavior



Identify Barriers and Benefits



Develop Strategy

Commitment

Prompts

Norms

Social Diffusion

Services/Products

Communication

Incentives/Disincentives

Convenience

Select the Behavior



Identify Barriers and Benefits



Develop Strategy

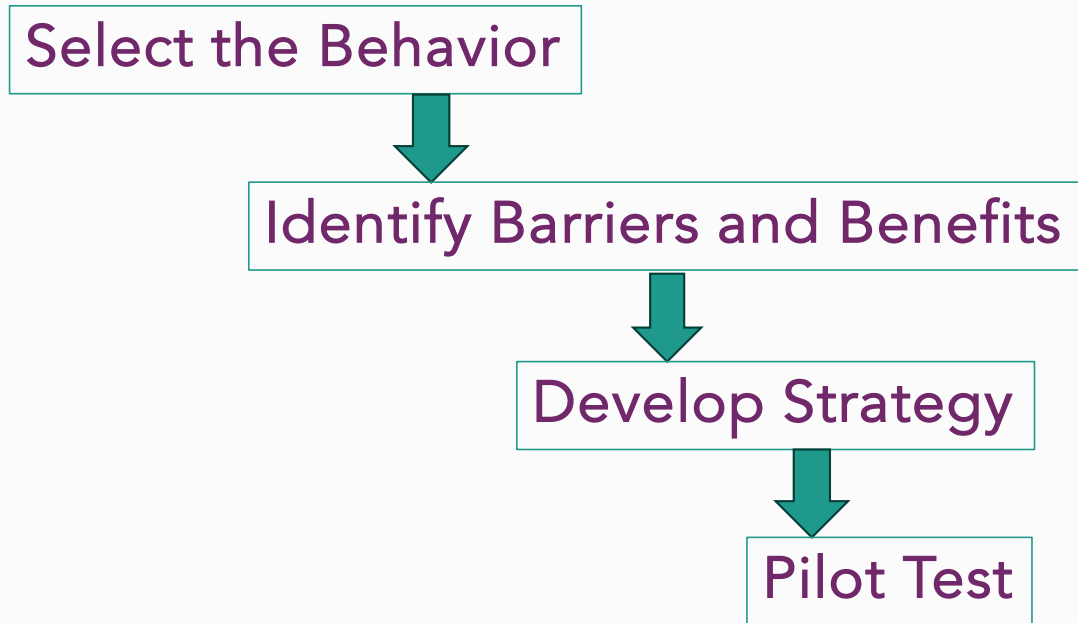
Commitment
Prompts
Norms
Social Diffusion

