

Course of action

Consumers may have good intentions when it comes to sustainability but **Richard Whitehall** argues that its design's role to ensure those intentions are acted upon

Sustainability is a complex and far reaching topic that is being considered by a host of organisations, from policy-makers to packaging engineers. For companies developing products and services, it can be challenging to find the right way to encourage customers to make sustainable choices. The need for relevant product and brand experiences is more important than ever. Overt references to the natural

world can work for a small segment of customers, but with more and more companies jumping on the bandwagon, it is time for a more nuanced approach that builds upon companies' existing brand equities.

The green living fad seems to have reached a peak with a multitude of publications and retailers targeting the 'green consumer'. However, recent marketing data has indicated a

low rate of conversion of people who intend to buy green products to those who actually do.

The majority of people understand the need for society to reduce consumption but when it comes down to selecting a new cleaning product or deciding to drive more slowly, they are swayed by factors closer at hand. This might be related to cost or a nice fragrance in the case of a cleaning product or just the sheer pleasure of



Source: 2008 GMA/Debitto Green Shopper Survey

Children adopted different techniques to resist the marshmallow with varying degrees of success



speed when driving.

In a recently publicised Stanford psychology experiment conducted 40 years ago by Walter Mischel, a group of four year-olds was submitted to a simple test that proved to be an indicator of their future success and happiness. A marshmallow was placed in front of the child and he/she was left alone in the test room. They were given the choice to either hold out for 20 minutes and receive a second marshmallow, or call an adult back into the room and eat the one in front of them. Children adopted different techniques to resist the marshmallow with varying degrees of success. The children divided into three equally sized groups according to behaviour pattern. The first group ate the marshmallow as soon as the adult left the room. The second group lasted for more than 30 seconds but eventually gave in to the temptation of the first marshmallow. The last group managed to hold out the full 20 minutes and received the second marshmallow.

The first and last groups were interviewed regularly over the next 40 years and the differences were dramatic; the last group did considerably better in life according to a number of factors including academic performance, wealth and self-reported happiness.

This experiment sheds light on one of the mechanisms at play in the shift from sustainable intentions into action. When faced with decisions in the heat of the moment our emotions kick-in and many of us make decisions based on instinct. It is only a small proportion



of us who are able to remain totally rational when faced with the rich stimuli of the retail environment. In a similar way, the decisions we make when using and disposing of products are heavily influenced by our emotions.

Design is a powerful tool for reaching out to people at an emotional level. By modifying stimuli we can help our instincts guide us to the best choices. If we think about the Marshmallow Experiment, there are a number of ways in which we could redesign the experiment to alter the stimuli and change the outcome for all three groups. For instance, turn on a TV in the room to distract the child, place a lid over the marshmallow, ask the child to make the decision before they even see the marshmallow, rephrase the challenge to make the second marshmallow sound more attractive, or test a group of three children at a time and allow them to discuss the decision.

So, from marshmallows to sustainability - Smart Design, a global design firm, has identified five guiding principles that it is using to design products and services that encourage sustainable choices. These principles loosely map to the strategies for changing the outcome of the marshmallow experiment.

1. Sustainability isn't enough

Even when sustainability is a major driver, other factors often drive the switch from intention to action. For example, people don't solely visit farmers markets to buy locally and organically but also because of the atmosphere, the ability to hand select produce and the interaction with

growers and like-minded people.

Full Circle Home recently launched a line of cleaning products. The sponge is made from cellulose, which biodegrades, but also is cleverly shaped to allow it to dry faster on the counter. It's a simple benefit but a compelling one to those of us who dislike mouldy sponges and also want to reduce our environmental impact.

2. The power of design cues

Design cues can have a powerful effect on moving people towards making certain choices. Design cues can convey that a product was designed with careful consideration. Take for example, Sony VAIO vs. MacBook laptops. They have similar ratings on the Greenpeace 'green electronics' chart, however, the MacBook seems more simple in appearance, and is part of an authentic-feeling product line up. It comes with a quiet fan and avoids flashy lights and finishes. These qualities make the Macbook feel like a more sustainable product, even though rationally we know they are very similar.

3. Consider the system

Designing a greener version of an existing archetype seldom presents the biggest opportunity to reduce environmental impact, maximise business potential, or create a better experience for customers. If we can persuade people to rethink their fundamental needs we can move them toward more sustainable choices.

Initiatives such as ZipCar, a car sharing and club car service, and MegaBus, a low cost bus service in the UK and North America, are two



transport systems that have made it less necessary to own a car; they have made the experience of sharing transportation more attractive by removing the pain of booking tickets and offering flexible pricing structures.

4. Keep communication simple and positive

Sustainability is a complex issue and companies need to be selective in the messages they send through products and packaging. We must make communication feel optimistic and connect with people's positive sentiments for the future, rather than doom and gloom. For instance, garden sprinkler systems waste a huge quantity of water through leaks caused by misassembly and lack of control over water use. Smart Design recently set out to design a simple system of sprinklers (and packaging) for a client that communicated the simplicity of using the product and how much water you really need to get the job done.

After measuring its own carbon footprint last year, Smart Design looked at how to make meaningful changes in its own offices in San Francisco, New York and Barcelona. The firm

Design is a powerful tool for reaching out to people at an emotional level

discovered that municipal recycling systems are pretty unintuitive and a lot of time was spent sorting through the rubbish. Consequently it launched an internal campaign amongst its staff to raise awareness. It was important to keep the tone positive to encourage action and was soon expanded to other sustainability issues around the office such as turning lights off, using fewer paper towels and encouraging people to use the company bikes to get around the city. Smart Design has certainly seen a change that it hopes will be reflected in this year's footprint measurement.

5. Make it relevant

When information is brought down to a personally relevant level it is more likely to encourage action. People measure their impact based on their social networks and this can provide a useful framework to provide meaningful feedback on how efficiently we're using products

and services.

Smart Design worked with Positive Energy, a US-based company whose mission is to partner with utility companies to reduce people's energy usage through motivation and education. Their product is a monthly custom energy report that prompts people to change their behaviour and teaches them ways to do so. The keystone of the report is a comparison of each household's consumption patterns relative to other households, based on the theory that "keeping up with the neighbours" is the most effective motivation for making people change their energy consumption behaviour. It also gives relevant tips on how to take action and reduce energy consumption.

In another project Smart Design was asked to develop an instrument cluster for Ford's 2010 Hybrid cars. Driving behaviour significantly affects the fuel efficiency of a hybrid and instruments provide little assistance. As a result, the

Far left | A new design for a garden sprinkler system. Left | Smart Design devised an internal carbon footprint campaign. Below left | An energy report created for Positive Energy to help people reduce their energy usage. Below right | An instrument cluster created by Smart Design for Ford's 2010 hybrid cars.

designers developed different ways to give drivers feedback on how efficiently they're driving, also respecting the reality that sometimes they just need to get somewhere fast. Gauges are displayed as a solid fill level rather than a thin needle to show information more clearly and at a glance.

So, in order to connect with all types of people on sustainability we need to create consistent consumer experiences that communicate short and long term benefits at both rational and emotional levels. We need to avoid the use of green clichés and instead tap into perceptions of sustainable products and services as providers of more thoughtful, safer and better made solutions, which work for people and the planet. Only then will we be able to influence the majority to create a better future. |

Richard Whitehall is vice president of industrial design at Smart Design, a global design firm with offices in New York, San Francisco and Barcelona.

