

Summary



**Rendering sustainable consumption behaviour more sustainable:
psychological tools for marketing prosocial commitment.**

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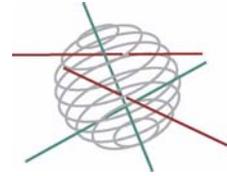
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Part 1:
Sustainable production and consumption patterns

Summary



Rendering sustainable consumption behaviour more sustainable:
psychological tools for marketing prosocial commitment.

CP/15

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Sustainable consumption patterns in individual consumers are in society's best interest. But for most people in most circumstances, sustainability will conflict with self-interest. Unsustainable products are cheaper, unsustainable means of disposal are less effortful, driving ones' own car is more comfortable than using public transportation, etc... Each of these choices confronts the individual consumer with a social dilemma: the choice between an easy solution that hurts society at large, and a sustainable alternative for which the individual pays a price. Government (at different levels) acts as a social marketer, assuming the difficult responsibility of promoting individual consumer choices in favor of the collective (sustainable) interest, and against one's personal interest. To promote sustainable consumption the government has two kinds of marketing instruments at its disposal: communication instruments and instruments for direct behavioral control. With the second instrument, consisting of fines and taxes, the government can achieve a change in behavior without achieving a change in mentality. However, this may cause long-term problems, because mandatory participation to sustainable consumption requires airtight control on citizens' behavior, which may be unaffordable over time. Moreover, in a democratic order, government policy needs the support of a majority of the population (which is often not the case). Therefore, the government complements carrot and stick approaches with communication-based social marketing, which strives to achieve a real change in mentality of citizens (which is also an explicit objective of Agenda 21 of the United Nations, 1992). To achieve a change in mentality, authorities may use classic advertising channels, but may also use messages that can be posted on product packaging, on garbage containers, etc. These messages should make people more aware of the reasons to make sustainable choices. We have our doubts whether simply providing people with information on reasons to choose the sustainable alternative, will have the desired results. Reflecting about behavioral options activates not only the pros of this option but also the cons, and consequently also the pros and the cons of alternative, non-sustainable behavioral options. The communication strategy may be effective for radical decisions (e.g., deciding to use alternative energy to heat the house). However, we suppose that this strategy may be very ineffective for simple waste sorting behaviors, which have to be carried out several times per day and which occur in a context of time pressure and mental load. Consumers and citizens probably will not extensively reflect on these decisions, and if they think about them they will probably come up with counter-arguments very easily. The self-interest (e.g., saving money) will always be more salient than the collective sustainable interest.

In this project, we investigated the potential of another type of persuasion strategies for the promotion of sustainable decision making. These strategies use a more subtle approach. They do not involve coercion, nor do they provoke active thinking about the pros and cons of behavioral alternatives. They simply use situational cues which activate certain thought contents.

This thought content may refer, for example, to latent motives to behave sustainable, or to an inconsistency between one's goals and actions, or to one's self-perception as a pro-sustainable

citizen. Activating these contents increases their accessibility and salience and makes them more probable to influence speedy and mostly subconscious behavioral decision processes, of which we carry out hundreds a day.

We investigated how several techniques, using this principle, may be applied as a promotional tool to increase sustainable decision making. The government's responsibility is to both instigate sustainable behavior, and to foster a change in mentality that will *make sustainable behavior self-sustainable*. We investigate how these two kinds of instruments can be optimally used and combined. We cover two specific research questions: (1) Does the government have to attempt to convince, or is it better to use more subtle means to activate existing pro-sustainable motivations, and (2) if direct behavioral control is necessary, how does one go from mere behavioral change to a true change in mentality and behavioral persistence in the long run?

In the next part of the report we will summarize our findings and report on the implication for policy.

1. Research overview and implications

Our research project covers two major questions of general importance to the marketing of brotherhood. Our first question deals with the instigation of sustainable behavior, and the accompanying question about which type of government message would be most suitable to initiate the behavior. Our second question deals with the persistence of such behavior, especially in cases where the behavior was first initiated with 'carrot-and-stick' methods such as rewards or the threat of fines. For both matters, we examined the potential of several techniques. All are inspired by the research literature on social and cognitive psychology. The scientific output of our studies has been or will be submitted to journals in this field, as well as in the field of (social) marketing.

