



COMMUNICATIONS PLANNING RESOURCE GUIDE:

Strategy, tools, and tactics to refine communications
about reducing food waste

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GOAL

Provide additional messaging, content, and potential tactics that could be deployed to affect behaviors regarding food waste among two identified clusters of consumers. This is another resource derived from recent research findings to further refine efforts or influence new programs.

STRATEGIES

Incorporate the latest segmentation research findings from OSU to refine targeted messages and identify communications channels to reach key groups of consumers with the most opportunity for impact.

Provide tactical recommendations including WHAT to say and HOW to get the messages across and serve as a resource for others in developing campaigns and other outreach strategies to help US consumers reduce food waste.

SET THE STAGE

We aim to provide additional details on two consumer groups identified in the OSU study that contributed 71% of the recorded food waste and share attitudes and behaviors that suggest an opportunity to affect change (Li and Roe 2023). Labeled “Harried Profligates” and “Guilt Carb Wasters”, respondents in both clusters:

- recognize food waste is a critical national issue and everyone shares responsibility
- feel higher levels of time pressure in day-to-day life
- express guilt about creating food waste
- identify food waste as a major source of wasted money
- report some existing activity to reduce waste
- believe further reduction is possible, not too difficult
- agree bulk/sale purchases contribute to waste in their households
- get information and influence from social media (data comparing these clusters relative to the other respondents)

Additionally, the study results indicated other demographic markers may have little/less impact on attitudes and behavior, including:

- region of the country
- political identification (liberal-conservative spectrum)
- race
- specialized diets
- frequency of grocery shopping
- motivating philosophical principles (Schwartz scale, e.g., power, achievement)
- married status (did not collect)

According to the research, these clusters can be segmented further.

Harried Profligates - generated 38% of overall sample waste

Demographically, this cluster:

- skews younger
 - 40% of respondents are under 44 and 21% are under 34
 - However, it's important to note that 23% are also over 65
- has a higher household income - 43% report more than \$100,000/yr
- lives in households with more total people (including young children under 5) than the other clusters

And they, more than other respondents, are more likely to:

- report saving money is a key motivation to reduce food waste
- admit a lack of control of certain aspects of their home food environment
- cite time pressure in day-to-day life as a prime contributor

This cluster's self-reported behaviors are the least supportive of food waste reduction. They are less likely to:

- make and stick to meal plans
- check food in storage before shopping
- obtain food via in-person shopping trips
- prepare meals at home during the week
- create and adhere to shopping lists
- avoid overbuying/unplanned purchases
- track food once in storage
- use leftovers and unused ingredients
- monitor portion sizes.

These consumers will most likely respond to messages about:

- Saving time and reducing stress
- Saving money: quantifying how haste makes waste

Guilty Carb Wasters - Contributed 33% of sample waste

Demographically this cluster:

- more likely to identify as female (63%), with elevated Hispanic/Latino (6%) representation
- skews a little younger and reports less formal education
- tends to be living in larger households
- more likely are taking care of young children (under 5)
- most likely working full-time

This group also is very likely to report they:

- were concerned about food affordability and listed food prices as a concern
- had cleaned out the refrigerator and thrown out food
- had an unexpected issue that caused unusual amounts of wasted food during their reporting week (81%)
- will purchase food in bulk in an effort to save money but eventually later waste/throw out

DEVELOPING TARGETED PERSONAS

In order to more effectively reach the consumers in these two clusters and deliver messaging they can relate to, we strive to flesh out personas based on segmentation demographics provided in the study. Ideally, we

- define each personal demographically as specifically as possible:
Gender | age | race | education | occupation | location | family | household income
- discover their pain points/motivators
- list where they spend time, what they do, who are they listening to

IMPORTANT NOTE: As referenced in the segmentation report, further demographic details could provide greater definition in the personas. We recommend additional research to determine:

- Approximate food budget per person (either weekly or monthly)
- Food budget trend: rising or dropping (YOY)
- Urban or suburban - proximity to food shopping
- Marital status

These personas are for planning and internal reference only. External identification or characterization of these groups should be carefully crafted so as not to offend the consumers. Taking that into account, truthfully and openly addressing the roadblocks these consumers face (as noted above) is an important element in building trust and engagement.

