

## Q&A Transcript

# What is your Communication Strategy?

## *Tools for Marketing Sustainability Across Campus*

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**Question 1**

**Alex, what has been the biggest challenge for you in building a strong communication program at Penn State?**

**Alex Novak:** I think the biggest challenge, if we are talking about sustainability communication specifically, is making it interesting to the biggest number of people. When we started out, a communication team was not even a part of the original budget of the sustainability institute. We realized very quickly that we couldn't possible write all those stories ourselves.

Therefore, when we would see stories coming out of different areas in the college, we would say, "You know what, that is a sustainability story. You're talking about an experience that a student is having where they are going out and making this difference in the world and underneath all the triple bottom line." Once we got them to recognize that, they began to own the story.

If a good story on campus is a sustainability story, that's how you move forward. However, it takes a lot of work to develop relationships across different areas of the colleges and you just want to make yourself and your messages as appealing as possible so that people want to tell it.

**Dallase Scott:** To add to that, don't go against the force of your campus brand. Sometimes we want to create our own identity so much in sustainability that you are fighting against a brand that people knows and like.

**Question 2**

**How do you incorporate the sustainability message into the new student orientation program?**

**Alex Novak:** When you are describing the desired norm, with incoming freshmen, just present the desired behavior as the norm. I think that part of that is not making seen like a fringe activity. So for us, an incoming student can't really go anywhere on campus and not see a composting bin. Whether they immediately take on that behavior or not is less relevant than the fact that they are surrounded by it, and will be surrounded by it for four years. The other piece of it is to make it seem fun. A lot of times with sustainability communications, we historically have relied on guilt, shame, and fear. If you can get smiling students doing cool things and making it seem fun, I think that's how you want to hit the incoming audience; you are not having to suffer for sustainability when you come to Penn State, it is what we do and it's fun and it's what everyone wants to do.

Additionally, we have an ECO-REPS Program which we advertise far and advanced for the students coming in. We also connect with whatever materials you have that goes out to freshmen. The other thing is to connect and give materials that are useful to the RA's on different halls. Get some key students to be recycling and post it on Instagram. Make it a part of what they do at Penn State when they get here. It is not weird; it's fun and it's the norm. You really want to hit them at the beginning without relying on a presentation of recycling because that is going to mean less than just increasing the visibility of people doing it as a part of their normal day.

Don't feel like you failed if you cannot be a part of the new student orientation because that is a very difficult time to break into. The students are overwhelmed and everybody wants to be there so there is this rush. Instead, think of ways to work around it so that you are there invisibly even if you are not a part of the formal programming.

**Dallase Scott:** I have to second with Alex about the value of orientation and that time period with new students. In fact, there was a [webinar that we did in 2014](#) about the importance of planting a seed with incoming students and the value of orientation. That is a key point where students are developing lifelong habits and if we create the right messaging that has social norming as a part of it, and you are creating a couple of communication channels, you're going to be engraining a habit that will pay off for the four year that your students are there.

Also, sometimes it is more valuable if people don't actually see you as the messaging behind it. Really thinking holistically and working through the different stakeholders on your campus can allow you to get to the same goal.

### Question 3

#### Can you expand on your example of competition and wasting energy as the norm?

**Dallase Scott:** This directly related to the accidental norming that I have mentioned earlier. One of the things that you see in energy competitions is a decrease in energy use in student dorms over a specific period of time. Consequently, you will then often see either a rebound effect, where the energy dramatically increases in the each building after the competition is over, or there is an increase in another building on campus because people would have moved their energy habits into a different location. There's a piece to competition that is short term. Instead, think about how you can best put your human resources in place for long-term change. That's why I tend to focus on things that are more focus on cultural norming. People like getting competitive, and as Alex had noted earlier to find ways to make something fun and engaging is absolutely a benefit. You need to be very careful of your messaging when you are doing a competition.

GreenerU has supported on a couple of institutions a Zero Waste Challenge. Again, it is a short term event where we ask people to reduce the amount of waste they have for a week, but the goal there in participation is to learn more about recyclables. Thus, we are very careful with our language where we are not going from a current norm to extreme living.

**Alex Novak:** You can really find yourself in a sticky situation if you use the wrong language. Mobius is a very good example. When we first started going about reducing waste, the Manager of the Recycling Program was going around giving presentations. His message was, "We should all be

doing this because it can save Penn State money.” While this may be true, the problem was when it was delivered to some staff, they said, “Great, where’s my raise?” When it was presented to some students, they said, “Great, when are you going to lower tuition?” Neither of these scenarios were going to happen. The messaging needed to change to say that recycling is the norm of the university. Specific reasons were avoided in this example. Everybody is coming to sustainability for different reasons. Don’t try to make there be one reason why people want to do this.

