

# The Pull of Social Comparisons

People look to what others are doing as a guide for their own behavior.

## Background

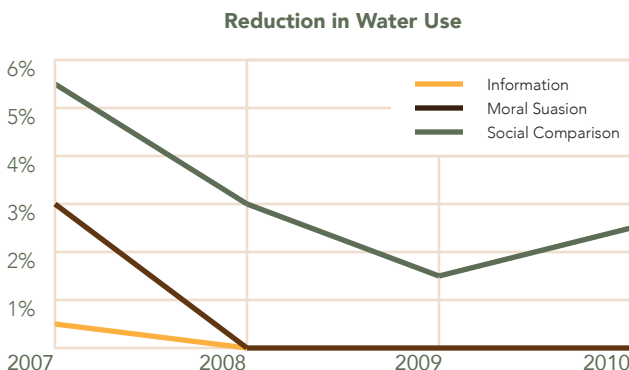
In 2007, an experiment with more than 100,000 households in Georgia shed light on how to inexpensively encourage people to voluntarily reduce their water use during droughts. One group of households received only information on how to reduce water use. Another group also received a personalized letter asking them to reduce their water use (moral suasion). A third group also received information in their letter on how their water use compared with other households in their county (social comparison). A fourth group received no message and served as a comparison group.

## Social Comparisons

### Reduce Water Use

The social comparison message had the largest and most persistent effect on reducing water use. Impacts from this single message could be detected six years later. (1-3)

When we design and implement programs, you may wish to include social comparisons as a cost-effective way to boost your program's impacts.



For references and more information about *The Pull of Social Comparisons* (Behavioral Insights Brief no. 2), visit [www.centerbear.org](http://www.centerbear.org) or email CBEAR co-Directors, Paul Ferraro ([pferraro@jhu.edu](mailto:pferraro@jhu.edu)) and Kent Messer ([messer@udel.edu](mailto:messer@udel.edu)).

Funded by USDA, CBEAR is a consortium of major research universities that uses the most modern science and methods to improve agri-environmental programs.

## Success Stories

In reminder letters to citizens behind on paying their taxes, including a sentence saying "9 out of 10 people in [your location] paid their taxes on time," increased response rates by 15%, resulting in an additional \$250 million tax revenue in 6 weeks. (4)

Comparing an individual's participation in a curb-side recycling program with their neighbors' participation resulted in almost 6% more participation than those who were not shown a comparison to others. (5)

## Applications

**Want to get more re-enrollees?** When sending reminders about re-enrolling, include information about how many other producers similar to them have already enrolled in the program.

**Are participants a year or two behind their contract schedule?** Try sending a letter to producers in danger of contract cancellation, informing them of the benefits of participation and letting them know that most producers in their county or state (give the specific percentage) complete their contract obligations within one year of their contractual deadline.

## Design Tips

Use comparison groups whose behaviors people care about (like neighbors in the same county or state); and Make clear that the behavior you seek to encourage is popular among this comparison group (or unpopular if you seek to discourage it).

## Testing Ideas

Before changing a program, testing can be used to estimate possible impacts. New social comparisons can be rigorously tested with randomized controlled trials. With testing, we can design evidence-based programs with greater levels of participation, participant satisfaction, and improved environmental outcomes.