Don't Break the Lake: A Social Marketing Campaign for Plastic Marine Debris in Cleveland, Ohio
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Don't Break the Lake is a social marketing campaign launched for the greater Cleveland area in Ohio, USA by the City of Cleveland’s Office of Sustainability in collaboration with Cleveland Water.

Community-based social marketing combines psychology and social marketing in order to identify barriers to a desired behavior, e.g. using a reusable bag versus a plastic grocery bag. The campaign was motivated by the Great Lakes Land-based Marine Debris Action Plan (2014) and concern over the impact of plastic marine debris in Lake Erie waters.

Lake Erie is one of our greatest assets in the region, and an invaluable natural resource. This campaign specifically focuses on the reduction of plastic grocery bags and plastic disposable water bottles.

Through surveys conducted by Ohio Sea Grant, the barriers to desired behaviors were identified and a campaign was developed to address these barriers. The long-term goal for this project was to target specific behaviors that will result in the reduction of plastic grocery bags and plastic disposable water bottles use in our region and the ultimate reduction of the amount of plastic marine debris entering our waters.

Reusable Grocery Bags
The City of Cleveland is partnering with a local grocery store, Zagara’s Marketplace, to promote Don’t Break the Lake and remind customers to bring a reusable bag when shopping.

Zagara’s has agreed to participate in the campaign in the following ways:
- Organize informational sessions with staff about the threat of plastic pollution to our waters
- Place campaign signage around the store
- Sell reusable bags with proceeds going to organizations focused on Lake health
- Hold water trivia contest in store lobby with free bags as prizes
- Provide window clings to store customers
- Place banners in the parking lot
- Place messaging on digital screens above checkout lines

John Zagara was the only grocery store owner in the region to testify before Cuyahoga Council in favor of the Carryout Bag Fee proposed by County Council.

Ohio Sea Grant conducted an online survey to gather data on the barriers to desired behaviors with regard to the use of plastic grocery bags and plastic disposable water bottles in the Cleveland area. A common response (80.4%) given as to why a reusable bag was not used was because they “forget.” The full report may be found in Marine Pollution Bulletin 127 (2018) 576-585.

Using these results, a Cleveland marketing firm developed the Don’t Break the Lake campaign.

Partners for the campaign were Alliance for the Great Lakes, Cleveland Water and NOAA.

Some of the lessons learned were:
- The City of Cleveland is currently developing a racial equity tool in conjunction with its Climate Action Plan; this tool should be used in the development of future campaigns.
- Expand the scope of the survey to include better representation of the population in the region.
- Define a narrower target audience for the campaign.

Promotional materials developed for both plastic marine debris items are:

Funding for this campaign was secured through the NOAA Marine Debris program.