Hectic Harry



**Mid-30s | Has a college degree | Married with 4 kids (9, 7, 5, and 3)
He and his partner both work FT and make \$125K**

Mom commutes to an office every day, while Harry tries to work from home. Always short on time, he wants to provide for his family but also wants to spend time with them. Days are spent balancing work, managing school, kids' sports, dance, and activities. Life. Is. Complicated.

Goals:

- Provide for his family
- Give his kids a good education
- Save for retirement
- Travel and experience new things

Motivators:

Reducing stress | Eliminating disruptions | Saving time | Saving money

Other Pain Points:

Getting kids to/from school and sports/activities | Managing work
Finding time for exercise/personal care

Potential Influences:

Sports | Career advice | Friends | Financial planning | Budgeting advice

Distracted Diana



**Late 20s | Has a High school diploma | Married and both work FT, earning < \$60k year
They have 3 young kids (6, 4, 1)| One child is in school**

It's tough making ends meet, they're already on a tight budget and may try to limit food waste when they can. It feels like every entire day is focused on childcare in one form or another. Stress (family, money, work) is a major factor and doesn't even let up on the weekends.

She Values: Family, time, convenience, and organization

Her Interests: Parenting, child development, cooking, home improvement, and travel

Her Challenges: Balancing work/family life, finding time for herself, and managing finances

Motivators:

Guilt over food waste | Saving money | Environmental impact | Responsibility

Other Pain Points:

Childcare logistics | Grocery shopping | Unusual events wreck food plans

Potential Influences:

Work & financial advice | Social media moms | Cooking tips/advice

RESEARCH & COMPARE EXISTING INITIATIVES

[Messaging Matrix](#)

Thankfully, much has been researched and done in recent history to reduce food waste. So we're not starting from scratch. Rather, we hope to refine and build on past campaigns and resources to more accurately target the most impactful clusters and create unique, customized messaging with the most efficacious content and motivation.

With that in mind, we've reviewed some of the larger efforts with similar goals and compiled notes about many in the messaging matrix found in the appendix.

These campaigns and resources like the [EPA's social marketing toolkit](#) have many effective devices, providing consumers with actionable tips and recipes they need to mitigate overspending and reduce waste.

THE ROADBLOCKS

There's no debate that changing consumer behavior is an uphill battle. On top of fighting information overload, attention deficits, marketing apathy, and increasing distrust generally, even consumers who want to make more sustainable food choices face significant roadblocks. Some are perceived, but many are very real.

Any messaging should address these obstacles with empathy. Content acknowledging that parenting is tough, that budgets are tight, that schedules are stressful, etc., engenders trust and the feeling of being understood. Guidance from a position of common ground has the best potential for being adopted.

EXPLAIN THE STRATEGY

There's a science and an art to influencing consumer behavior. People, in general, will not respond to being told what to do. Therefore, it's critical to lead people to define themselves in a way that changes their behavior. In other words:

create the identity, not the action

"We want to see ourselves positively. (For example) We want to see ourselves as smart, interesting, attractive, and athletic, so we engage in actions that support those ideas. If we want to see ourselves as athletic, we need to run every so often. If actions allow us to hold desired identities, we're more likely to take those actions. If voting is an opportunity to show myself and others that I am a voter, I'm more likely to do it."

- [Fast Company article on persuasive language](#)

To affect measurable change, we need to imbue positive ideas of personality and foster consumer identities that result in sustainable actions leading to reduced overshopping and food waste.

Messaging should help consumers adopt ideals underlying the benefits of being food-smart and become a core characteristic of their identity.

Additionally, today's consumer is much more likely to adopt advice from friends (or social networks) rather than from traditional advertising or authority figures and agencies. As such, communications strategies should be focused on building grassroots support and changing social norms through more direct contact like [Community-Based Social Marketing](#), which can be quite impactful in generating sustainable behavior changes. One of the key tenets of CBSM is targeting specific, indivisible, end-state behaviors and our recommended messaging is crafted around this.