**Dallase Scott:** To jump in with the purpose of the competition, it is helpful to be specific on the behaviors that are going to have the most impact. Chasing after students to unplug their cellphone chargers is not going to have that big of an impact versus making sure that they are closing their windows during winter months when their heat is on. Making sure you are thoughtful of what you are asking is also important when you are thinking about your goal and outreach.

## Question 4

**Can you touch on the cultural barrier and how to access the more diverse audience of students?**

**Alex Novak:** I don’t necessarily have a specific example, but what I can say is if you consider each college, or each discipline, or each dorm as its own environment, you’re looking for what would resonant with that audience. I think the key again is not to try to find a message that would reach them, but to let them develop the message for themselves that tells the story. That might sound vague, but we see examples constantly that come through the new system where we would never expect to see. Know your audience and don’t go out on a political limb at the risk of alienated a significant part of your audience.

**Dallase Scott:** Often we surround ourselves with people who are similar to us. Really, just getting out there and talking to different stakeholders should be part of your homework before starting any campaign. There’s a lot of different student groups on campus that specifically focus on diverse subgroups of the campus. Having conversations with them and learning how they communicate not only will help you develop a partnership, but it might also give you some new language to use within your campaign.

## Question 5

**How do you communicate progress: To your direct supervisor? On the efforts you are putting in? Based on metrics?**

**Alex Novak:** With any marketing and sales campaign, it is very difficult to tie back to one message, or one story, or one poster what the effect was. Therefore, you want to know in advanced what you’re going to be able to measure; whether it is electricity reduction, students applying for more courses around sustainability, or marketing surveys that are saying students are identifying the university with sustainability. For me and all the stats that I have shown in my slides, getting out more than 400 stories in the national media with Penn State being identified with sustainability is a monster metric. That means that other people are talking about it that way, and that’s really where, from a communications aspect, I want to be because that ties into perspective students, perspective parents, and perspective faculty and staff that we can identify with sustainability. Metrics are essential; you should be, from just a web perspective, on [Google Analytics](#). Also use

something like [Hootsuite](#) for your social media. Definitely be looking at what is working and what isn't. You will see patterns emerging very quickly.

**Dallase Scott:** I think people hold off on doing any metrics because they feel like they are not a social scientist or there's not really a perfect metric here. You really just have to start somewhere! One of the things that GreenerU does is starting out with a baseline survey. We don't know what we are going to get, and we are not necessarily looking for any A-HA pieces, but what it can allow us to do is a year or two years down the line, we can have some sort of baseline to go back to. Even if you are putting together surveys now and you don't see any significant from that survey, consider it your baseline survey. Additionally, make sure work with a faculty member to ensure you are thinking through some important questions ahead of time. Take the time when you are putting your goals together to think about how you can assess things down the road.

## Question 6

**Our Operations Department is always keen to promote their success in terms of money. They save with building and energy projects. These stories do not often resonate well with the students and staff. How can we spin the stories to create more enthusiasm of operations?**

**Alex Novak:** There are times where portraying savings is necessary, but particularly when talking with student and faculty, try and refrain from using that as a metric. As the cost of higher education goes up every single year, just saying that we save millions of dollars doing this is not a good method to use.

You want to show success in terms of stewardship, conservation of resources, efficiency. I think there are a lot of businesses terms you can use to tell that story without talking about the dollar amount. I have never seen the dollar amount ever go over well in the college setting.

**Dallase Scott:** To expand on that, we are trying to talk about the success of work and get people excited. We are trying to tie it into the original value there. For operations it is cost savings. Outside of operations, you can have a ridiculous, silly poster of the "success kid" and people are going to get more excited about seeing something that would make them laugh that is also tied into something that operations is doing for the building rather than tying it into a big numerical fact. Sometimes people are looking for a little bit of brain candy or just looking for something to be cheerleaders for, and it is okay to have fun that is ongoing in promoting success.

## Question 7

**Can you describe how you create effective content for social media, for example, Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram?**

**Alex Novak:** There are different audiences for different social media outlets. I showed Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. But we also have Pinterest and we have Google+. In term of social media content, one thing that I can say we found is that imagery is key. Get good solid imagery. That is what people are going to click on, that is what people are going to look at instead of the words. It is really tough but if you can get somebody that can do compelling infographics, definitely go that route.

