

# When It Rains, It Pours

Engineering a successful rainwater harvesting program

By Namju Cho



Kuntz, an early adopter of the rainwater harvesting program, with the rain barrel installed at her home

The City of Los Angeles Stormwater Program partnered with S. Groner Associates (SGA) to launch a rainwater harvesting pilot program in 2010. The program's purpose was to encourage residents in select cities to install rain barrels at their homes to harvest rainwater, which can be recycled to water gardens and landscaping. It used a combination of proven community-based social marketing practices, such as recruiting early adopters to establish the behavior as a social norm. Twelve months after it kicked off, the pilot program received a whopping 3,033 signups—more than five times the goal of 600.

## Identifying Early Adopters

The most important element of the program was identifying the early adopters who could help establish rainwater harvesting as a social norm. The pilot targeted residents within the Sawtelle, Jefferson and Mar Vista areas in west Los Angeles, but all Los Angeles residents were eligible to apply. The company soon identified early adopters in Mar Vista who not only wanted to install rain barrels at their homes, but also were eager to spread the message to their communities. These early adopters included environmental leaders, city councilmen and neighborhood activists.

The early adopters were the first to receive rain barrels for their homes, making it easy for them to provide personal testimonials regarding their experience and opinion of the pilot program, which were featured in the outreach materials SGA developed.

Jeanne Kuntz, who sits on Mar Vista's neighborhood council, was one of the program's biggest champions. She was so passionate about the program that she personally attended her neighborhood farmers market each week with a table and materials to tell her neighbors how she felt about the program and how to sign up. She soon became the face of the campaign.

"This was a great program that I felt very passionate about, so the decision to help out in any way that I can was a no-brainer," Kuntz said.

The beauty of having early adopters is that as a community member herself, Kuntz carries a tremendous amount of credibility that a government entity cannot. Having a government decree that residents and businesses should sign up for a rain barrel or other rainwater harvesting equipment in a top-down manner is not going to be as effective as having someone that residents know and recognize talk about her own experience so they can empathize with her.

At community events and meetings, SGA had tables where brochures and applications were available to residents, and had a sample rain barrel on display so people could see what they actually looked like. These events were also an opportunity to talk to residents about the program and answer any questions they had on how the program works and how to join.

## Making It a Norm

Lawn signs are a proven way to establish a social norm, as they are highly visible and often have a clear and succinct message. SGA created lawn signs that read, "This house proudly harvests rainwater," which the early adopters, including Kuntz, placed on their lawns. A few days later, one of Kuntz's neighbors called, saying she was walking her dog and saw the lawn sign—and that she wanted to "proudly harvest rainwater, too!" This was the theory of social norms at its best.

Another critical component of the program was earned media, which also helped to establish rainwater harvesting as a norm. Once the early adopters like Kuntz went to work to help spread the message, the online blogging community covering regional water quality, sustainable lifestyle and neighborhood issues caught on, sharing their own experiences with rain barrels. The program soon took on a life of its own.

Supplementing blogging with traditional media added another layer of credibility, transparency and reach. Online stories drove print stories and

vice versa. As the online community buzzed about the program, SGA pitched and placed an article in the *Los Angeles Times* announcing the pilot program and how to sign up for a free rain barrel. The article became the second most e-mailed article of the day.

After the *Los Angeles Times* story ran, a broader spectrum of the online community joined in. Some bloggers showed off their creative sides by personalizing their barrels with painted decals and posting photos of the artwork. The *Los Angeles Times* reporter who first announced the program later bought and installed her own rain barrel and wrote a positive, first-person account of her experience with it, along with other eco-friendly things one can do at home.

SGA also utilized media to demystify the installation process, which could be perceived as overwhelming and be a barrier to signing up. By breaking down the installation process through radio and video, residents could see what it would entail and heard happy installers like Kuntz gush about the program—just the kind of story the campaign wanted to tell.