All of the persuasion techniques presented in this report, bear on a conflict of interests present in most citizens. On the one hand, reports show in increased interest of the general public in sustainable development issues. We all feel positive about a green and pollution-free environment, for example. On the other hand, people usually associate the behaviors related to sustainability with behavioral costs like money, time, effort and inconvenience. This means that although we are potentially motivated to make sustainable decisions, there are many barriers that prevent us from doing so. Although educating and sensitizing the public is an obvious necessity when promoting the sustainable cause, we felt we needed to approach the problem from another angle in this project. We have searched for subtle ways to modify people's perception of choice alternatives by facilitating the access to certain thought contents, with the aim of increasing the probability of making sustainable choices.

Instigation of sustainable behavior

First, we want to investigate which kind of communication is best suited to induce sustainable behaviors in consumers who also have more selfish options. Traditionally, the government's position has been that of an advocate, trying to convince consumers to take the collective interest into account. Social marketing of the traditional kind is the art of presenting convincing arguments, trying to make consumers change their minds about what is the best thing to do. We suspect that this approach is not optimal. Thinking about alternatives activates the pros but also the cons of each behavioral option, including the self-interested one. We propose an alternative approach that uses the principle of priming, heavily studied in social psychology. Pro-social priming is the art of unobtrusively bringing subtle cues in the environment, which activate available pro-social memory content, and subtly guide behavior in pro-social directions, typically without the recipient of the information being aware. We conducted two series of studies, using different types of procedures and information content. We found that in financial games, where participants exchange money and can make defective or cooperative choices, most participants behave more cooperatively after being exposed to cooperation primes. One group did the opposite; they behaved less cooperatively after being exposed to cooperation primes. These were the pro-selfs, a category of people known to attach more importance to personal than to group gains. We replicated our findings in several experiments and we could also demonstrate that the effects of primes on behavior are mediated by expectations of other people's cooperative behavior (people that were also involved in the game). Thus, for most citizens the spontaneous expectation that other people will act in a cooperative sustainable manner is a stimulation to behave in the same cooperative sustainable manner. However, the expectation that other people will cooperate stimulates consistent proselfs to free ride on the cooperative efforts of other people. This means that for a limited number of people prosocial communication has a contradictory effect! A second series of experiments showed this effect is limited to situations with a large degree of interdependence. Situations in which there is a smaller degree of interdependence between interactions partners led to another pattern of results. Then low-consistent individuals assimilated their behavior to the primes, while high-consistent ones followed their social value orientation.

In a test whether these effects generalize to sustainable choices, we focused on environmentally-friendly behavior. We primed the concept 'environment' positively (e.g. recycling) and negatively (e.g. pollution). Three experiments indicated that in this case (1) only negative primes have the desired effect; and that (2) this effect is independent of their habits regarding sustainable behavior.

A second method we tested is the induced hypocrisy technique (Aronson, 1999). This technique consists of confronting people with the inconsistency between their attitude and their behavior. It does so by asking individuals to make a (public) statement (e.g., written, videotaped, petition) about their attitude (i.e., commitment). As this commitment can not be withdrawn,

subsequently remembering past failures (i.e., mindfulness) to behave in line with this attitude would reveal an inconsistency. This inconsistency is experienced as an aversive state (i.e., hypocrisy or cognitive dissonance; Fried & Aronson, 1995), which can be solved by assimilating one's behavior to his or her initial positive attitude. We investigated the possibility of implementing the induced hypocrisy procedure in large scale marketing campaigns, as well as in more direct one-to-one marketing strategies, in order to promote environment-friendly behaviors. Data revealed mixed results: sometimes, the behavioral effect of hypocrisy was positive; in other studies, this effect was negative, and data from a study did not reveal any behavioral effect. Based on previous literature, we concluded that it is important to know that under some conditions hypocrisy can backfire. Moreover, we observed that induced hypocrisy can be used as a powerful persuasion tool in a one-to-one (individualized) marketing approach. We also observed that it is possible to induce hypocrisy in large scale communication campaigns. However, we did not observe any behavioral effect in the context of a large-scale marketing study conducted in a supermarket. We suspect that this absence of behavioral effect is due to the fact that we used a delayed and diffuse consumer choice measure instead of explicit and direct requests classically used to measure hypocrisy effects.