We must also overcome many barriers, such as the “Good Provider Image,” a common [Mental Vision of Self](#) that maintains a caregiver (such as a parent or spouse) qualifies as a “good food provider” by serving large or excessive amounts of food. We aim to provide messaging tools that reframe these beliefs and position Good Providers as those who also save money, which can be used to support the family in other ways.

Messaging can leverage psychology around our innate [Loss Aversion](#), the strong negative feelings we have against waste, especially when it is something that we consider ours. Essentially, we are wired to hate losing the resources we have in hand.

Timing also plays a role and [habit psychology research](#) indicates windows of opportunity—when consumers are more receptive to adapting habit changes—may exist during moments of transition, such as changing jobs, moving to a new home, adding a child to the family, etc. Future tactics could leverage these moments by targeting consumers likely preparing for or adapting to these changes. Inserting food waste messaging into the social media conversation targeting these consumers could be effective.

MESSAGING

To foster specific identity qualities that may reduce wasteful food habits and align with respondents' beliefs and the resulting cluster personas, messaging should support these characteristics:

- I am in Control of my (hectic) life
- I care about my family and my children's Future
- I am Responsible
- I am Mindful and Respectful of others and our environment
- I am Resourceful
- I am an Efficient Shopper
- I am a Saver

With these qualities and the audiences in mind, specific messaging also must address the four primary forces that affect behavior change. They must clearly communicate the positives (toward change) and dispel the negatives (impeding change). Great messaging can do some of both in simple, concise language.

Forces At Play



Pain of Current Practices

the negative effects of wasting food

Losing money
Wasting time
Bad for the environment

Pull of New Behavior

positive results from better food habits

Saving money
Saves time/effort
It's more responsible
Doing the "right" thing feels good



Inertia of the Status Quo

difficulty overcoming ingrained habits

It's not that important
Don't have time to
Don't know how
Don't want to

Anxiety and The Unknown

lack of conviction or angst over change

Takes too much time
It's not that easy
Won't help
Isn't safe

Key Messages

Better food habits not only save money, they save you time and effort, too. And they're really easy.

Supporting Messages

- Simple planning and reusing leftovers can save you more than a thousand dollars every year, reduce trips to the store, and put time back into your busy schedule.
- Saving food saves time.
- Throwing away food costs you more than money.
- Just a few minutes can save you hours every month.
- Just a simple meal plan and quickly checking the fridge before you shop will save both time and cash.
- One less trip to the store each month will save you at least 60 minutes. That's 12 hours a year or more.
- As easy as opening the fridge before you shop.
- Today's tech (AI assistants and phones) makes keeping a grocery list super easy.
- Find many specific tips in flyers like these from [SaveTheFood campaign](#)

Because we care about our families and community, we pledge to do our part. By spending just a few minutes to plan ahead, we actually save time and stop wasting money.

Supporting Messages

- Making better food choices is taking care of ourselves.
- Healthy households are food-smart.
- Show your love with healthy, food-smart portions.
- Our kids need us to be food-smart.
- Give your kids the gift of healthy portions.
- Your kids will thank you ... in 20 years.
- Time saved at the store can be spent playing with your kids.

Regain control over your hectic life and stop wasting your hard-earned money by throwing away expensive food. It only takes a few minutes to plan ahead, reduce overspending, and create delicious meals that actually make life a little easier.

Supporting Messages

- Life is messy - don't get stuck with food waste.
- Don't let food waste slow you down/mess you up.
- Turn chaos around with a good food plan.
- You're too busy to waste so much food.

Key Messages (cont.)

Better food habits are simply smarter. A few fast and easy tactics will help you spend less, save more, and be the hero for your family and the environment.

Supporting Messages

- Maximize your life: get the most out of your food.
- Take back control - don't let food waste bring your family down.
- Regain a little control of your hectic life with simple, better food management.
- Make more quality time with family by controlling your food stream.
- By the time you read this, you could have already saved money on groceries.

