

Promoting Positive Social Norms

Rain Barrel works with partners and clients to design strategies that will move people from harmful social norms to positive norms!

A key advantage RBC offers to clients is a rights-based approach that examines the relationships, drivers and dynamics of entrenched harmful practices and how these practices might be changed or abandoned when a social norms perspective is applied. We emphasize practical, operational implications in using social norms theory.

What is a social norms perspective?

We understand that individuals are sometimes conditioned by their beliefs about how **others** expect them to behave. They believe that others who matter to them expect them to follow one or more specific rules and conversely, that their friends and families and others know that they, too, are expected to follow those rules or practices. In other words, “social pressure” is in place. Not following rules of behavior may result in reprimand, shame or exclusion (some form of social punishment).

Conversely, following the behavior may result in praise or acceptance (some form of social reward).

Social norms are kept in place by expectations of two kinds: empirical (that is, “I do this because I see others doing this”) and normative (that is, “I think the others think I have to do so”). Thus, our behavioral choices are often interdependent. For social change to work, we often have to coordinate our change with other people.

How we approach stubborn norms

We work with you to shed light on complex and seemingly intractable issues such as resistance to childhood vaccines, early marriage or teen pregnancy, or adolescent smoking. We help design strategies that involve multiple communication channels, messages and materials. We advocate for many groups of people to be involved in changing social norms, including individuals who are influential with their constituents or members.

Strategic communication

A powerful way to influence collective behavior is to design communication strategies that take into account the dynamics of the social norm you wish to address. Exposure to consistent and appropriate mass and local media materials and related *public actions* helps to support consistency in the look, tone, and ‘feel’ of a new model of communication. It is an approach that avoids the polarized debate that has surrounded so many efforts to change harmful norms, by situating ‘expertise’ at family and community level and models strongly positive messages that appeal to wide audiences. We encourage a shift away

from traditional activism characterized by adversarial, highly negative and often top-down communication approaches.

This requires community engagement, respectful dialogue and interactive communication approaches based on a careful assessment of the type or types of social norms underlying given behaviors. For example, norms associated with religious or other value systems require different approaches from those linked only to social pressure and expectations.

What Rain Barrel can do for you

Depending on your needs, we offer a variety of support mechanisms:

- **Workshops:** Our 5-day workshop on social norms presents theory and practice. Participants examine relevant case studies and work on developing their own strategy.
- **Campaign and strategy design:** We can help you design and produce long-term campaigns using traditional mass media, social media and community-based discussion and theatre or music, as well as storytelling strategies to reach your target audiences.
- **Videos:** Our Entertainment-Education creatives and videographers will work with you to develop live-action or animated shorts illustrating positive strategies for adults, teenagers and young children facing choices about their own behavioral choices.

We never use one-size-fits all approaches; we work with you to meet the specific needs of your organization and audiences. We are friendly, flexible and reasonably priced.

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