In a third line of research we examined how and why sustainable and commercial goals can be combined in one bundled offer. The rationale is that individuals sometimes need an 'excuse' to demonstrate their sustainable intentions. Simply donating money or doing an effort for a cause is economically unfavorable. Additionally, the present societal norm of self-interest threatens people to be ridiculed by others for displaying such 'soft' pro-social behavior. Presenting the donation or the effort as part of an economic exchange might provide such an excuse. In a first experiment, we collected more money in the condition in which people received a small object in return for their donation. In the next experiment, we tested the hypothesis that perhaps it is not the exchange which facilitates donation, but the fact that people were presented with an 'appropriate' amount to give. This study showed that simply asking people to donate a certain amount increased the revenue. These studies suggest that people often refrain from donating because they are unsure which is an appropriate amount to give.

Implications

We studied the potential of three techniques for the instigation of sustainable behavior. These techniques do not suffer from the flaws associated with the persuasion methods typically used by governments, namely behavioral control and communication-based campaigns. We do recognize that education is essential, as people need to gather procedural knowledge of *how* to execute behaviors which are more environmentally friendly, for example. We do have our doubts, though, about the effectiveness of communication strategies aimed at making people think about the *why* of performing these behaviors. Thinking about the pro's leads to thinking about the cons of these behaviors as well. Moreover, thinking of the sustainable alternative might lead to thinking about the pro's and cons of the selfish alternative as well. The self-interest (e.g., saving money)

will always be more salient than the collective sustainable interest. Therefore such explicit thinking usually results in non-sustainable decisions. The behavioral control strategies might be effective, but they are expensive as well, and do not lead to a mentality change. The subtle techniques we proposed here, aim at achieving that last thing.

If the results of the first priming studies with financial games could be generalized to sustainable decisions, implications are rather pessimistic. This would mean that a certain group of people, who are mostly negatively motivated (e.g. avoiding fines) to make sustainable choices will react negative to pro-environmental messages. Even though this might be a small group, they might infect others to start making selfish choices as well (the rotten apple effect). We used a sustainable behavior setting in our second series of priming studies. Here we found that apparently the perception of the dilemma-situation is different than for the financial games.

We found that priming negative concepts, that are related to sustainability, like 'pollution', results in more sustainable decisions than priming positive concepts, like 'recycling'. This suggests that people spontaneously tend to reflect very little on the impact of their behavior on the environment and other people when making a decision. If the thought content about this negative impact is activated, people will take it into account. This conclusion is partially supported by the third set of experiments, on the induced hypocrisy technique. We showed that confronting people with the inconsistency between their (pro-sustainable) attitudes and their (non-sustainable) behavior can result in more sustainable choices afterwards (under specific conditions). Rather than inviting people to explicitly think about the possible disastrous consequences of their behavior, it seems to be more appropriate to subtly refer to these consequences. Activating this thought element makes it more accessible when considering a sustainable dilemma. The target is subtly reminded of the pro's of the sustainable option, without referring the other behavioral options.

The last set of studies has a simple but very useful implication. When collecting money for a charity, one should indicate which is an appropriate amount to donate. Doubts, about how much to give, easily lead to not giving anything at all, even though there was an intention to donate.

Persistence of sustainable behavior

Our second objective is to investigate how the social marketer should combine communication with direct behavioral modification techniques (pricing, regulations) championed by lawyers and economists. Carrots and sticks are necessary because there are some who are not to be convinced of the collective interest in any other way. But what happens to those for whom the carrots and sticks were not necessary? The available evidence suggests that they will take a step backwards. They will now justify their behavior on the basis of the rules or price advantages of sustainable behavior, and lose intrinsic motivation.

