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## **Understanding the Audience: The Neighbours of Crowsnest Pass— A Case Study**

**By Shelli Bischoff<sup>1</sup>**

### **Introduction**

Regional conservation plans and organizational strategic plans typically include a marketing component. The purpose of the marketing component is to increase awareness of an issue or expand outreach efforts to a broader audience. Good marketing also ensures that these efforts will result in some specific action—whether it be to vote a certain way, to participate in a public hearing, or to donate money to a cause.

Marketing efforts typically focus on strategies—all the things an organization can do to reach and engage an audience. Less frequently are those strategies based on 1) a real understanding of the audience and 2) what is necessary to get the audience to act on a long-term sustained basis. Marketing teaches us that it is necessary to remove obstacles to action or to create benefits for taking that action. It is not just building awareness or providing information or creating the right messages.

A recent marketing project initiated by the Yellowstone to Yukon Conservation Initiative provides an excellent case study of the value of a solid marketing approach. Their work to understand the audience and to define strategies based on that understanding, demonstrates what good marketing is, and how it can make the difference between conservation failure or success.

### **Situation**

Lying just north of the U.S./Canadian border, the Northern Crown of the Continent ecosystem (NCC) straddles the

<sup>1</sup> With appreciation to Bart Robinson, Yellowstone to Yukon Conservation Initiative for his leadership on this project and for his assistance in writing this case study.

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continental divide between British Columbia and Alberta. Rich in both natural and human history, the NCC is significant for its core wildlife habitat, and it acts as a critical ecological corridor for animals moving both north to south, and east to west through the Rocky Mountains. The Yellowstone to Yukon Conservation Initiative, the World Wildlife Fund, and The Nature Conservancy have all identified the ecological health of the region as essential to maintaining viable populations of wide-ranging mammals in U.S. Northern Rockies. Threats to the landscape and its wildlife include transportation, resort development, motorized recreation, and resource extraction.

Crowsnest Pass, one of the lowest routes through the Rockies, crosses through the heart of the Northern Continental Divide. The Pass is a primary Canadian transportation corridor with both a railway and a highway. Five small communities lie scattered along its length on the Alberta side. The communities, which amalgamated 25 years ago to form the Municipality of Crowsnest Pass, are today home to approximately 6,000 residents. The municipality has been the site of numerous studies,<sup>2</sup> many of which detail the social, political, and economic challenges it faces. Since the first European settlement in late 1800s, the Pass has been through multiple boom and bust cycles associated with the ebb and flow of the mining and timber industries. More recently, it finds itself in transition from a resource-extraction economy to one fueled by tourism and recreation. The Municipality has seen a steady decrease in population over the last 15 years, with an increasingly aging population. The population is less well educated, with a lower income than other populations in the area, and the social indicators suggest, as one report concluded, “a sick community” in need of healing.

<sup>2</sup> Recent examples include *Pass to the Future*, the results of a 1999 public consultation regarding the development of a Municipal Development Plan, and a community profile compiled for *Measuring Change in Rural Communities: An Economic Workbook for Western Canada*, a 2002 and Sonoran Institute publication. The author of *Pass to the Future* suggests Crowsnest Pass has been one of the most heavily studied communities in Alberta.

## Lesson One

### *Think differently about the audience*

Segmenting the market within the context of a given issue, as opposed to segmenting it on the basis of straight demographic data, shifts thinking away from stereotypes and an “us vs. them” mindset.

## The Project

In June 2003, The Yellowstone to Yukon Conservation Initiative (Y2Y) sponsored a workshop for NCC conservation stakeholders in which the participants sketched out a conservation strategy. Among other desired outcomes, the strategy identifies managing critical public and private lands for conservation, mitigating transportation threats through good planning and the use of wildlife crossings, regulating motorized recreation in such fashion as to be compatible with wildlife and non-motorized recreational values, and changing the Crowsnest political climate to be more receptive to conservation input. The conservation strategy also recognizes the importance of a healthy economy and social community.

Acknowledging the importance of involving the community in any conservation effort, the strategy includes the goal of “engaging popular support for conservation.” More specifically, the conservation strategy partners seek to support existing but latent conservation values, and to work within existing communities and cultures.

## The Marketing Process

Social marketing<sup>3</sup> is an appropriate approach to reaching out to and engaging the people of Crowsnest Pass to support conservation. The specific marketing goal is to have vocal, visible, and majority support for conservation and behavior over the long term that results in on-the-ground conservation.