Services/Products
Communication
Incentives/Disincentives
Convenience

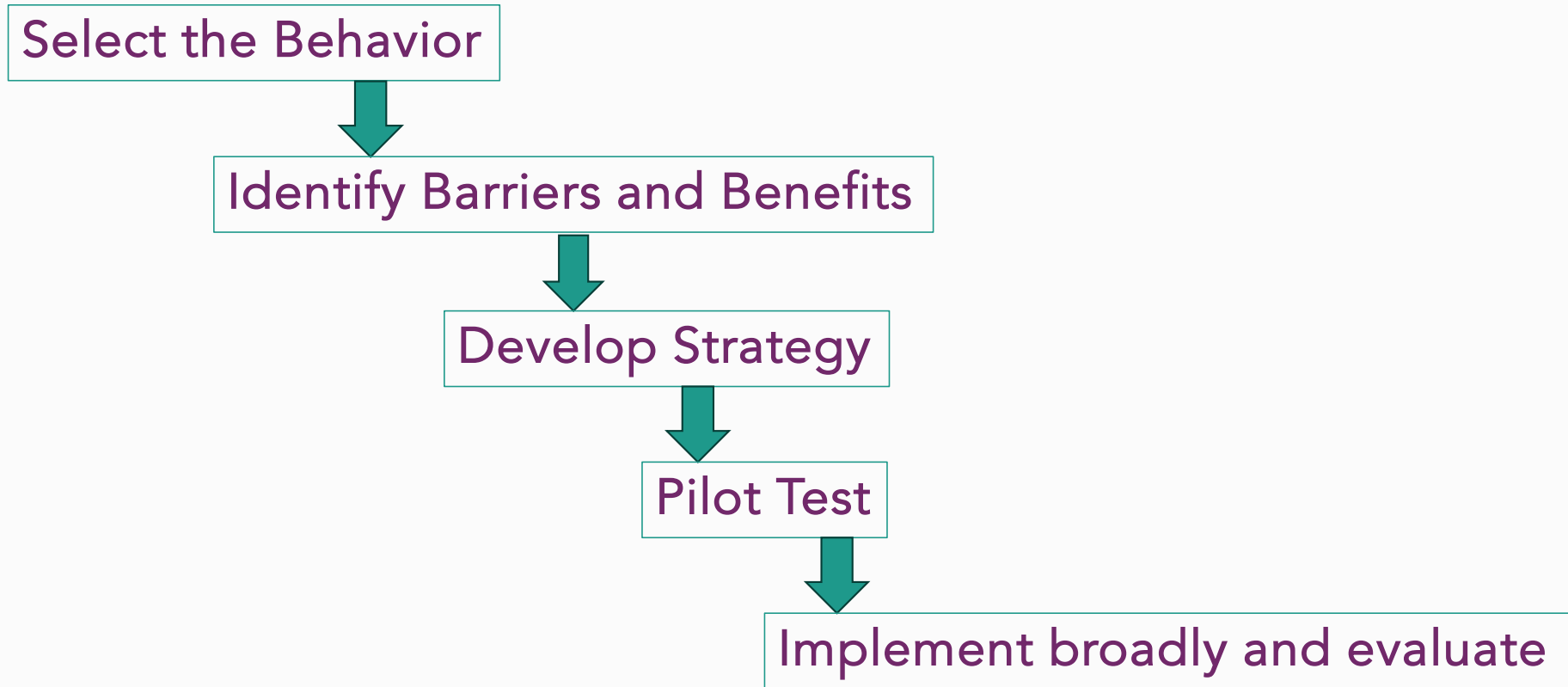


www.nrcan.gc.ca

Community-based social marketing approach



Community-based social marketing approach



Behavior Selection Exercise

How do we select a behavior?

- Indivisible

~~Remove invasive species~~

Remove buckthorn

- End-state

Use organic fertilizer on lawn

Turn off computer monitor when not in use

Wash clothes in cold water

How do we select a behavior?

- How impactful is the behavior?
- What level of penetration has it already achieved?
- How **probable** it is that more people will adopt it?

Where and who is your audience?

- Geographic (e.g. within what boundaries)
- Demographic, economic
- By activity (e.g. people who go fishing, dog walkers, etc.)

