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### **Background:**

For more than two decades, Elizabeth Roe has been helping public agencies and private companies communicate with the public about recycling, waste reduction, water pollution prevention, sustainability, and more. Elizabeth has led sessions on communications planning and messaging across media channels at various state, regional, and national conferences. Elizabeth is President of Eco Partners, Inc., a firm devoted to providing high-quality, cost-effective, customized local newsletters designed with residents in mind. Nationally, she is involved with the National Association of Government Communicators and the Solid Waste Association of North America (SWANA), where she serves as the Vice Director of the Communication, Education & Marketing Technical Division.

### **National SMM Plan Recommendations:**

The poet Adrienne Rich may seem an odd place to begin this recommendation. However, in thinking about what I've seen over the past 30 years of my career and what I hope for the next 20 or so, I keep coming back to Rich's words: "The dream of a common language."

As professionals in the solid waste and materials management industries, we speak in our own code. My job for nearly three decades has been translating that code into the language of regular people—the adults and children who must act for local programs to succeed.

At the most basic level, the genius of "The 3 R's" lies in its simplicity—three verbs which have generally understood and accepted meanings. As a communicator, I can do something with those three terms (and extensions, such as rethink, refuse, etc.) because I am building on concepts that are readily understood. In communicating with regular people leading their day-to-day lives for whom "zero waste" or "sustainable materials management" are not top of mind, effective communications focus on simple, action-based steps. These communications need to use plain language, avoid jargon, and repeat instructions regularly.

In continuing to explore the entire spectrum of sustainable materials management, I hope that we also consider what commonly understood and accepted language can and should be used in communicating with those outside our industry and particularly residents young and old. For example, one of the terms that has been embraced is "zero waste." The term is catchy, but is it helpful? "Zero" has a specific meaning to people who read and hear it. Inside the industry, we know that getting to zero waste is a long and complex process, which may well result in residuals of about 10%. However, for a regular person, 10% is not the same as zero. When we use terms such as "zero waste," we need to frame them properly and explain them clearly so that the language supports, rather than undermines, our goals.

### **Recommended Actions:**

- Create definitions for terms such as sustainable materials management, zero waste, etc. that can be used by all stakeholders nationwide.
- In citizen communications, use terminology that is clear, plain, and easily understood.
- Focus citizen communications on the concept of "waste as resource," which employs commonly understood terms and concepts.
- Communicate both program goals and how-to messages regularly in citizen communications.