Keep it short; you do not want to overwhelm people with text. If they want more information, they can dig deep into your website to find that information. For social media, making it easy to share, tying it into school pride, and making it fun are essential. All my images that I have shown are tied into athletics. As a tree hugger myself, that pains me to have to tie it into athletics every time, but the reality is that anytime in social media we put up the Nittany Lion or the Beaver Stadium, it instantly gets a hundred thousand Facebook likes. And that is inescapable for us. So don't fight it, work with it.

**Dallase Scott:** In addition to what Alex mentioned, know what your current resources are. It is okay to focus on one thing and start doing it really well. Look to students for additional help to focus in on your messaging.

## Question 8

**Do you have writers on staff to produce stories or do you collect them from others? What is the right approach for limited resources – office of one – to get the ball rolling?**

**Alex Novak:** Decentralization is the key. I actually work in Penn State Office of Physical Plant. So I am in a totally separate building from our public relations in the institute. One way to approach it, is to find content. Find a professor in a given college; find a student group that is doing something cool. Even if you are not a good photographer, there are good photographers on campus. You want to become a resource for your other communications effort and good content. If you try to produce it all yourself, you are really shackling yourself. You are much better selling the idea that these are good stories for your school to tell to the other communicators in the university. You need to reach out and make those connections.

## Question 9

**How would you communicate a lack of progress, negative progress, or bad press? What messaging would you use and how could you use this to motivate future progress?**

**Alex Novak:** Be honest about what happened. Anything that happened in the environmental sphere is an opportunity to talk about what the university's goals to be more sustainable. We had a huge challenge at Penn State when we converted our steam plant to coal and natural gas. Which in many ways, is absolutely a better situation, but it involves putting a high pressure natural gas line through campus and it's related to fracking which is also negative. Ultimately, we are talking about reducing greenhouse gas emissions. This controversy allowed us to talk about the amount of energy we are putting into our buildings. It also allowed us to talk about the fact that we are joining Better Buildings Challenge through the DOE. There is no such thing as bad publicity, people say. Use any one of those opportunities to point to what your university doing that is positive. Don't let the negative part of it control the message.

**Dallase Scott:** It sounds like Alex is touching on something that we brought up earlier in the presentation: injunctive versus descriptive norm. The descriptive piece is usually the one that is being performed and so in this case, Alex touched on being truthful about some perceived setbacks. However, remember to keep focusing on where you want to go so that you show the vision of preferred behavior, which is where the program is heading. Again, being honest and keeping the message positive and letting people know how they can contribute in a positive way

is definitely a way to not only address real concerns that some people might have, but it also lets them know that they have the opportunity to engage in positive behavior. It shows that your office and department is also working on the vision and heading in that direction.

### Question 10

**Did you have to convince administrators that having the Penn State brand associated with sustainability is positive rather than negative?**

**Alex Novak:** I wouldn't say we had to convince them that it was positive rather than negative. I would say that we had to convince them it was positive. We were seeing stories coming out that were sustainability related but they weren't tagged that way. What we did was we went in, and we went back to the communicators, the researchers, and the students that were involved and said, "Look, this is a sustainability story. We are going to promote it on our website. We are going to promote it over social media." Later we created a mainstream newsletter that people can subscribe to and we would send it out that way. Once the visibility started to get out there, people started doing it automatically. There is no administrator that is going to turn their nose at smiling students going out into the world doing good things. By taking it away from "green," we sort of depoliticized it. Once we turned sustainability into a positive story, not only did we not have a barrier anymore, but we saw in one year, the sustainability stories become a part of our brand's storybook. It is a positive story for everyone and at every university.

### Question 11

**What does Penn State do to get people composting and how successful has it been? How do you use messaging to reduce composting contamination?**

**Alex Novak:** The biggest thing we did to get people to compost was make it possible. There were a lot of people who wanted it to happen. A pilot project that we ran in one of the dorms was very successful. Everywhere we put composting, we have seen increased usage. Contamination does not happen as much as you would expect. We find more things in the trash that could be recycled or composted than we do find trash in the compost bin. Making it available is the biggest factor and it increasing awareness.

**Dallase Scott:** One of the things that you can think about is identifying barriers and how you are going to reduce them. Not only when you are trying to get people to adapt to a behavior, but when you are trying to get people to stop a behavior, you should think about the barriers to change. Physical effort can be a barrier with composting. For example, we have new waste management stations at a college that I've worked with, Babson College, which we specifically have for the post-consumer compost. In this system, you have a lift up a latch in order to put your food waste in there. It is an additional physical effort for someone to do. If people don't want to do that, they are going to throw it into the trash. This is the desired behavior, because at this point where we are at with compost, we would rather have the mistake of putting compost in the trash than the trash in the compost because of the contamination piece.