Behavior Selection Exercise

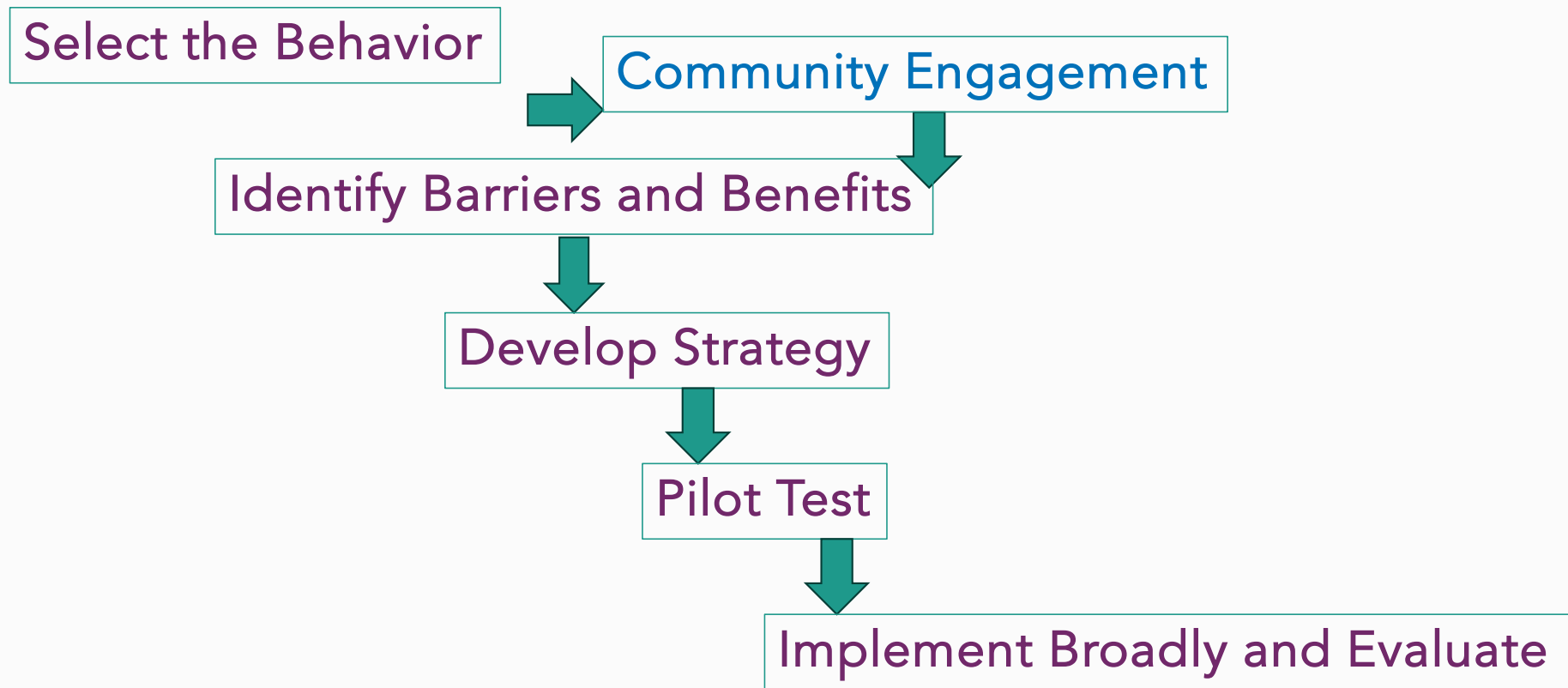
In the chat, write:

1. The issue you will address
2. The target audience
3. The behavior

Characteristics

- Indivisible
- End-state
- Consider impact, penetration, probability
- Define the audience

Community-based social marketing approach



The Secret Sauce: Community Engagement

Why it doesn't always happen:

- "We already have our strategy"
- "Seems too difficult"
- "We already know our audience"
- "We don't have the time or money"

The Secret Sauce: **Community Engagement**

Why it's worthwhile:

- Deepens understanding of your audience: collect demographic data, identify groups, networks, information about their availability and preferences
- Builds relationships and trust with your audience
- Focuses your subsequent research and behavior change strategies
- **Increases your chances of success!**

The Secret Sauce: Community Engagement

What does it look like?

