

CASE
THE STORY OF STUFF

 Image: [The Story of Stuff](#)
WHAT IT'S ABOUT:

The Story of Stuff is a 20-minute online movie that became a movement for systemic change toward “less stuff, less toxic stuff, less waste, more sharing and more fun.” Created by and featuring sustainability expert Annie Leonard, the film explores the lifecycle of material goods and the impacts of excessive consumerism. It makes clear connections among a large number of social and ecological challenges and is a call to action to create a more sustainable and just world through changing production and consumption patterns. The original The Story of Stuff movie has been viewed more than 23 million times (and counting) globally since it launched in 2007 and is translated into over 30 languages. Its popularity led to the creation of the nonprofit, The Story of Stuff Project, and the development of additional award-winning animated and live-action movies. The movies use compelling illustrations and narration and adopt a curious and investigative tone. The twelve films together have been watched more than 50 million times and catalyzed hundreds of initiatives and campaigns by individuals and communities.

Over the past five years, there has been an evolution in the approach beyond story-based education to campaigning on compelling issues. The Story of Stuff nonprofit engages heavily in movement building working in coalition with other aligned individuals, organizations, and networks such as the global Break Free From Plastic movement.

Over one million people globally have joined the Story of Stuff community to engage collectively in policy or community-based campaigns and raise awareness including educators, students, parents, community leaders and groups, entrepreneurs, and academics. These community members take action on prioritized campaigns, utilize teaching tools, listen to podcasts, partake in study programs, and participate in Citizen Muscle Boot Camp - an online training program to foster sustainability leadership. Ultimately, The Story of Stuff’s strategic work falls into three broad categories: fight the bad, build the good, and change the conversation; with selected campaigns based on detailed analysis and consultation.

PROFILE

GEOGRAPHY: United States with global reach

AUDIENCE: Community groups, citizens, community leaders, educators, faith-based communities, change makers

ORGANIZATION: The Story of Stuff Project (NGO, nongovernmental organization)

DATE: 2007 – Present

DOMAIN: Holistic, Leisure and Consumer Goods

NEEDS ADDRESSED: Betterment, participation, understanding, identity, freedom, creation

COMMUNICATIONS METHODS: Campaigns, online videos featuring animation, curriculum, book, speeches, study programs, faith-based programs, Citizen Muscle Boot Camp, podcasts

PRINCIPLES IN ACTION

STAKEHOLDER-FOCUSED



The Story of Stuff nonprofit engages its community in a constant dialogue including through email exchanges, Facebook posts, surveys, and calls, as well through dialogue with coalition partners. Through this interaction, the team determines which approaches and campaigns stakeholders are most passionate about, what to engage in, and what to prioritize. A microbeads campaign and the Citizen Muscle Boot Camp emerged as strategic actions in response to stakeholder interest. Within the Break Free From Plastic movement (#BreakFreeFromPlastic), the team relies on the expertise and insights of their partners in countries throughout the Global South (as well as Europe and North America) to know what is happening in the world and how to find solutions.

BETTER LIVING



Story of Stuff campaigns highlight the magnitude and scope of the challenges at hand and emphasize “real solutions” throughout messaging, particularly the social and environmental innovations needed. The Story of Solutions emphasizes the necessary shift from “more” to “better” as the overarching goal for the economy and society and inspires their community with stories of leadership in [The Good Stuff](#) newsletter, such as the feature on [Pashon Murray, the founder of Detroit Dirt](#), community compost and garden initiative.

IMPACT



The Story of Stuff launched with a goal of reaching 50,000 people with an accessible and easy to understand presentation on consumption and production. Having far exceeded that goal, the organization now focuses on measuring the number of community members engaged and actions they are taking as well as the outcomes the Story of Stuff community is achieving in specific policy campaigns.

SYSTEMIC



The Story of Stuff movies and materials clarify complex challenges in accessible language and visuals, enabling understanding of the link between daily lives and the big picture including the patterns behind problems, not just the symptoms. One of their short films, for example, focuses on electronics and demonstrates how products are being ‘built for the dump’ to shed light on planned obsolescence. The approach also focuses on empowering community members to act and educate others through compelling narratives and an extensive resource site. Messaging emphasizes changing societal structures, such as a policy banning microbeads in cosmetics, rather than on just “shopping green.” The Story of Stuff campaign on bottled water aims to change the infrastructure and policies behind the product including challenging including Nestle’s right to access water resources in San Bernardino National Forest in California.



