THE POWER OF SIMPLE

How the Natural Resources Defense Council effectively unearthed and reframed compelling research to raise public awareness and effect policy change around food waste.

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Back in 2006, the Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC) hired a bright young scientist who wanted to figure out how to get American farmers to use less water, gas, and fertilizer, and fewer pesticides as they grew food.

Her name was Dana Gunders, and after studying the problem for some years, she produced a 69-page report titled *Improving the Efficiency of the US Food System: A Summary of the Problem and Steps Toward Addressing It*.

That usually would have been the end of it. NRDC is a 46-year-old shop mostly made up of policy wonks, and powered by science and law. We’re the folks who helped bring about the Clean Air Act and the Clean Water Act, and contributed some critical thinking to President Obama’s plan to cut carbon pollution from power plants. But for much of our history, communicating our work to the public was an afterthought. We won by going deep, and getting our wonk on. And we were more than a little suspicious of anything that smacked of “dumbing down” our approach.

But Gunders’ report coincided with a sea change in the way we practiced communications. Our primarily “press release on demand” communications department was becoming a partner in the organization’s planning processes, working to find new and unexpected means of capturing public attention for NRDC’s work and issues.

We read the report, and lo and behold, buried at the very end were these incredible statistics: Forty percent of the food grown in the United States is wasted from farm to fork to table—at a cost of $165 billion, or $2,200 every year for every family in America. If we reduced those losses by just 30 percent, we could feed 50 million Americans—50 million people in a country where 48 million live in food-insecure households.

By the time the comms team finished our work, those facts were front and center, and the report had a new title: *Wasted: How America Is Losing Up to 40 Percent of Its Food From Farm to Fork to Table*.

We frontloaded all the juicy findings so that they framed the report. We restructured the content so that it amplified the data with a clear and engaging farm-to-fork narrative—tracking the waste from the farm, through production and sale, to the kitchen. Brain science tells us visuals matter, so we developed a complementary set of infographics to illustrate the waste at each stage of the food chain, and acquired photos of fruit that people typically discard because it’s not perfectly formed.

Then we got to work on our outreach strategy.

We wanted to get our data and ideas in front of critical decision makers and stakeholders. We also wanted to use the stunning findings to reach audiences that had never heard of NRDC, or connected the food on their plates to environmental issues. That meant creating a distinction between audiences. We used the report to alert experts to the issue of food loss along the production cycle, while our mainstream press promotion—which targeted foodie blogs, consumer reporters, and home and lifestyle websites—focused on kitchen waste, consumer cost, and advice for making food last longer. Environmental reporters were also on the list, but our strategy drove us to reach beyond them.

We had several interlinked goals: First, we wanted to take advantage of the branding opportunity. No one else was talking about this topic, so we had an opportunity to own an issue and get NRDC’s name out there in a major way. Second, we wanted to mainstream our work. “Environmentalism” is a really antiquated and opaque term for work that deals with the food we eat, the air we breathe, and the water we drink. We had an opportunity to break down jargon and prejudice, and to build a bridge between NRDC’s work and people’s everyday lives. Third, we wanted to empower people. So often, people feel helpless in the face of environmental threats. Here, we had a problem they could do something about. Lastly, our work to increase public awareness would provide our policy advocates with needed ammunition for effecting major policy change.

It all worked.

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such as The Atlantic and The Washington Post ran multiple stories; we secured targeted coverage with dozens of leading agriculture, business, and environmental media outlets; and Grist.org, often considered the go-to source for environmentalists, cross-posted a blog series by Gunders.

Our media outreach and momentum even prompted a syndicated editorial cartoon and jokes on The Tonight Show.

All told, this policy report was the most successful NRDC has ever published, and it continues to spur new media inquiries on a weekly basis. More importantly, it has helped spark change. Last September, both the Obama administration and the United Nations set first-ever targets for reducing food waste. Congress introduced landmark legislation to expand the donation of food that might otherwise be thrown away. On the next page, we list our 10 tips on turning a wonky project into a success.

Businesses are also getting in the game. A company called Imperfect Produce, for example, launched a cosmetically imperfect produce box delivery service, and General Electric announced an open-source refrigerator that might allow for some real innovation in fridge design. The restaurant scene is joining in: Feeding America received support from Google to create an online marketplace that enables more restaurants and grocery stores to donate excess food, and well-known chef Dan Barber recently launched a pop-up restaurant called WastED that utilizes misshapen or frequently discarded foods. Our achievements—significant action and change across all sectors and at all levels—greatly exceeded our expectations, but we’re not done yet. We’ve begun partnering with cities to figure out how to save food on a municipal scale, and recently worked with Gunders to publish a handbook for wasting less food in the kitchen. Last month, we launched Save the Food, NRDC’s first-ever large-scale advertising campaign, in partnership with the Ad Council. The campaign—which includes our broadcast video, “The Extraordinary Life and Times of Strawberry”—aims to profoundly shift consumer behavior and create pressure for further policy change at all levels. Results? Too soon to tell, but we’re pretty sure we’re all going to waste a lot less food by the time we’re through.

Lisa Benenson is Senior Adviser at UNICEF, where she manages global operations for digital strategy, media relations, and internal communications. UNICEF promotes the rights and well-being of children in 190 countries and territories. She was formerly the chief communications officer for NRDC, one of the nation’s most effective environmental groups. At NRDC she led digital strategies and fundraising, brand and marketing, editorial content, and public relations.
Along the way, we’ve learned a few things about making a wonky project into a communications success.

1. **KEEP IT SIMPLE.**
   Jargon doesn’t make your work sound smarter; it just makes it harder for everyone else to understand. We looked for core messages and statistics, and prioritized those to deliver compelling story ideas to potential publishers.

2. **KNOW YOUR CONTENT.**
   The better communications staffers understand the project, the better they’ll be at creating an arsenal of compelling story angles. We partner with our program teams early and often.

3. **FOCUS ON SOLUTIONS.**
   Telling folks about a problem makes a story for a day, but if you can also talk about solutions, your work will have staying power. For food waste, we offered a range of actionable recommendations to reduce food waste that were tailored to different audiences—including farms, restaurants, grocery stores, and consumers.

4. **MAKE YOUR STORY TIMELY.**
   Every story benefits from a news hook. For “Wasted,” we connected our story ideas to the nation’s devastating drought and growing worries about rising food prices.
5 SHARE THE UNEXPECTED.
The only way to stop reporters from throwing your story idea straight into the trash is by writing a gotta-look subject line. We leveraged our most compelling factoids with “Did you know?” headlines that caught attention.

6 REMEMBER TO SHOW AND TELL.
Using visual, evocative, and personal language helps people see the urgency of existing problems and how they can change. For instance: The average American wastes so much food that it’s like buying four bags of groceries and leaving one in the store.

7 BOLSTER STREET CRED.
We wove many real-life examples and success stories into the report, our blogs, and our press releases to add a layer of authority and credibility to our ideas. The fact that businesses and chefs are voluntarily adopting food waste solutions we proposed proves that these stories helped develop trust.

8 BEFRIEND THE GATEKEEPERS.
Identify the right press contacts at national, syndicated stations and wires, and pitch reporters far ahead of your actual release date with embargoed information to secure stories in high-profile media outlets. Coverage there will drive coverage in other outlets and generate local stories.

9 REPEAT YOURSELF.
Don’t think you’ll bore people if you say the same thing over and over. Repeating your message makes it stick. For us, the statistics were the most powerful message.

10 SUSTAIN THE BUZZ.
Presenting your expert (in our case, scientist Dana Gunders) as a thought leader and getting them to blog allows you to spin new story angles on an already hot topic.