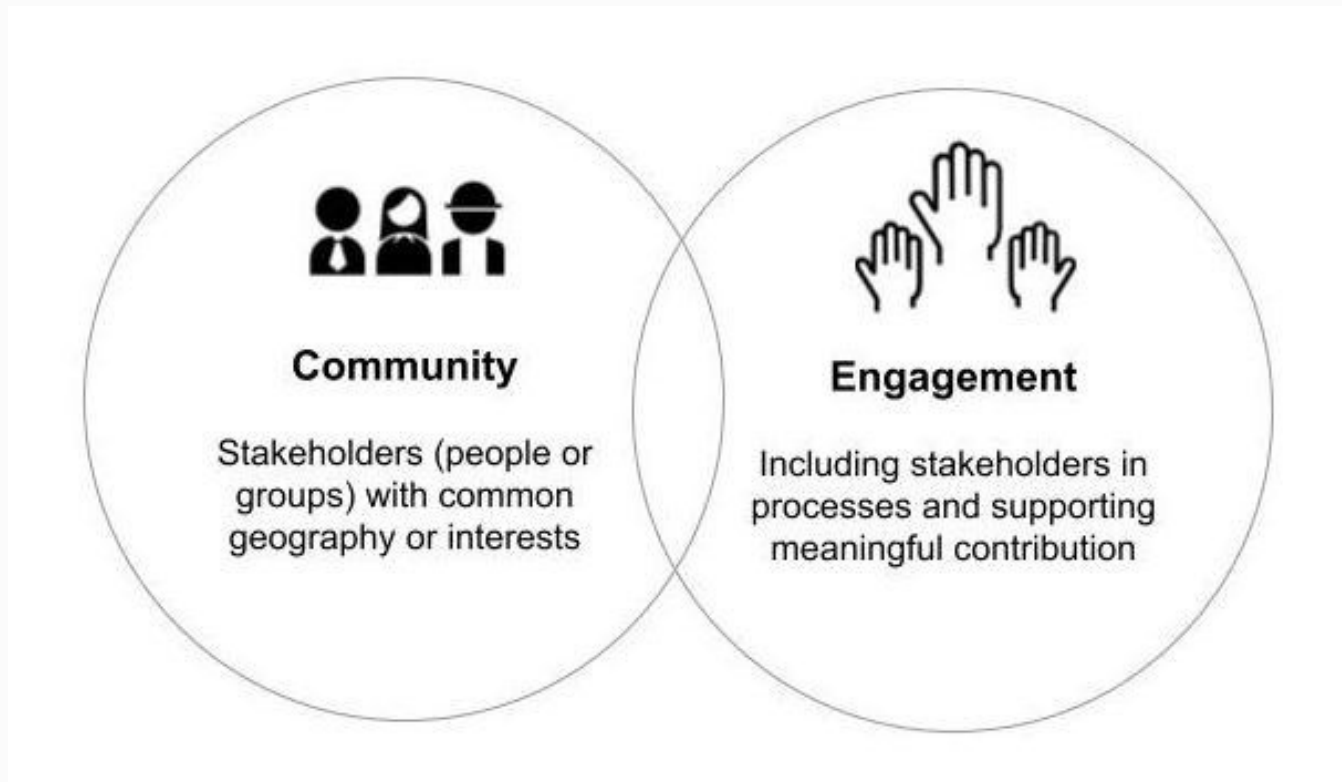
- Outreach materials that reflect the diversity of your audience
- Listening sessions BEFORE project design that are easily accessible, where everyone can weigh in on the topic

The Secret Sauce: **Community Engagement**

What does it look like?

- Open dialogue, transparency about your objectives, two-way communication
- Post-session survey to measure participant engagement (Did you feel heard during the session? Were your questions answered? Etc.)

The Secret Sauce: **Community Engagement**



Identifying Barriers and Benefits

Types of Barriers

- Internal: Motivation, knowledge, convenience, attitudes, time
- Structural/External: Program changes, convenience, difficulty, access

NOTE:

Multiple barriers can exist simultaneously

Barriers can be seasonal

Identifying Barriers and Benefits

Types of Benefits

(needs the behavior can meet)

Economic, social, personal

NOTE:

Multiple benefits can exist simultaneously, so prioritize them

Motivation is the most important consideration when prioritizing benefits.

Identifying Barriers and Benefits

Research Tools

- Literature review (has anyone else done something similar? What does existing research show? What questions were asked?)
- Observation & mapping
- Focus groups
- Individual interviews
- In-person intercept surveys, online/telephone polls, print postcards

Considerations

- Cost of different methods
- Time to carry out different methods
- Location and availability of your target audience
- Rigor and validation: make sure your sample size is adequate and representative, and use multiple methods