To identify the most efficient, effective, and culturally sensitive strategies to achieve the goal, the NCC conservation partners engaged in a one-day social marketing workshop. Hosted by Y2Y and facilitated by Conservation Impact, the workshop was designed to introduce the participants to social marketing as a

<sup>3</sup> Social marketing is the application of commercial marketing concepts and tools to the “solution of social problems where the bottom line is behavior change” (Andreasen). Social marketing seeks to understand the target audience and remove barriers and enhance benefits for that audience to behave in a way that is beneficial to themselves or society as a whole. It is distinctly different from communication for the purpose of persuasion or selling.

## Lesson Two

### *Understand the audience*

The process of describing the old neighbours highlights that they care very much about the landscape and appreciate it as a source of economic, recreational, cultural, and aesthetic importance. The descriptive profile begins to break down less useful stereotypes. The old neighbours do not need to be convinced of the importance of the landscape; however, they have their own reasons for caring—and had them long before any “environmentalist” showed up! Given as much, an awareness campaign is not necessary and more information or arguments based on ecological, biodiversity, environmental knowledge, per se, may well do more to alienate than to serve conservation needs.

conservation tool, to have them understand their regional and local audience, and to have them develop appropriate outreach strategies that fit with selected target markets.

What resulted is an excellent case study of how a social marketing approach can support conservation. Among other lessons, it reveals why understanding the audience is so important.

### **Market Segmentation**

The NCC conservation partners wanted a more authentic sense of the Crowsnest Pass residents than could be provided by demographic data alone. Specifically, they sought to understand what it is about the southern portion of the NCC landscape that is important to them. (This is different than what they might identify as important conservation or environmental issues!) Thus, the marketing session began with the question: “How do people relate to this landscape?” In answering the question, the population was segmented into six categories. The different segments saw the landscape variously as:

1. my community, my neighbourhood
2. my heritage, part of my responsibility as a steward to protect it for future generations
3. a potential investment
4. my economic livelihood
5. having important intrinsic ecological values
6. my playground—for my recreational use

Keeping the marketing goal in mind and applying a set of criteria for selecting the market,<sup>4</sup> the workshop participants decided that the segment most likely to take action toward the goal was the group that relates to the landscape as my *community*. This became the target segment for the marketing program.

<sup>4</sup> The criteria included assessing which segment: a) provided the greatest chance for success, b) contained the most people who had influence within the community; and c) contained people who were willing to be public with their views and build a public profile as a conservationist.

## Lesson Three

*It's not about what the organization needs; it's about what the audience needs.*

By really listening to what the audience needs to support conservation, strategies can be created that will work.

The old neighbours need safe, appropriate, culturally sensitive ways to express their support, and they need to know how to turn awareness into action that will make a difference. They do not need more information or more science, and they don't want to be told what to do. Therefore conservation organizations need to do their own work differently—working through and with others, creating new strategies, and working behind the scenes to create networks and connections.

## Target Market

The selected target market makes perfect sense based on the context, goal, and criteria. Those who see the landscape as part of their community—named “old neighbours” for purposes of this marketing strategy—are the ones who not only really count in terms of community influence but who already have a deep involvement with their environs.

People who grew up, live, and work in Crowsnest Pass, helped to describe the old neighbours in a way that statistics never can. The old neighbours are mostly multi-generational residents who have a fierce pride in the area. While they have made a living from the land—literally using the land for sustenance—they understand the inherent importance of sustainability and stewardship of the resource. They are generally community oriented, distrustful of outsiders, and consider themselves independent, resourceful, and self-reliant. They go to the local barbershop for the latest gossip and read the local newspapers. They don't want to be told how to do something, and they have become increasingly frustrated and distrustful of public processes and community politics. They have shown great care for each other in times of crises, be it a mining disaster, a landslide that buried a town, or, most recently, a runaway forest fire.

Relative to the marketing goal, the key considerations for reaching the old neighbours are that they:

- ◆ don't like outsiders telling them what to do about their community/home
- ◆ have deep ties to the area based on history or choice and care very much about the area as it defines their own heritage and community
- ◆ are distrustful and even fearful of public processes and politics
- ◆ inherently understand the issues of balance between economic vitality and conservation in terms of their own use of the land for livelihood and their respect and stewardship of the resource
- ◆ are pragmatic and value common sense and hard work

*It is necessary for conservation advocates to understand conservation from the perspective of the target market—old neighbours—which is heritage, sustenance, and home!*

## Marketing Strategies

Social marketing is about removing obstacles and increasing benefits for people to behave in a new way. It is not simply about messaging and communication. It is clear that the obstacles that prevent the old neighbours from becoming vocal and visible conservation supporters are that the cultural norms do not support taking a public conservation stance. That is, to be known as a conservationist is not a part of the Pass history. The past and present political processes and systems don't favour open dialogue about conservation. The people who may be inclined to speak out may not know how to do so, and, given the current social climate and power structure, it may not be safe to speak out.