Reducing your household food waste even a little bit can make a big difference. It's not hard to make small changes that positively affect your household and community.

Supporting Messages

- Saving food saves the planet.
- We are respecting our communities by reducing food waste.
- We can't save the world today, but we can do just one thing better.
- Wasting food is bad for you, bad for the planet.
- Making a grocery list can take as little as 60 seconds and might save you 30 minutes at the store.
- As easy as opening the fridge before you shop.

Find additional supporting details and actionable advice in the following section on tactics.

TACTICS

Social Media Influencer Campaigns

Much like Gatorade promoted “Be Like Mike” (1991), inspire our two clusters to be like the influencers they admire and help them identify with the core character traits of people who don’t waste food. Visually demonstrate the advantages and quantify the benefits in quick (30s and less) entertaining videos about reducing food waste.

Study respondents ranked social media second only behind websites when asked about preferred news sources. YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter (in order) were the most popular, and the Harried Profligates showed the strongest preference toward YouTube and Facebook. This maps with other studies showing popularity among people 24 and older gravitating toward these platforms.

There is no shortage of social influencers available for collaborations. The real challenge is identifying those with engaged and dedicated audiences in our target groups while avoiding influencers already proselytizing responsible food habits to consumers with good habits already in place (like consumers in cluster 1).

Also, influencers do not need to be expensive A-list celebrities, but it helps. The best campaigns use a wide combination of active social media influencers headlined by a well-known personality with a very large audience (millions of engaged followers), supported by a number of smaller, micro-influencers that might only have a few thousand devoted, niche followers. Influencers should be subdivided even further to include broad exposure to target consumers’ geographic area, representing their race and culture, etc. While race and location might not delineate which consumers are wasting more food, messaging can be tailored and localized based on an influencer’s audience. Selection of influencers to cover multiple ethnicities, locations, etc. also helps ensure a campaign reaches the two target clusters within those demographics.

A sample of potential influencers is included [here](#). These examples were selected for their positive tone of voice, audience reach (both large and smaller audiences*), and suitable content matter. It’s only a representation of what’s possible.

It’s important to account for the low representation (just 5%) in this study from the 18-24 age group, which skews toward TikTok** nationally. [Some reports](#) indicate older generations including Baby Boomers are increasingly spending time on the platform. Any campaign designed for longevity and influence over future generations should also have exposure to the younger audiences watching videos on TikTok.

Possible tactics and social content might include

Leftover Chef National Contest - encouraging families to have friendly competitions once a week at home by creating meals using leftover food. Encourage them to post photos and use a campaign-created hashtag.

The LeftOver MakeOver - creative ways to reuse leftovers in delicious meals (already a popular life hack on social channels)

Label Date Education - helping consumers to get wiser about label dates -- what they really mean, the difference between “sell by” and “best by” dates, how to know if something is truly gone bad or can still be eaten, etc. This might include using USDA’s [Food Keeper](#) resource and building off segments like [Adam Ruins Everything](#).

*Research related to our work in public health behavior change campaigns shows that people listen to influencers who are more localized or more specialized. While one influencer may have five million followers, a greater impact on behavior change may come from more targeted content providers with fewer followers who more closely relate to it. A balanced campaign will employ both mega- and micro-influencers.

**TikTok - while some government agencies are blocked from using TikTok, ignoring the channel would eliminate a viable means to reach and engage with particularly younger audiences. Tactics here might not be useful for every agency/organization.

OG Influencers - Local Friends

As indicated in CBSM, consider delivering food-smart messaging through trusted community relationships such as:

Community food banks - often run by local nonprofits and churches or nationally through [Feeding America](#), they have a direct connection with millions of consumers, both those in need and the volunteers helping them. Supporting their efforts with education, recipes for reusing leftovers, tips for preserving food, etc. may only have a small impact on families already pressured to stretch food resources.

The greater value may come from building awareness among the families motivated by church organizers and volunteering peers. A campaign might reinforce that good citizens recognize and respect the community's needs by practicing better food habits at home.

