



Consumer Power

A **communications guide**
for mainstreaming
lower-carbon behaviour



Institute for Public Policy Research
Challenging ideas – Changing policy

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About this guide

In the UK a very substantial part of the public is not changing the way it uses energy – at home or on the move – in the face of climate change. They have either not been the target of efforts to persuade them to change, or have not responded to messages they have been exposed to.

This guide provides 10 principles for making climate change communications more effective. They have been written following research by ippr with an influential segment of the group of people who are not changing their habits.

Who is this guide for?

Our findings will be of value to anyone interested in designing communications, products and services aimed at increasing the uptake of lower-carbon behaviour – from energy utilities to car manufacturers, train operators and the UK tourism industry, as well as government and climate change campaigners.

Who needs to be targeted?

If lower-carbon behaviour is to be made mainstream, communications urging behaviour change among the public to address climate change should be aiming at society's trend-setters – the 'Now People'.¹ This is an influential group of people for whom status, fashion, success and the esteem and recognition of others are very important. They tend to have a high level of motivation to consume, and their prominent position within social circles makes them a driver of fashions and trends, meaning that they are a particularly powerful subsection of the population when it comes to determining consumption-related behaviours. For this reason, they are often the target of commercial marketing campaigns.

1. The Now People form a subgroup in the Values Modes segmentation model, which categorises people according to their different psychological motivations.

However, when it comes to climate change, communications, products and policies have not been designed with Now People in mind, and so have failed to provide them with the clues or opportunities to satisfy their needs. As a result they are switched off from the issues. This has acted as a brake on the adoption of lower-carbon behaviour across society.

How do we know what will work well with them?

ippr conducted several workshops with Now People in the UK to find out what might motivate this group – and thus the wider public – to act. We explored their attitudes to lower-carbon lifestyles, focusing on the theme of shopping, to assess the processes that people adopt when making consumer decisions.

We also carried out observations of home energy assessments in the homes of Now People, and then interviewed them to gauge their reactions to the energy advice they had been given.

What did we find out?

10 key lessons emerged, which we provide as advice for designing communications on climate change in the following pages. To sum up, success is likely to come from persuading mainstream consumers that in adopting lower-carbon lifestyles they can save money, have control, look good, do the right thing without being an environmentalist and still be themselves. Persuading the public of this and putting policies in place to ensure that lower-carbon options are affordable, desirable and visible will take us a long way towards mobilising the power of consumers in the battle against climate change.

We hope you find this guide useful.

Simon Retallack and Reg Platt, ippr
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**The full findings of our research can be downloaded at
www.ippr.org**

1. Don't focus on climate change

A lack of awareness of climate change is not the problem. Most people are aware, but that awareness is not motivating enough. For many, climate change is just boring.

Other motivations need to be drawn on because saving the planet or helping the environment, while not seen as a bad thing, is a secondary reason for taking action at best.

Recognition of that should be the starting point of all communications efforts to encourage mainstream consumers to adopt lower-carbon behaviours.

2. Focus on saving money now

Emphasising the money-saving potential of adopting lower-carbon behaviours will be much more effective than urging people to take action on the basis that it will prevent climate change – particularly in the present economic climate.

The economic downturn is influencing everything and people's focus is on ways of saving money – or on simply not wasting it. So a key message should be:

Not wasting energy = not wasting money.

But there are ways we can make the notion of saving money even more appealing – for example, by emphasising the pleasurable things that the money saved can be spent on.

3. Prevent the rebound effect

Care needs to be taken to prevent a ‘rebound effect’ in which people spend the money they have saved from using less energy on other, high-carbon, purchases, like flights.

To help prevent this effect, communications could refer to the need to reduce carbon ‘pollution’ (rather than ‘emissions’), or use humour to satirise high-carbon behaviours, or simply make lower-carbon choices more desirable.

These options are explained further in points 4, 5 and 6.

4. Talk about carbon pollution, not CO₂ emissions

One way to help prevent the rebound effect may be for communications to talk about carbon pollution.

Referring to ‘pollution’ – a word that implies ‘dirt’ – is likely to have more impact than referring to ‘emissions’, which are invisible to the eye.

Similarly, plain ‘carbon’, associated with coal and perceived as black and dirty, may also be a more effective word to use than ‘carbon dioxide’, which is invisible.

5. Satirise high-carbon behaviours

Most mainstream consumers want to look cool. They note anything that detracts from their image and act upon it quickly, to maintain or change the perceptions of others.

Communications that use humour and gentle mockery, sarcasm and satire could associate high-carbon choices with unattractive personalities (a very British approach) which people would want to distance themselves from.

A range of alternative (lower-carbon) behaviours could then become available for people to choose for themselves, leaving them with the sense that they still have room for self-expression, which they prize, without being told how to behave.

6. Make lower-carbon options desirable

Another way to overcome the rebound effect is by continually repackaging sustainable products and behaviours into 'objects of desire' – this is what originally turned the polluting car into something that people 'had to have'.

In these difficult economic times, these could perhaps be depicted as the technologies and behaviours of 'fashionable austerity'.

7. Remember that being in control matters

High and fluctuating energy prices and the role of energy companies are of a source of anxiety to mainstream consumers. They are also experiencing insecurity and a lack of control due to the current economic turbulence.

Communications about lower-carbon behaviours could capitalise on this. Mainstream consumers may respond well to communications emphasising how energy-saving measures can offer them 'control' over energy costs and independence from energy companies.

8. Make it fun

Communications that are fun and humorous are far more likely to capture and sustain people's attention than communications that are too serious.

9. Avoid guilt and the ‘environmental’ label

Communications that promote feelings of guilt should be avoided, particularly in relation to choices that have already been made, as these drive people to disengage from the message.

Instead of saying ‘You are not doing enough’ or ‘You are not taking responsibility’, communications should acknowledge and praise the actions that people are already taking and build on those.

Environmentalists are often thought of as ‘smug’ and different from the rest of us. So communications must promote lower-carbon behaviours as being ‘normal’, while still offering the possibility of looking good.

10. Use messengers that ‘keep it real’

Getting the messenger right is important. People want to hear from figures in the public eye who they trust and associate with as peers, rather than aloof A-list celebrities, such as film stars, who are not ‘one of us’.

To reach mainstream consumers, communications should use ordinary, everyday celebrities who are seen as wholesome and trusted. They are ‘like us’ and can make lower-carbon choices seem normal, affordable and achievable, as well as desirable. Think Tess Daly and Vernon Kay, rather than Madonna or Leonardo Di Caprio.

About ippr

The Institute for Public Policy Research (ippr) is the UK's leading progressive think tank, producing cutting-edge research and innovative policy ideas for a just, democratic and sustainable world. Since 1988, we have been at the forefront of progressive debate and policy making in the UK. Through our independent research and analysis we define new agendas for change and provide practical solutions to challenges across the full range of public policy issues.

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