Image: [The Story of Stuff](#)

DYNAMIC LIFE CHANGES



The Story of Stuff is a partner with the Center for a New American Dream and encourages people to “Simplify the Holidays” by focusing on the meaning of the holidays and by giving experiences rather than shopping for physical gifts. Similarly, in one of its campaign strategies, The Story of Stuff focuses on influencing a particular life stage namely Grade 9 to 12 high school students through “Buy, Use, Toss? A Closer Look at the Things We Buy” curriculum.

COLLECTIVE ACTION



The Story of Stuff movies and campaigns are aimed directly at stimulating collective action rather than expecting solutions to be a burden on individuals on their own. Curriculum and congregation guides are created for school groups and faith-based communities rather

than on individuals acting alone. The micro-beads campaign links individual choice of purchasing choice of bead-free cosmetics to a broader movement of other individuals taking action as well as companies (e.g., Lush cosmetics) and policy-makers banning the microbeads from products.

Image: [The Story of Stuff](#)



RESPONSIVE



The Story of Stuff nonprofit is deeply participatory in its process of developing and adapting its strategy through social media and email exchanges, meetings, and surveys of its community. Early programs for schools and faith-based communities emerged from this responsiveness to the interests of the community. Before launching The Story of Stuff, Annie Leonard tested the movie presentation on hundreds of Rotary Clubs and among social change activists, then worked with Free Range Studios to produce and fine-tune the narrative. New movies in the series were adapted based on feedback on the original films, such as adding a larger emphasis on solutions rather than on simply outlining the problem.

COMMUNICATIONS TAKEAWAYS

Connecting with Audiences:

Illustrate the role for all actors in a system

Highlight the policy, corporate, and individual behaviour change needed. Provide clear guidance on how actors in the different roles can make a change (i.e. individuals can avoid products with microbeads and help push for a policy ban, companies can provide alternative products and lobby for policy change, etc.).

Framing:

Reveal the System

Don't assume people connect the dots between consumption and production issues or understand the best way to influence political, corporate and cultural systems. Use an investigative storytelling approach to reveal the relationships, as well as barriers and opportunities for change.

Strategy:

Make the action request explicit

The Story of Stuff Project invites people to participate from the minute they land on the website. By considering the journey one might take in exploring the site they put meaningful and consistent asks in places where people are likely to act. The Story of Stuff prepared for success by developing clear plans for how to move people from interest to action and to support this by providing a community to connect with.

Strategy:

Learn to win by winning

The Story of Stuff Project gives ordinary people experience with civic action. By selecting impact campaigns it gives its members opportunities to see the outcome of their advocacy, with the overarching goal of instilling in people worldwide a sense that systems change is not only possible, it's necessary and inspirational.

Tactics:

Build resources for institutions not just individuals

The resources developed by The Story of Stuff team include ones created for schools and faith communities. While this is somewhat limited in scope and could probably evolve to have stronger calls to action and resources for individuals, it does help the small team reach large numbers by enabling educators to discuss the systems and processes that contribute to environmental degradation. This approach helps attract a consistent audience and hone in on creating materials for a particular demographic.

MORE INFORMATION

<http://storyofstuff.org/>

<http://storyofstuff.org/movies/>

<https://www.youtube.com/user/storyofstuffproject>

<http://storyofstuff.org/blog/coworking-cooperating-and-coming-together-the-new-better-off-life-looks-pretty-darn-good/>

Roosevelt, Margot (July 13, 2010). "[Teaching 'stuff' about ecology](#)". Los Angeles Times.
Annie Leonard (2009) [10 Little and Big Things You can Do](#). Yes Magazine, 23 December.

This is an excerpt from the report: Fostering and Communicating Sustainable Lifestyles: Principles and Emerging Practices. United Nations Environment Programme - Sustainable Lifestyles, Cities and Industry Branch (UN Environment), 2016. The report co-authors are SCORAI - Sustainable Consumption Research and Action Initiative (Philip J. Vergragt and Halina Szejnwald Brown), One Earth (Vanessa Timmer, Dagmar Timmer, Dwayne A. Appleby), Climate Access (Cara Pike, Sutton Eaves, Rebecca McNeil), Tellus Institute (John Stutz). Copyright © United Nations Environment Programme, 2016.