**Alex Novak:** Additionally, signage is something that we struggle with all the time. And there is a lot of research out there and certainly a lot of opinions about what the best way to do signage is. One thing that we have done, and many other places have done, is on the trash can, it says "Trash"

and it actually says “Landfill” right next to it and then it says, “Are you sure?” So that’s a little cue for people to think, “I can throw this away” because there is no other away. On the compost side, it does help to have some visual representation of what does go in there. For us, in the dorms, pizza boxes are huge and our composting operations can handle pizza boxes and that is something absolutely we want to have on there.

**Dallase Scott:** Being able to test out your communication with folks is valuable before you invest a lot in signage is important. Lastly, one of the things that we recognize is depending on your location and when people are eating, we realized that time and routine is a big barrier for compost and getting people to sort properly. So one of the things that we have started to think about and work on is instead of waiting for the messaging to be at the trash and when people are walking away, what messaging can we provide when people are sitting down and eating and have time to think. So maybe, on the tables we’re cuing them up for the expectation of their behaviors before they even reach the decision making point. I often go through this barrier checklist when I try something and it is not working: is it too complicated, is it a physical effort, what’s going on here?

## Question 12

**Sustainability has so many definitions and touches so many facets of university lives, it is not just recycling. Do you have any strategy on synthesizing such a broad topic in communications?**

**Alex Novak:** I think it helps first to come up with a definition. Everyone’s definition is different. But, hilariously, it took a sustainability council at Penn State 18 months to come up with a definition. And having the triple bottom line needs to be in there. We lead off with human health and happiness and then have environmental quality and then have economic well-being. I think the key to getting the message out is not just to repeat the definition, but to present stories as sustainability related that ties into all those things. A perfect sustainability story to me is one that bridges two parts of the definition. It is a challenge to communicate what you are doing but the more you can communicate through specific stories, the more it becomes tangible for people. Go out to look in the individual colleges, department, and units and find examples of people practicing sustainability and say, “Look, this is what you’re doing and this is how it is related to sustainability.” I think you will get a lot of mileage out of that.

**Dallase Scott:** When you go to where the people are at, you are going to where their current values are. This allows you to identify within their current values and within their stories what is sustainable. When we are working with our clients and thinking about this, one of the things that we are trying to do is create a self-concept for individuals. So if you are reaching out to these different programs and authors who are writing these pieces and letting them know, “that is sustainability and you are writing sustainability stories,” or the actions that they are doing enhance sustainability on their campus, you are helping to connect the dots between your goals and their goals. These individuals are then going to identify themselves as sustainability champions, which can add value because you are building your community and the number of stakeholders who are thinking about this in a way and who now know to connect with you the next time there are other opportunities to collaborate.

**Alex Novak:** I want to add one more thing to that. Penn State is huge so we have a slightly different mechanism for delivering information. One challenge we have is with our commonwealth

campuses. There are 24 of them and they are all over the state; some of them are very small. And they really struggle to be heard in the noise that Penn State makes. One thing that we realize is that sustainability is a great way for these people to tell their stories. So publish something that happened on their campus and it won't necessarily get picked up by the news or media at University Park, or Philadelphia Inquirer, or the Pittsburgh Gazette. But once it goes to that sustainability filter, then it suddenly a positive story about students making a difference, faculty making a difference. So now we are seeing a huge uptake from our commonwealth campuses where people are using sustainability to tell their stories. It is the medium itself that becomes helpful to them. Remember that every college and every unit wants to do something to promote itself. Getting people with good PR not only makes them feel good, but it gives them something to share with their dean and something to share with their development office.

### Question 13

**What if you are in an office of one? With limited resources, how do you prioritize?**

**Dallase Scott:** Start out by asking yourself the questions that we talked about in the beginning; really try to understand your goals. If you don't get your goals out of the gate, it's really easy to zigzag all over the place and chase after different types of messaging opportunities and not really dig deep into one specific area that you are hoping to make progress in. Goals can give you the opportunity to prioritize in one specific space and can possibly help you prioritize who you reach out to and what type of messaging you want to create.

**Alex Novak:** I would add that we knew that when the Sustainability Institute was formed, there was no communications plan. We did not have any full-time staff. So we were really an office of none and then we got one person in to do the social media and another person in to help the website. What we realized very early on was that we could not be writing the stories and we could not be creating the content. That is a trap you could fall into because if you are trying to create all the content yourself, it's only going to have one voice which is yours and it's going to be marginalized to some degree. What you want to do is go out to other parts of your university and be a champion for people to tell sustainability stories to. Go out and interview people that are in unusual departments doing this kind of work. I think the notion of mainstreaming and the notion of getting the sustainability story into the regular cycle of news is what is important. Think about how you can tie what you do into the larger university operations.