

# **“Curb Your Consumerism” Waste Reduction Campaign Case Study**

Spring 2018 | By Nate Steers

## **Project Overview**

While the consumption of goods and services is a crucial component of modern economic systems, the culture of consumerism contributes to waste, resource depletion, pollution, and social and economic inequities. In recognition of students' propensity to consume throughout their time at college, the UVM Eco-Reps carried out a campaign to educate students about the effects of consumerism and various ways to decrease consumption habits.

## **Background**

How much we choose to consume as individuals directly impacts the size of our environmental footprint in the world. For the majority of goods and services, the more we consume, the larger our impact on the environment. While consumption is sometimes driven by necessity, such as in the case of food or healthcare, much of consumption habits relate to material goods. Moreover, the growth and development of digital marketing, manufacturing, and transportation have made access to goods and services cheaper and more efficient than ever. However, due to issues such as inefficient supply chains, planned obsolescence, and pollution and waste production, consumerism continues to be a major stressor on environmental systems.

The negative implications of consumerism, however, can be mitigated if people are willing to change their consumption habits. While many recognize the practicality of the recycling and reuse of products, other strategies, such as DIY products and bulk purchasing, are less known ways of reducing one's environmental footprint when consuming. If both producers and consumers are willing to make a conscious effort to reduce the environmental impacts of consumerism, then the sustainable purchasing and use of goods and services can grow to become the norm in our society.

## **Goals**

Through various outreach efforts, the campaign goal was to educate students about the environmental impacts of consumerism and provide resources and strategies for reducing consumption habits and reusing materials and products.

## **Implementation**

The UVM Eco-Reps consists of 20 students that are divided up into five community teams of Change Agents, with each team assigned to a specified residential area on campus. Their efforts included a campus wide event as well as smaller events held in residential locations

In an effort to conduct campus wide outreach, the Eco-Reps hosted a sweater swap event in the UVM student center. This event was a means of promoting both the reuse and donation of used clothes by encouraging students and faculty to exchange winter clothing. Items for the swap were collected using donation bins in various campus locations and during tabling events in the week leading up to the event. The majority of items were donated by various area consignment stores. Participation in the event was free, regardless of whether an attendee was bringing something to contribute.

On a community team level, each team of Eco-Reps came up with their own outreach strategy to promote the practices and ideas geared towards reducing consumption habits. This includes education about responsible consumption, the culture of waste, waste reduction, doing more with less, bulk buying, thrifting, DIY, and the reuse and repairing of products. Additionally, the Eco-Reps created a local shopping guide to educate students about circulating money into their community and reducing environmental impacts by eliminating components of supply chains. This guide also provided students with information about locally owned businesses for clothing, food, and lifestyle shopping.

## **Timeline**

1/22/18 - 1/26/18

- Winter Involvement Fair - tabling to collect sweaters

1/29/18 - 2/2/18

- Sweater Swap collection tabling in student center
- Sweater Swap event

2/19/18 - 2/23/18

- Event: DIY Trail Mix & T-shirt Repurposing
- Event: Zero Waste Movie Night with Snacks and Hot Cocoa
- Event: DIY Sock Coozie with Hot Cocoa
- Event: DIY Trail Mix

2/26/18 - 3/2/18

- Event: DIY Trail Mix & T-shirt Repurposing
- Event: DIY Sock Coozie with Hot Cocoa
- Event: DIY Trail Mix

## **Financing**

Geofilter: \$21.75

Curb Your Consumerism Stickers: \$180.00

Food supplies for DIY and trail mix events: \$143.29

**Grand Total: \$345.04**



## Results

The success of the Sweater Swap event was measured by the number of donated items, attendance at the event, and interest on social media. Prior to the event, a total of 385 items were collected from both off-campus businesses and from on-campus tabling events and donation bins. While students and employees were encouraged to donate items to the event, the partnership with local businesses was crucial for the success of the Sweater Swap.

During the event, which had over 200 attendees, an additional 125 clothing items were donated or swapped with other items. Free participation in the swap, whether bringing an item to contribute, or not, ended up being very successful and easy to manage. The script for volunteers included mention of being respectful about what attendees took and gave in alignment with the “spirit” of the event. Additionally, due to the success of the event and the support garnered from students, the possibility of creating similar future events or a permanent space for donating and purchasing used clothing has sparked interest from the UVM Student Government Association.

Social media resources, such as Snapchat and Facebook, were also used to reach a broader population of students and community members. A Facebook event was created to promote the Sweater Swap event and the collection efforts. A total of 8,941 people were provided information about the event on Facebook, while the event page itself had a total of 1,178 views. Additionally, 223 people reported they were interested in the event while 58 said they would be in attendance. The Sweater Swap was also promoted during the event using a Snapchat Geofilter, which was designed by an Eco-Rep. The Geofilter was viewed a total of 3,166 times by Snapchat users during the Sweater Swap event.

## Lessons Learned

The Sweater Swap proved to be a success and managed to garner a lot of interest from students and faculty. While there were concerns about how organized the event would be, the flow of donations ensured that items were continually being cycled through. The success of this event has also promoted a discussion about a permanent installation of a donation based thrift store at UVM. This is a concept that other environmental groups have successfully put in place at their universities, allowing students to purchase used clothes and other goods or make donations themselves.

Another important aspect of this campaign is the promotion of local and sustainable businesses. UVM is located in Vermont’s largest city, which is home to a variety of locally owned stores and restaurants. The promotion of these local resources is important for building a sense of community and is particularly useful for new and incoming students who may not be familiar with the area.

In this discussion, it is important to consider consumption in the context of college campuses, which are densely populated areas of consumers and producers of waste. If institutions are seeking to be more sustainable by minimizing their

environmental impact, addressing the widespread issue of consumption and waste will require collective action.