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Developing an Integrated Marketing Campaign to Bring Back Lapsed Hunters in Virginia

Identifying Words and Phrases That Work

UNDER A NATIONAL SHOOTING SPORTS FOUNDATION HUNTING HERITAGE PARTNERSHIP GRANT, the Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries (VDGIF) recently partnered with Responsive Management, Southwick Associates, Tammy Sapp, and Jodi Valenta of Mile Creek Communications to develop a comprehensive integrated marketing plan that will result in a research-based communications outreach program to recruit lapsed hunters in Virginia.

In 2008, about 187,000 resident hunting licenses were sold in Virginia, compared to nearly 218,000 in 2005. This project is the VDGIF's first targeted effort to reach out to lapsed hunters. The overall project included the following components:

- ◆ Identifying lapsed hunters to develop the sample for the survey.
- ◆ Reviewing VDGIF strategic and marketing plans, reviewing literature regarding past research pertinent to the study, evaluating current VDGIF outreach and educational activities, and conducting staff interviews.
- ◆ Conducting three focus groups of lapsed hunters, the results of which were used in part to develop the telephone survey instrument.
- ◆ Conducting a telephone survey of lapsed hunters and analyzing the survey data.

This article discusses results of the telephone survey of lapsed hunters and analysis of the resulting data, two of the three components of the project conducted by Responsive Management. The telephone survey was conducted in November 2009. Responsive Management

obtained a total of 803 completed telephone interviews of lapsed hunters from Virginia.

One important goal of the survey was to determine what words, phrases, and messages resonate positively with lapsed hunters in relation to hunting. The results will be used to develop communications strategies for encouraging lapsed hunters to return to purchasing licenses and to the sport.

Reactions to Words, Phrases, and Messages as They Relate to Hunting

The survey presented respondents with 36 words or short phrases. They were then asked to indicate if the



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Words and Phrases That Were Asked About in the Survey

“Does this have a positive, negative, or neutral association with hunting?”

Economical	<i>Active</i>	Conserve	PEACEFUL	Heritage
<i>Thrill</i>	Environmentally friendly	<i>Fun</i>	ENVIRONMENT	<i>Outdoor lifestyle</i>
Friends	Family	Excitement	<i>Healthy</i>	
Natural	Quality	Tradition	Escape	The basics
Conservation	<i>Expensive</i>	Investment	Get away from it all	<i>Connect to nature</i>
Manage	Protect	Wildlife management	Conservation funding	Inexpensive
Roots	Quality time	<i>Memories</i>	Preserve	Stewardship
<i>Relaxing</i>	<i>Organic</i>			

word or phrase had a positive, neutral, or negative association with hunting.

At least 90% of lapsed hunters made a positive association with the following words or phrases in relation to hunting: “connect to nature” (96%), “quality time” (94%), “fun” (94%), “get away from it all” (93%), “relaxing” (92%), “memories” (91%), “excitement” (91%), and “heritage” (90%).

The survey also presented respondents with 28 messages that might encourage them to purchase a hunting license. For each message, the survey asked respondents if the message would be very effective, somewhat effective, or not at all effective at getting them to buy a Virginia hunting license.

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Three of the messages stand out, each with at least 50% of respondents saying it would be very effective at getting them to buy a Virginia hunting license:

- ◆ “Make memories. Take someone special hunting.” (54%)
- ◆ “Hunting—protect the heritage, protect the environment.” (54%)
- ◆ “Hunting bonds family. Share the experience.” (50%)

The complete list of messages is available in the final report; see the link below.

Implications for Communications Strategies

Taken together, many of the top messages pertain to the “passing on the hunting heritage” theme. Two of the top three messages focus on the hunting heritage, and the other is a “blended theme” message that combines the hunting heritage theme with a conservation theme. Furthermore, when asked about message themes, respondents’ top message theme was “being reminded that it is important to continue the hunting heritage of this country” (this was the top theme that respondents indicated would make them very or somewhat likely to purchase a Virginia hunting license during a year in which they otherwise might not). Finally, “heritage” ranked eighth among words and phrases with which respondents said they had a positive association regarding hunting.

