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Holiday Gift for Food Pantries

Client Savings top \$160K

Environmental Benefits Stay in the Chicago Area

Each year, to celebrate the season, we give holiday presents to associates and friends. In the past we've given out pens, Kill-A-Watt meters and personal organizers. This holiday we decided to take a different approach to gift giving – instead of giving presents to associates and friends, we decided to give out Compact Fluorescent Lamps (CFLs) at food pantries on the south side of Chicago and Oak Park/River Forest. For those that don't know, CFLs are the energy efficient replacements for incandescent light bulbs. They save 75% of the energy and last 10 times as long as the incandescent light bulbs invented by Thomas Edison over 130 years ago. Over the past few weeks we've given out over 3,500 CFLs to 849 families in need. Over the operating life of the CFLs each family will save approximately \$200 in electricity expense. Total savings for this phase of the program exceed \$160K and the environmental benefit of our actions is equal to that of 1,600 Renewable Energy Certificates. And because the energy reduction is here in the Chicago area, the reduction in pollution is the same as building and operating renewable energy plants here.

When we were first developing the Holiday CFL plan we were given the option of shipping the CFLs to the central location of the Greater Chicago Food Depository, the organization that coordinates and supports the activities of most food pantries in the Chicago area. They, in turn, would distribute CFLs to their food pantries. While this option would have been easier and less time consuming for us, based on our experience with the lack of CFL acceptance by the general population, we decided to hand out CFLs to food pantry clients ourselves on the days they pick up food. This process would allow us to not only “sell” the use of CFLs, but also take data on attitudes and the level of use of CFLs in these communities. We set up a little demonstration with two desk lamps (one with a 14-Watt CFL and one with a 60-Watt incandescent bulb) connected to Watt meters to illustrate the energy-saving capabilities of CFLs. Each family was given one four-pack of CFLs. We also emphasized that throwing out a working incandescent light bulb made economic sense and that they should immediately install the CFLs as soon as they got home. Under this phase of the program we visited five food pantries in Chicago and one in Oak Park/River Forest.

Findings

CFL Awareness – Approximately 99% of the clients knew about CFLs. They were called “energy savers.” People knew that CFLs save energy and money on their “light bill,” but most had no idea of how much a CFL saved. The two-desk lamp set up illustrated the reduction in energy usage. Most were impressed with how much less energy was being consumed by the CFL. Having them touch the metal shade of each bulb made it clear how much more of the incandescent bulb's energy

consumption was converted to heat versus light. With the light output being the same and the Watt meter reading 75% less for the CFL lamp, they could see how energy savers are also money savers. In translating the energy savings into light-bill savings, we emphasized the 10-times longer life of CFLs. The \$50 potential savings per CFL was met with excitement.

CFL In-home Use – The median number of CFLs installed in homes was two to three. The number of CFLs installed ranged from zero to maximum market penetration (i.e., all sockets were filled). Approximately 5% of the client families had no CFLs installed in their homes. Most clients lived in houses or large apartments, thereby exhibiting a large savings potential beyond current use level of two or three CFLs per home.

Resistance to Purchasing CFLs – While most knew that “energy savers” saved money, few went out of their way to purchase CFLs. They said that the cost of buying CFLs was prohibitive. In their communities they would spend up to \$9 for two CFLs. No one knew that CFLs were being subsidized through several retail channels by ComEd’s Energy Smart Program. For many clients the big box stores that sell CFLs at reasonable prices are not readily accessible. They were amazed that one could buy a four-pack for less than \$2 at Home Depot. At \$2 for four, they quickly surmised that the cost for CFLs was approximately the same as that of incandescent light bulbs, thereby removing the price barrier – if they could get to the right store.

Mercury Content – About 1% of the clients brought up the mercury content in the lamps. We discussed how they should be disposed of in a safe manner. With each four-pack of CFLs we gave information on where best to use their CFLs in their homes along with information for safe disposal. Unfortunately, if this group has problems getting access to reasonably-priced CFLs, the CFLs are probably getting tossed into the regular trash when they burn out. A CFL contains 4 mg of mercury. Coal contains mercury that is dispersed over the countryside when it is burned to generate electricity. In Chicago, the amount of mercury not emitted into the air because of the use of a 60-Watt equivalent CFL is approximately 10 mg. So the environment is better off by 6 mg through the use of a single CFL. Safe disposal of CFLs is something we all have to work on going forward.

Conclusions

Our decision to visit the food pantries and participating in the distribution of the CFLs was the right one. We spent 30 to 60 seconds talking to each client about CFLs and we’d extract a promise that they would immediately go home and use them. While we really didn’t expect everyone to immediately go home and put the CFLs in an awaiting socket, the likelihood of that happening probably increased significantly because we took the time to talk with them. The alternative of merely putting the CFLs in a grocery bag alongside the canned beans would have reduced the efficacy of our program significantly through breakage and lax implementation. Most clients (90%) were extremely appreciative of the CFLs and said that “of course” they would use them, which made us feel that we were making a difference.

In the communities we visited there is a lack of access to reasonably-priced CFLs. It is unfortunate that they are subsidizing programs through a line item on their “light bill,” and they are a segment of society that could very much use the savings CFLs generate, but they have little access to the retail outlets that participate in these programs. So they are losing out on both ends. Current utility-sponsored programs don’t seem to be reaching this market segment.