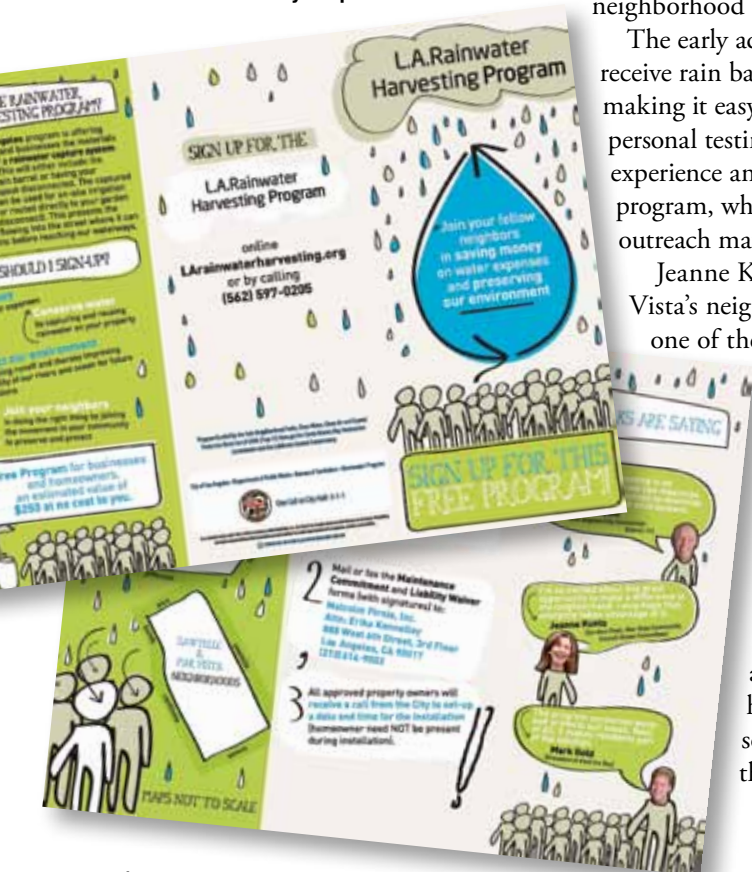
The effort led to 100 media placements in outlets such as KPCC/NPR, CBS, *Daily News*, *News Central* and local community blogs, including Green LA Girl and LA Creek Freak. SGA also garnered extensive coverage in local media, including the *Westside Cities Daily Press* and *The Argonaut*, to name a few.

## Social Media Buzz

In addition to earned media, SGA conducted online outreach through the program website and social media, and made sure there was cross-pollination across channels. It encouraged program applicants to talk about their experiences with rain barrels on the LA Stormwater Program's social media platforms, such as its blog and Facebook page.

SGA also developed a website for the rainwater harvesting program that provided residents with information on the pilot program and how to harvest rainwater. The website, which was taken down when the pilot period ended, included a how-to guide for

A brochure provided information about the rainwater harvesting program, including testimonials from early adopters.



installing a rain barrel and a list of rain barrel manufacturers.

The website also connected visitors to the storm water program's blog, Facebook page and e-newsletter so the social media elements could work in tandem with one another. SGA linked a Facebook photo album to the website so viewers could see photos of the program's participants installing rain barrels at their homes. The message essentially was, "Everyone else is doing it because it's cool, and so should you."

### Pilot Program Results

As a result of the marketing strategy and community outreach approach, the program received 3,033 applications. The program then selected rainwater harvesting participants based on location in designated pilot areas who could fill the 600 available spots for residents (e.g., rain barrel, down-spout disconnects) and businesses (e.g.,



Lawn signs helped to establish rainwater harvesting as a norm in the neighborhoods.

planter boxes).

### Program Sustainability

After the pilot program was completed, SGA made the following additions to the rainwater harvesting website: a "do not drink" sticker designed for residents' rain barrels; a

request form for residents to receive free "do not drink" stickers; a Tool Check List page for residents to refer to when preparing to install a rain barrel; and a "How to Install a Rain Barrel" video.

The popularity of the rainwater harvesting pilot program has Los

Angeles residents still e-mailing, calling in and commenting on the program's social media outlets. All residents are directed to the LA Rainwater Harvesting website and encouraged to sign up for the *LA Storm Water* e-newsletter for future updates regarding rainwater harvesting. At least one city (Culver City, Calif.) has tried to replicate its program and used the same materials SGA developed.

The program was presented a California Water Environment Assn. award for the public education program in fiscal year 2010-2011. *wqp*

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