Extension Agents - the more than 1,300 agents from the Cooperative Extension System (CES) already are working with USDA/National Institute of Food & Agriculture to help farmers, ranchers, and communities adapt to challenges including improving food safety and nutrition. The [CES Impact Collaborative](#) could be a valuable partner to any consumer campaign and already has [established community education programs](#) on family and child care, food choice, and dozens more.

Byline Content

Because websites topped the respondents' list for news gathering, campaigns should include active and consistent publication of byline content. This must go beyond environmental and food waste advocate sites to reach our two target clusters. Popular general news sites, entertainment, business, and lifestyle sites need to be targeted to reach consumers not already aware of/actively practicing responsible food habits.

Ideally, these should be penned by or ghostwritten for in-demand/popular influencers used in social media campaigns. Authoring content helps ensure messaging is on target, completed in a timely manner, and well written.

Broadcast “Roadshow” (Satellite Media Tour)

Harried Profligates also indicated TV as a primary source for news and we can't forget this as a communications channel.

A popular, in-demand influencer/spokesperson could land live segments with local TV stations across the nation (such as network morning shows) to talk about saving busy families both money and time through better food habits like shopping advice, food storage tips, or leftover makeovers. Stage virtually as needed to reduce costs of travel and supply stations with b-roll and graphics to support.

This idea might also include generating content for regionally-produced TV shows or documentary-style video for streaming services.

The Smart Food Pledge

Consumers are asked to pledge to make small changes in how they buy, store, prepare, and save food. By taking The Smart Food Pledge, they can promote their commitment with a social icon, badge, profile frame, etc. Think how the popularity of the Ice Bucket Challenge grew based on social value and desire to join the movement. Or how the viral #biriaramen challenge swept TikTok; many related recipe videos have 2M+ views.

This won't have the same “shock” humor as videos of celebrities doused with ice water, but when connected to actionable advice its social influence to “do the right thing” will propel people with good intentions, like our two target audiences, to adopt change. This pledge can be proudly displayed with social media “stickers,” etc., and link to other resources like Hellmann's Fridge Night Mission, Save The Food's [Guestimator](#), or [one of the many available apps](#) as a means for fulfilling aspects of the pledge.

The key to igniting interest and followership is launching with a few well-known and respected influencers.

Publicize the study findings

While not as direct, getting media and social recognition of the study results and personifying the clusters identified could help raise awareness and drive behavior change.

Issue a press release on the study results once it is published in a peer-reviewed outlet (currently under review) and:

- Describe the two clusters worth targeting
- Explain their potential and needs
- Lay out the plan to reach and influence them
- Support with an infographic

It won't drive national news, but may be effective in helping to land podcast interviews, smaller trade or local news, or support the broadcast roadshow mentioned above.

30 for 30

Playing on the popular ESPN programming of the same name, educate consumers that saving time and money can be done in 30 seconds or less.

What can you do in 30 seconds? Regain 30 minutes or save \$30 by using 30 seconds on good food habits.

- Check the fridge before you shop - saves \$15 wasted on overbuying
- Freeze the leftovers - saves \$25 and 30 minutes making another meal
- Make a simple meal plan - saves 15 minutes and \$10 while shopping
- Measure servings - saves \$5 in food that might have been thrown out

Food Heroes

A series of ads/promotional videos with a "superhero" theme, portraying those who waste less are saving the world.

- SAVE THE FOOD = SAVE THE WORLD (consider using actress [Hayden Panettiere, who played Claire Bennet](#), the hero cheerleader from the "Heroes" TV show, whose well-known tagline was "Save the Cheerleader. Save the World.")
- Create a song spoofing "My Hero" by Foo Fighters, similar to a Weird Al Yankovic cover, promoting a Food Hero. Maybe [something like this](#), created by Google's Bard AI.
- Use music to bolster content with Super Mom/Dad: "I can bring home the bacon, fry it up in the pan, and never waste another bite or dollar again . . . cause I'm a food savior."
- Playing up the good parenting angle: Every Bite Counts for My Children's Future: teaching my kids good citizenship and proper financial savings makes me a Super Dad.