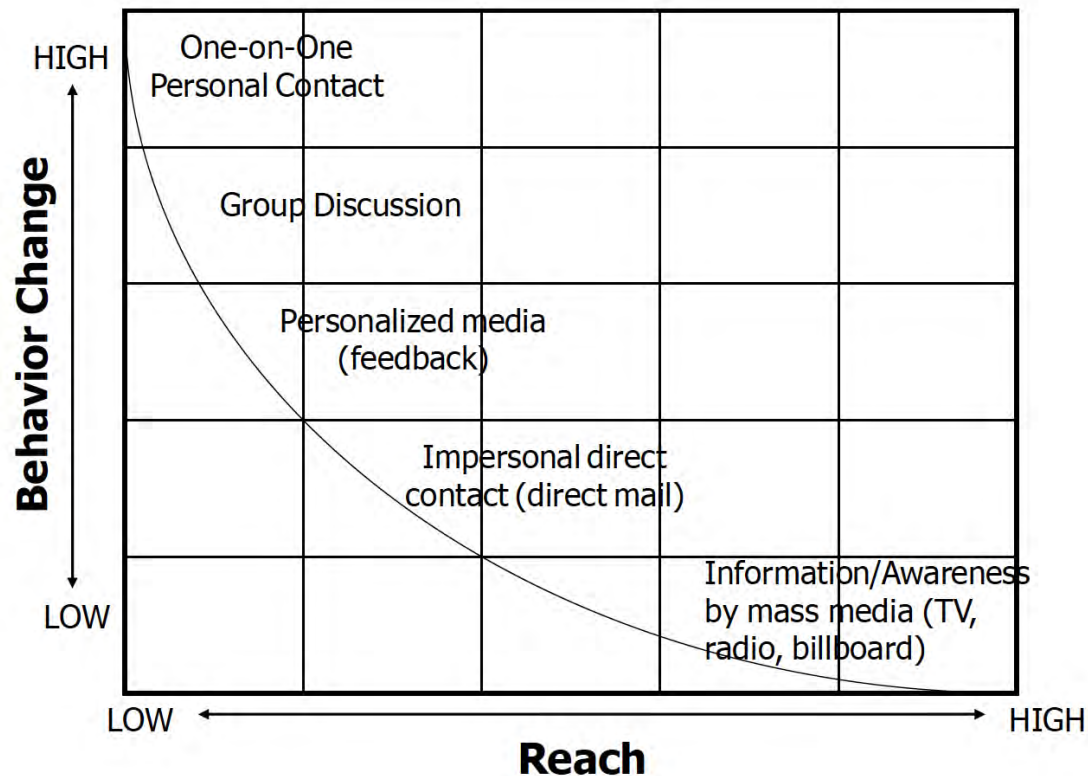
Understanding Perceptions

- Use quantifiable questions, e.g. *on a scale from 1 to 5, how likely are you to establish a native garden in your yard?*
- Dig deeper into perceptions by asking probing follow-up questions: *why are you likely to establish a native garden in your yard?* OR
why wouldn't you establish a native garden in your yard?
- Ask respondents to rank their reasons in terms of importance and explain why.

From Research to Action

- Get crystal clear on the most prevalent barriers and benefits
- The strategies you undertake should **reduce those barriers** and **enhance benefits**
- Evaluate strategies for their impact, reach, and feasibility

From Research to Action



Graphic from: Schultz, P.W., & Tabanico, J. (2007).
Community-based social marketing and behavior change. In
A. Cabaniss(Ed.), *Handbook on Household Hazardous Waste*.
Lanham, MD: Rowan and Littlefield. stephen@ensemble-media.com

Behavior Change Strategies

From Research to Action

Research Finding		Strategy
<i>Barrier: Lack of knowledge about low-flow shower heads</i>	>	Provide information, including how to install them
<i>Benefit: Saving water and money is a priority</i>	>	Highlight benefits; offer shower head coupon
<i>Barrier: Inconvenient to find and replace shower head</i>	>	Provide one free shower head per home

Behavior change approaches bridge the gap between good communication and an effective, sustainable outcome.

The goal isn't to convince or coerce people to do something; it's to understand the barriers and benefits people associate with a change in behavior, and to address those with research-driven strategies that lead to concrete, positive action.

Have questions? Want to collaborate? Get in touch!

Stephanie Foerster

Founder and Director, Ensemble Media

[Email: stephanie@ensemble-media.com](mailto:stephanie@ensemble-media.com)

Direct: 202.491.3210

<https://ensemble-media.com>

ensemble
M E D I A

stephanie@ensemble-media.com