“Connect,” “share,” “make memories,” and “heritage” were used frequently in the top nine messages rated as

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being very effective. All messages that used the word “connect” were in the top nine messages, regardless of whether the concept referred to making connections with nature or with family and friends. The phrase “connect to nature” was the top-ranked term among words and phrases that respondents indicated as having a positive association with hunting; the word “memories” ranked sixth. The message that ranked fourth overall as very effective, “Connect to nature, hunt Virginia,” was the top-ranked message as being very effective among those who indicated they are not at all likely to purchase a 2009–2010 hunting license.

Although one of the top messages overall, “Hunting—protect the heritage, protect the environment,” uses the word “environment,” its concept of protecting the environment is blended with the hunting heritage theme. All three messages pertaining only to the “environmental impact of hunting” theme, essentially

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an “environmentally friendly” or “going green” theme, ranked quite low in the ratings and were in the top messages rated not at all effective. Also note that the blended messages that ranked high did not have a strong “going green” message, but rather an appeal to protect the environment that did not use common “going green” terms that were used in the low-ranked messages, such as “natural,” “organic,” and “local.”

Many direct “buy a license” messages were not popular. The direct “buy a license” message appears to be more effective when used in conjunction with the words “conserve” or “conservation.” The three messages with a direct “buy a license” statement that were among the top 12 messages rated as very or somewhat effective associated buying a license with the concept of conservation.

The next phase of the project is currently under way where the research team at Responsive Management is working with the communications team of Tammy Sapp and Jodi Valenta to craft a communications campaign that is based on a solid foundation of research.

The full report, including more results and recommendations regarding the effectiveness of words, phrases, and messages; results on satisfaction and dissatisfaction with hunting in Virginia; constraints to hunting participation; motivations for purchasing a hunting license; personal lifestyle data; and an examination of target markets is available at http://www.responsivemanagement.com/download/reports/VA_HHP_Lapsed_Hunter_Report.pdf (478KB PDF).

Is Hunting on Private Land Affecting Conservation Funding in Virginia?

Recruiting lapsed hunters to buy licenses is especially important in Virginia because of one particular finding of this study: Nearly half of the “lapsed” hunters in the survey (46%) said that they had hunted on private land in Virginia in the 2008–2009 season (Virginia hunting regulations allow hunting on private land without a license in specific situations). Thus, in Virginia, many people who were thought to be “lapsed” hunters are actually lapsed license buyers.



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What some of these hunters might not know is that hunting license fees collected by the Commonwealth of Virginia are the main source of funding for the VDGIF, and that these funds make wildlife and habitat conservation in Virginia possible. If close to half the hunters who do not purchase a license in a given year are actually hunting on private land, this indicates a major loss of funding for wildlife management in Virginia.

“This is alarming news because it means the agency is losing funds, which could be used for conservation work, in two ways,” said Tammy Sapp, who was one of the partners in the VDGIF study. “The first is the obvious loss of license sales money from private land hunters who qualify for an exemption. The second way is less apparent, yet extremely important to VDGIF funding. Fewer licensed hunters means the agency qualifies for less money through Federal Aid in Wildlife Restoration. This program authorizes hunters and shooters to pay an excise tax on firearms and ammunition that is apportioned back to the states based on a formula that factors in the number of licensed hunters. Bottom line, those who don’t buy a hunting license reduce federal matching money for VDGIF’s wildlife management and habitat improvement projects.”

This is one more reason that using conservation messages to encourage lapsed hunters to buy a license could help the agency, by letting those who hunt on private land know that their purchase of a license does much more than simply allow them to hunt—it contributes to the overall management and conservation of hunting lands in the state, something from which they benefit directly.