



Behave!

CowBins (www.cowbins.com)

What are the secrets of getting someone to change their behaviour? Penny Walker looks at the latest advice from researchers.

We all hope that we can communicate successfully. But what makes a presentation, advert, leaflet or meeting a success? How do you ensure that it results in a change in the audience's knowledge, attitudes or behaviour? Over the last year or so, different parts of the UK Government have commissioned research into how to influence attitudes and – I would argue more importantly – in getting people to change their behaviour. Some of the most interesting work has focused on climate change.

Cross-government bodies like the Behaviour Change Forum have asked themselves and academics, consultants and practitioners what does and doesn't work.

A report from specialist sustainability communications agency Futerra is one result. Freely available at www.climatechallenge.gov.uk, 'The Rules of

the Game' is the basis for the 'Guide to Communicating Climate Change'.

Futerra has followed this up with guidance about changing behaviour, in its report 'New Rules: New Game'. The summary was released in the Autumn, with a fuller report due in early 2007.

Rules for changing behaviour

According to Futerra's report, these are the five key principles:

1. Go beyond the usual suspects.
2. Know the difference between sleepwalking (passive, habit-based autopilot) and retail therapy (active, conscious choices).
3. Refreeze good behaviours – once you have roused people to make different conscious choices, new positive behaviours need to become unconscious habits.
4. Forget bridging the 'value-action' gap. There is a well-known gap between people's values or attitudes, and their behaviour. Many behaviour-change strategies are based on increasing

people's awareness, changing their attitudes, and then expecting them to take action. This is based on a very poor understanding of what motivates and enables behaviour change.

5. Change groups. Don't focus on individuals – it's much easier to shift if those around you are changing too, as this provides 'social proof' that it is possible and not eccentric.

These principles and rules emerged from taking a thorough look at research on behaviour change – from all sorts of fields including purchasing behaviour, the evolution of the role of women in the workplace and how behaviour changes at different life stages. This was important ground-work, and something which Futerra's Solitaire Townsend says hadn't been done before in this way. "I went looking for something summarised and practical – short, digestible and usable by people who are putting together communications campaigns, and it just wasn't there. I was surprised."

Townsend explained what she found.

“Some of the things that sound obvious now, we didn’t like when we first realised them. Relying on survival instincts and concern about the future is a mistake – even for people who have young children. It just doesn’t work. Another surprise was what we learnt from cognitive dissonance theory: when there is a contradiction between people’s attitudes and their behaviour, they are more likely to change their beliefs.” This is summarised in Rule 23, “keep things compatible”.

Futerra came up with 25 rules for changing behaviour, which can be found in the report. Townsend has some favourites.

“We have summarised things in short and simple tactical rules. I particularly like Rule 22, ‘label people’. If you name someone as caring, it makes it easier to get them to act in a caring way later. This is called ‘symbolic self-completion’ in the text-books, and you can see it in the way that animal charities communicate with their supporters – calling them ‘dog lovers’. If you think of yourself as a dog lover, then you are more likely to pay attention to messages which explicitly target dog lovers. So if someone does something which is climate-friendly, whether they meant to or not, you should say, ‘thanks, you’re clearly someone who cares about the climate’. Then, next time, they’ll be more likely to listen to a climate-related message.”

Another of Townsend’s favourites is Rule 18, what she politely calls the sod-off factor – otherwise known as psychological

reactants. “A lot of the more strident environmentalists don’t believe the statistics about public awareness of and attitudes to climate change. They don’t believe that as many people are aware and think action should be taken, because when they talk to people about the issue, they get negative reactions. If you tell someone what to believe and what to do, they are likely to just say ‘no!’, even if they might, in other circumstances, agree with you. Telling someone what to do creates a strong negative reaction.”

Instead of triggering the ‘sod off’ response, Rule 25 suggests that the actions we want people to take should be presented as pleasures, not chores. Townsend says, “People have been trying to minimise the amount of chores they have to do, and they really don’t want to be adding more to their ‘to do’ lists. Instead, if you can get the action onto their mental pleasure / leisure list, then it’s more likely to get done.”

Townsend cites CowBins as an example of making a desired behaviour pleasurable. Recycling bins in New Cross, South London, were painted to look like Friesian cows. People were invited to ‘feed the cows’ with tins, paper and bottles. Yields went up by 61 per cent. In contrast, Rule 17 states that money generates weak changes, and Rule 4 that we are more worried about loss than gain. So saving a small amount of money, say by driving more fuel-efficiently, won’t be a strong motivator.

Successful at communicating?

All this good advice is just a few clicks away. You can find the web addresses below.

To keep your skills sharp and to help others change their behaviour, you can have fun using the Rules to design your next communications campaign.

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Futerra, and 'New Rules: New Game'
www.futerracom.org

Behaviour Change Forum
www.sustainable-development.gov.uk/government/task-forces/behaviour-change.htm

Guidelines for Communicating Climate Change www.climatechallenge.gov.uk,
www.climatechallenge.gov.uk/multimedia/guide.html

Key research:

‘Personal responsibility and changing behaviour: the state of knowledge and its implications for public policy’, by David Halpern and others, Prime Minister’s Strategy Unit, 2004.

‘Choice matters - alternative approaches to encourage sustainable consumption and production’, by Professor David Uzzell and others, commissioned by Defra, 2006.

‘Promoting pro-environmental behaviour: existing evidence to inform better policy making’, by Andrew Darnton and others, commissioned by Defra, 2006.

‘Innovative methods for influencing behaviours and assessing success: triggering widespread adoption of sustainable behaviour’, Brook Lyndhurst, for Defra, 2006.

‘An evidence base review of public attitudes to climate change and transport behaviour’, Dr Jillian Anable and others, for the Department for Transport, 2006.

Cognitive dissonance theory

“According to cognitive dissonance theory, there is a tendency for individuals to seek consistency among their cognitions (ie beliefs, opinions). When there is an inconsistency between attitudes or behaviours (dissonance), something must change to eliminate the dissonance. In the case of a discrepancy between attitudes and behaviour, it is most likely that the attitude will change to accommodate the behaviour.”

<http://tip.psychology.org/festinge.html>

Take that case of someone who considers themselves generally responsible and a good citizen. They also have a belief that high carbon emissions are a bad thing. They investigate their own carbon footprint and discover that it is very large. Their belief that good responsible citizens don’t do bad things is threatened by the other belief – that having a large carbon footprint is a bad thing. It is easier to change that second belief (that a large carbon footprint is bad) than it is to change the gas-guzzling 4x4 car.