We introduce the practice of social labeling as a potential solution to this problem. Labeling is a summary for any social marketing intervention suggesting consumers that their behavior is to be attributed to the kind of person they are. Concretely, in a first step one uses behavioral control methods to provoke a certain sustainable choice. For example, one can put a price promotion on an environmentally friendly product. In the next step a social label is communicated, attributing the choice to the personality of the consumer (e.g. 'you chose an environmentally friendly product, apparently you are a person caring for the environment'). Some limited evidence suggests that labeling may foster persistence of the desired behavior, because it makes consumers see their sustainable behavior as their own motivated choice, not forced by the environment. Limited evidence was gathered in areas other than sustainable consumer choices. We wondered whether, due to specific characteristics of sustainable behaviors, the technique needed some adjustments to be successful for our purposes as well. We studied the usefulness and limits of this technique. We found that it is very well suited for promoting sustainable behavior, but care has to be taken that the target person is prevented from reflecting on the actual reason they made the ecological choice in the first place. If the message is passed through in a smooth way, it will be accepted by the target person. We were successful in obtaining self-perception changes, as people rated themselves more as environmentally friendly consumers after we communicated such a social label. People often make choices based on their self-perception, which explains why they made more sustainable choices afterwards.

A second method builds upon the same self-perception process. Any technique that makes the target person see himself as a sustainable person, increases the probability of making sustainable choices. When someone asks wonders whether he or she is "the kind of person which would choose the sustainable alternative?", a ways to reach a conclusion is by scanning his or her memory looking for examples of sustainable behavior in the past. The more examples one finds, and the easier it is to do so, the more he sees himself as someone who behaves sustainable. This implies that facilitating the search for past sustainable behavior increases the probability of making sustainable decisions in the future. Actually, we found that it is enough to *suggest* that it is easy to find such examples. We did this by selecting some sustainable behaviors that most people execute, for whatever reason. Then we presented this list to our participants with the question: 'do you usually perform these behaviors'. The mere suggestion that examples of previous sustainable behavior are easily recalled resulted in an altered self-perceptions, more favorable attitudes towards specific sustainable behaviors, and in an increase in sustainable decisions.

Implications

Usually sustainable campaigns implicitly convey the message that most people do not take sustainability issues at heart sufficiently. Although this is true -it is the reason the campaign was set up- this message may have counterproductive results. First, it implies that everybody around me still fails to make sustainable choices. An individual might wonder why, if all the others seem to

stick to traditional, non-sustainable life-styles, he should change his behavior. After all, we know that our individual behavior has little impact on the large scale. Secondly, it suggests that the individual, who hears or reads the campaign, is a person who does not care enough for the environment and for others. This is a social label. A person acting on this label will make even less sustainable choices in the future.

The two methods we described, approach the individual in a positive way. Instead of socially sanctioning one's failure to do the right thing, campaigns should 'reward' people. It seems even sufficient to give them the impression they are doing ok. Communicating a social label after provoking a certain behavior seems to work best if people are prevented from reflecting on the actual reason for this initial behavior. The label can be communicated by short messages on the packaging of bio- and fair trade products, for example. The message should be presented smoothly to avoid people actively thinking about the real reason for the purchase (e.g. a price promotion on this product) and rejecting the label. Subtle reinforcements which refer to the target's personality being the reason for a sustainable choice influence his or her self-perception lead to more sustainable choices.

In conclusion, the result of our studies indicate that promoting sustainable choices can be achieved either by subtly activating a *negative thought element referring to the harmful consequences of an individual's actions*. A subtle activation prevents pondering about alternatives. It is very important that the message focuses on the consequences of a certain behavior. This way the target person does not feel personally addressed and blamed. Deliberating a sustainable dilemma involves a choice between pursuing personal benefits and benefits of society at large. Usually the selfish arguments (like money, time, and effort) are most salient, resulting in non-sustainable choices. Priming the disastrous consequences of a selfish choice for the environment of society, makes these more salient and more probable to influence the decision.

A second successful strategy is to activate a *positive thought element that refers to the target's personality*. People often make decisions, based on the question whether they think they are the kind of person choosing a specific choice alternative. Making them think about themselves as someone who usually chooses the sustainable alternative, increases the probability they will actually do so.