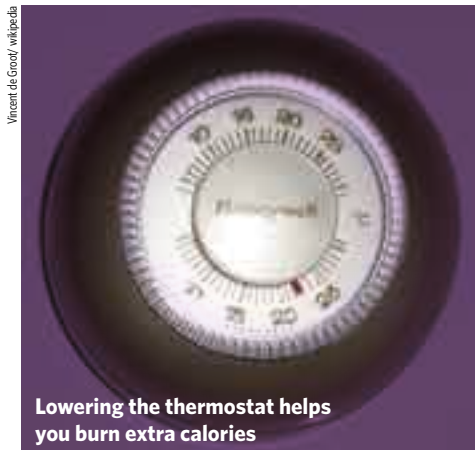


# “...Help your skin, your figure, your bank balance and the planet!”

*Beginning with an action which resonates with someone’s existing values can catalyse a chain reaction. Penny Walker explores the VBCOP theory of change*



the thermostat is, in supermodel Stella Tennant’s words, good for your skin and your figure.

In an elegant video promoting charity Global Cool’s ‘18 degrees of inspiration’ campaign, Tennant is seen wrapping up in this season’s latest knitwear trends and snuggling down under comfy duvets, having turned her heating down. She also says “the good news is, that if you turn your thermostat below 18 degrees, you could be burning an extra 60 calories an hour – and that’s while you’re fast asleep”. The campaign’s message is ‘turn up the style, turn down the heat’.

What a stroke of genius – marketing low-carbon living on the basis that it’s good for your complexion and will keep you thin.

There are planet-saving and money-saving lines in the video too, but the primary message is that wearing warm woollies is achingly cool.

## Ability and motivation

As well as communications which provide motivation and guidance, people need easy access to the equipment or opportunities. Clickable links to on-line knitwear shops, recycling bins in parks, real-time energy use displays – all these nudges make behaviour change easier and thus more likely.

## Behaviour change leads to attitude change

So far, so good. If we want people to turn down their heating, we need to present that

idea to them in their language, harnessing their motivations and we need to make it easy.

The exciting bit of Rose’s theory is the possibility that having adopted a climate-friendly behaviour – albeit for fashion-conscious reasons – the ‘consistency heuristic’ comes into play.

## Consistency heuristic – I do it, therefore it makes sense.

A heuristic is a ‘rule of thumb’ – more often right than wrong. The consistency ‘rule of thumb’ is based on a well-researched psychological phenomenon where behaviour leads opinion (rather than the other way around). “I do it, therefore it makes sense.” Rose says, “In essence, to maintain our belief that we are sane people whose views about what makes sense match our behaviours, if we change behaviour we then adapt our relevant opinions to suit it.”

## We do it

The admission “I do it” can be reinforced by letting people know they’re not alone. Far from being eccentric or pioneering, it’s a social norm (at least amongst the group they identify with). You may know the story of Milgram’s hotel towel reuse experiment. Four different towel-reuse messages were randomly distributed in hotel rooms. All of them mentioned the environmental benefits. Guests who were given the

If we want to get people to turn down their thermostats, we need them to understand climate change, right? This belief is based on an implicit theory about what drives behaviour – rational contemplation of the consequences of the action – and that what motivates us to want them to change has to be the same thing that motivates them to want to change. And if they aren’t motivated by climate change, then we have to tell them more about it, in stronger terms, to get them motivated. We assume we need them to share our values, in order to get them to act.

Chris Rose, of CampaignStrategy.org who came up with the VBCOP approach (see Figure 1), begs to disagree.

“A proposition not matched to values is unlikely to induce someone to do a behaviour, and even less to continue it,” he says in his latest newsletter.

If you want someone to reduce their carbon emissions (for example), you need to find an action which resonates with their existing values, and present it in a way which chimes with those values too.

## Burn calories not coal

So if you’re targeting young people who are very interested in their appearance, it’s a good tactic to let them know that lowering