Thus, for marketing efforts to be successful, it is necessary to:

- ◆ provide safe, appropriate, culturally sensitive vehicles for people to express their views
- ◆ turn the old neighbours' care and concern into specific action

### The Marketing Plan—Old Neighbours

#### Driving Values

Sense of history  
Sense of place  
Hard-working  
Pride/ownership  
Common sense

#### Needs/Interest

Keep things the way they are  
Utilitarian but respectful of  
the land  
Sustainability  
Community  
Integrity

#### Message

We can help you protect  
the community that is so  
important to your history  
and heritage.

#### Strategies

Neighbour to neighbour—  
within own communities  
and through local news-  
papers  
Listen, don't tell  
Create opportunities and  
vehicles for action that  
are safe and culturally  
appropriate.

*Organizations should focus on being of service to the community and be aware of attitudes of “trying to get them to do what we want,” rather than “how can we help the neighbours do what they want.”*

This has significant implications for the marketing strategies. It is important to focus strategies on helping the old neighbours act on what they already know is important, rather than trying to convince them of the benefits of conservation. Also, it is not necessary for the market to understand conservation in terms of biodiversity or ecological corridors. Rather, it is necessary for the conservation advocates to understand conservation from the perspective of the target market—i.e., in terms of heritage, sustenance, and home!

To best reach this audience, strategies must emphasize four elements.

1. **Action rather than awareness.** For their own reasons, the old neighbours are already aware of the conservation issues. Conservation activists do not have to try to convince old neighbours of the importance of the natural landscape. It is more important to provide tools or opportunities to translate the inherent affinity for the landscape into the action necessary to protect it. Some examples of how to translate awareness to action include:

- bumper stickers, pins, plaques—“I support the conservation vision of NCC ...”
- have an old neighbour write a weekly column in the local paper about what the landscape means to his or her family
- ask people who show up to hear a presentation to sign a declaration of support or sign on to a full-page ad in a newspaper (safety in numbers)
- set up a town forum outside the political process and publicize its success
- have old neighbours create a community picture interpretation and put copies of them in every public place (makes the vision their own and in their own style)

2. **Removing the barriers to participation.** It is necessary to create safe and accessible vehicles for people to express their views. Organizations should focus on being of service to the community and be aware of attitudes of “trying to get them

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to do what we want” rather than “how can we help the neighbours do what they want.” For example:

- create comfortable, legitimate forums within the trusted communities of neighborhoods, schools, churches
- create a community vision that becomes public
- use strength in numbers, and create a network that lets people know others are involved
- mostly, listen, listen, listen to what is needed

3. **Working at a smaller, community-based, local level** rather than a large-scale, mass marketing level. This target market values community and trusts “their own.” It is necessary to work within the local social network, like at the local barber-shop. (Clearly, young, liberal, backpacking, outsider environmentalists are not the right messengers.) For example:

- ask the friends and relatives of old neighbours to host a small private gathering
- work through sympathetic local businesses or community organizations

4. **Building on the themes of community**, heritage, utility, and responsibility, rather than ecology, biodiversity, and wildlife corridors. Perhaps the word conservation isn’t even the right word, none the less ecology or biodiversity!

## **Conclusion**

The Crowsnest Pass area and the efforts of conservation organizations to generate vocal and visible support for conservation is a case study that demonstrates the importance of understanding the audience, *before* investing in communication and marketing strategies. By really knowing who the old neighbours are, how they behave, and what they value, it is a relatively easy process to understand the approach that will be most effective.

The planning process challenged assumptions and cut through less-useful stereotypes. It also challenged the conservation organizations to re-think how they do their work. A simple but creative

process helped to ensure that precious resources are used most effectively and that strategies will gain the results desired in a reasonable amount of time.

The Crowsnest Pass area is an irreplaceable and beautiful area. The work of conservationists is urgent and crucial. A marketing approach will help achieve conservation goals and protect this significant ecological area.

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#### **About the Author**

Shelli Bischoff is a partner in Conservation Impact LLC and founder of Marketing Impact LLC. She has worked with more than 350 nonprofit organizations throughout the United States and Canada, teaches in a master's of nonprofit management program, and is an invited speaker at national conferences. Bischoff specializes in strategic marketing and organizational development. She helps organizations create Constituent-Centered Nonprofits™ through a unique approach to market segmentation and target marketing. She is best known for her customized consulting services that range from one-day marketing planning sessions to comprehensive strategic repositioning projects. For more information, contact her at 303-223-4886 or shelli@conservationimpact.com.