

free-range thinking™

free-range thinking™ is a monthly newsletter for public interest groups, foundations, and progressive businesses that want to reach more people more effectively.

The Behavior Change Bible

When Everett Rogers Published the first edition of *Diffusion of Innovation* in 1962, he didn't plan on creating an enduring manual for changing behavior, but that's exactly what he did.

In public interest work it's easy to believe your projects are entirely different from those of your non-profitting colleagues, but take a step back and you'll see the essential challenge is the same: you are trying to convince people to change. To try a new thing (designated drivers), develop a new habit (recycling), give up an old one (unprotected sex), or shift a paradigm or two (gun control). Behavior change is our common task, and it's uncommonly difficult.

Fortunately, we have *Diffusion of Innovations*, a guide as invaluable to behavior-changers as *The Elements of Style* is to writers. Even 37 years after its debut, *Diffusion* remains the definitive manual for introducing new ideas and convincing millions of people to try them -- not that this was Everett Rogers' intention. *Diffusion* is an exhaustive analysis of hundreds of ideas from the cure for scurvy (which took nearly two centuries to gain acceptance) to cellular phones (which went from novelty to ubiquity faster than you can say Nokia). Rogers, the Chairman of the Department of Communications and Journalism at the University of New Mexico, studied these innovations to learn what makes a new idea attractive, how it spreads from one person to another, and what factors affect the speed of that diffusion. Ultimately, he isolates five factors that determine why certain ideas capture your imagination, and why some will spread like wildfire.

For people interested in effecting progressive change, these five factors can serve as reliable criteria for shaping and communicating your new idea:

Relative Advantage

Rogers defines this as "the degree to which an innovation is perceived as better than the idea it supercedes." In a nationwide Ad Council campaign, the Environmental Defense Fund emphasized the relative advantage of recycling in the campaign tagline, "If

you're not recycling, you're throwing it all away." By itself, the line implies recycling is better than sending all your trash to a landfill, and paired with a picture of the earth it powerfully alludes to the ultimate downside of not recycling. Factor #1 is a reminder that before planning any communications campaign, you must answer this question: *"How can I clearly demonstrate that my idea has advantages over the old way?"*

Compatibility

Compatibility is "the degree to which an innovation is perceived as being consistent with the existing values, past experiences, and needs of potential adopters." Living in a litter-free state should be compatible with the values of every Texan, but public clean-up campaigns routinely fell on deaf ears. When the slogan "Don't Mess with Texas" was introduced, however, littering dropped significantly for the first time. What changed? An environmental campaign became a matter of state pride, and this tapped a deeper core value with more Texans. Most "good causes" can usually assume they have factor #2 on their side - it tends to come with the territory -- but *don't ignore the possibility that there are other values you can engage that may serve you better.*

Complexity

"The degree to which an innovation is perceived as difficult to understand and use is inversely related to its rate of adoption," says Rogers. In plain English: the more understandable the idea, the faster it catches on. If you're working to reduce drunk driving, solutions can become very complicated since you're dealing with societal mores, law enforcement issues, and more. That's one reason why the designated-driver concept is such an elegant solution. It is easy to explain and implement. It may not completely eliminate the problem, but it has already saved countless lives and has been widely adopted as a result. The lesson of factor #3 is crystal clear: *keep it simple.*

Trialability

Innovations that can be tried on a limited basis have a far greater chance of diffusing than innovations which are not "divisible." Any "money back guarantee" that induces you to buy is factor #4 at work. It may not always be feasible, but if you can build into your new idea a pilot program, a 6-month trial period, or some other "trap-door" which allows your target audience to gingerly dip their toes into new behavioral waters, you increase both the speed at which the idea will spread and its chances for widespread acceptance.

Observability

Can people see early adopters trying your innovation? If they can, it will spread faster. Recycling diffused quickly partly because it is a very public action - you can see your neighbor wheeling his specially marked bin to the curb. Since many public interest ideas will not be as observable (e.g., campaign finance reform), *the challenge is to make your innovations visible*. Racial solidarity and pride are hard to see. You can't miss a Million Man March.

free-range follow-up

What's next after you've conducted a successful brainstorm? John Kao, CEO of The Idea Factory in San Francisco, offers this reminder that your job is far from over.

"Coming up with ideas is only one part of the process of innovation. If you have a brilliant idea and all you do is write a memo and 'cc' it around, it will likely have no impact. You have to get people emotionally engaged. No one got up the courage to storm the Bastille after receiving a memo."

- as quoted in Business 2.0, September 1999

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