Figure 1

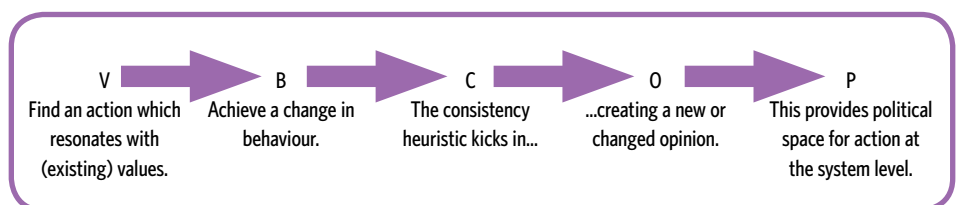
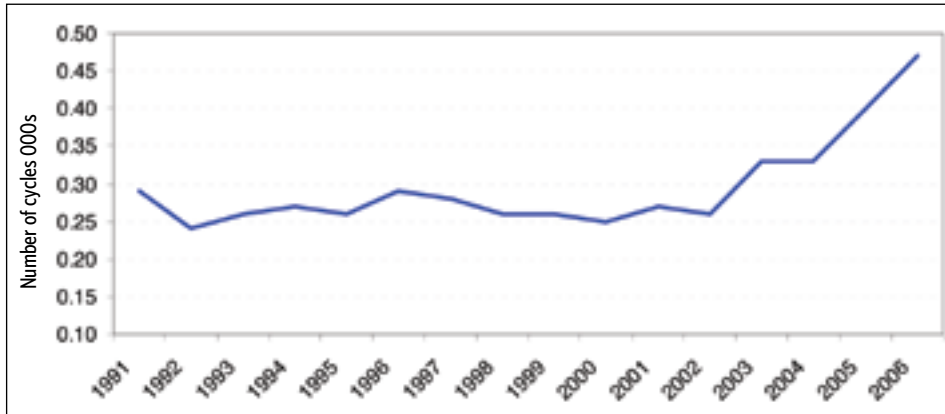


Figure 2: Average daily cycle flows on major roads in London



Cycling in London, Final report, October 2008 (data taken from the London Travel Report 2007). Note: major roads include principal and trunk roads. [www.iema.net/env/95/11](http://www.iema.net/env/95/11)

message 'Join Your Fellow Citizens In Helping To Save The Environment' followed by information that 'the majority of hotel guests do reuse their towels when asked' were 26 per cent more likely to reuse their towels than those who received a message which was just about the environment. The power of the social norm here is undeniable.

Further validation of the behaviour comes through approving messages from celebrities, media and other voices whom the target audience sees as credible. Let people know that because they are taking this action they are cooler, hipper, smarter or better in some way which resonates with their existing values. This strengthens the connection they feel to the behaviour, and makes the need for consistency more powerful.

**New opinions, new politics**

Chris Rose is ultimately interested in political change – new laws, what's taxed and what's incentivised, how public money is deployed. He argues that the new opinions which are created from new behaviours give politicians and policy-makers opportunities to change things at a systemic level.

The UK's smoking ban was possible because non-smokers and voluntary no-smoking areas had reached sufficient critical mass that people held positive opinions about protecting themselves and others from passive smoking and getting rid of the smell of stale smoke in public places.

And because large scale behaviour change can happen very suddenly (see figures 2 and 3), he's keen that we should

harness the potential of the VBCOP approach in a systematic and planned way.

I think this could work in organisations and supply chains too. Instead of changes in laws or taxation policy (which politicians can deliver), think about 'structural' changes like policies, organisational structure, rules, targets and so on. As people form positive opinions about energy-saving behaviour, possibilities open up for ambitious targets or new policies. Positive opinions about alternatives to car travel enable changes in fleets or car parking provision. Buying fairtrade coffee for the canteen means ethical supply chain policies for the core business can be discussed.

**"Let people know that because they are taking this action they are cooler, hipper, smarter or better in some way which resonates with their existing values"**

Figure 3: Do you take your own shopping bag when shopping?

	Always	Always + quite often	Never
2007	25	39	36
2009	70	76	10

Public attitudes and behaviours towards the environment – tracker survey, research report completed for Defra by TNS, September 2009, [www.iema.net/env/95/12](http://www.iema.net/env/95/12)

**Work backwards**

So if you're interested in structural change in your supply chain or organisation, a VBCOP approach would look something like this:

1. Consider whose opinions you need to have on board, in order to get that change. Previous articles like 'who can help me' may be useful in identifying these stakeholder groups.
2. Identify their values and motivations.
3. Identify a behaviour which chimes in with their values and motivations, and which also delivers some benefits related to the issue you are interested in.
4. Create messages and opportunities to catalyse changed behaviour.
5. Reinforce the sense of 'I do that' and 'we do that', using commentators and communication channels which the group find credible and authoritative.
6. Watch for the new helpful opinions, and get the commentators to reinforce them too.
7. Use this new ready-made supporter base to propose and support the structural changes. ■

Penny Walker is an independent sustainability consultant.

<http://penny-walker.co.uk>

Hotel towel experiment:

[www.iema.net/env/95/13](http://www.iema.net/env/95/13)

VBCOP – A Unifying Campaign Strategy

Model, Chris Rose

[www.campaignstrategy.org](http://www.campaignstrategy.org) March 2009

[www.globalcool.org](http://www.globalcool.org)

'the environmentalist' publication dates in 2010

19 Apr	4 May
17 May	1 June
14 June	5 July
19 July	6 Sept
20 Sept	4 Oct
18 Oct	1 Nov
15 Nov	6 Dec

14 June, the 100th issue!