

CHARM: Social Norms Marketing for Energy Efficiency

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Abstract

UK focus group research with dark/light and non-green consumers explored attitudes to a range of government, charity, manufacturer and retailer sustainability initiatives. The study explored how consumers understand the term 'green' and its relation to concepts such as sustainability, eco-friendly, organic, global warming, human rights. Consumers found it very easy to define green and non-green behaviours, although they recognised that these were subject to change. This was because for them most behaviour was neither green nor non-green, but simply 'normal'. Consumers define 'green' and 'non green' in relational ways and both are related to a third concept - what they see as normal. Successful environmental initiatives, such as recycling, are 'normalised' and become part of everyday life. This insight provides a way of understanding how consumers relate to energy saving initiatives.

This research has part of the inspiration for CHARM, a major EPSRC funded UK project, which will critically evaluate the use of social norm marketing. One of the CHARM case-studies will focus on electricity consumption. Research suggests that feedback on individual consumption can reduce energy usage, and that this reduction is increased by communication of average levels of consumption for relevant social groups, e.g. for a particular street. This research will evaluate this process, installing hardware and testing feedback in several hundred homes, and combining this with extensive qualitative research on the customary practices that underlie energy consumption, and on ways in which these practices can be challenged and changed by information about what other people do.

Introduction

Increasing awareness and concern about climate change has prompted a surge in initiatives that aim to encourage pro-environmental behaviour. The disappointing performance of many of these initiatives reflects the importance of understanding

consumer reactions to green marketing activities. Marketing (and particularly advertising) are seen to have stimulated the excessive consumption that threaten sustainability (UNEP, 2005). Green marketing has often been interpreted rather narrowly, as merely positioning products or services as 'green'; a strategy that rightly has been criticised, often rightly, as mere 'greenwash'. However, increased concern about the environment highlights the role that social marketing can play in encouraging pro-environmental consumer practices.

The research explored consumer reactions to a range of pro-environmental initiatives, developing understanding of the process through which consumers adopt pro-environmental behaviours. The findings indicate that many initiatives fail because they advocate the adoption of behaviours that are seen as not 'normal' and therefore as outside current social norms and normality. The paper illuminates the ways in which consumers identify, categorise and adopt pro-environmental practices, and argues that social marketing should promote conceptions of normality and social norms that encompass pro-environmental behaviours. This may be more effective at inducing the behavioural changes required to reduce the negative consequences of climate change than injunctives to adopt what are regarded as atypical attitudes and intentions.

The paper includes a discussion of social norm marketing, which has been used in the US to reduce energy consumption, and describes CHARM, an EPSRC funded project, which will evaluate the effect of social norm marketing on electricity consumption in the UK. The paper is structured as follows. In the first part we discuss the role of marketing in promoting sustainability, before describing the research method and findings. The second part of that paper briefly reviews research on social norms before describing project CHARM. In the final section we consider some of the implications of applying social norm research to electricity consumption.

Part One

Research on Pro-Environmental Initiatives

The Role of Marketing in Promoting Sustainability

Jones et al. (2007) consider the relationship between marketing and sustainability and argue that although marketing, as a driver of consumption, might seem to be the antithesis of sustainability, it can help to change consumer behaviour towards sustainable consumption. The concept of green marketing is not new. Writing in 1969, Lazer argued that marketing should consider its social responsibilities and in 1975 the American Marketing Association held a conference on 'Ecological Marketing' (published as Henion and Kinnear, 1976) but despite these early developments, and accelerated interest in the 1990's (Hartmann and Ibáñez, 2006; Lee, 2008), green marketing has had limited success (Peattie and Crane, 2005; Wong, 1996). Brennan and Binney (2008, p. 3) define green marketing as 'the incorporation of environmental dimensions into marketing activities'. Green marketing is a form of societal marketing (Kotler, 1972; El-Ansary, (1974) although it also falls under broader definitions of social marketing (such as that given by Lazer and Kelley, 1973). Andreasen (2003) delineates the two terms, using 'societal marketing' for socially responsible marketing, and 'social marketing' for marketing programs designed to influence behaviour in order to improve personal welfare and that of society. Green marketing can embrace either or both concepts: promoting products by positioning them as socially responsible and/or encouraging green behaviours for the welfare of society, but it can also be

used to refer to 'greenwash' (Brennan and Binney, 2008) merely positioning products and services as green, without consideration of their social effects. Brennan and Binney point out, there is a difference between marketing green products and marketing that aims to encourage green behaviours, but claim that there are likely to be similarities in the adoption of green products and the adoption of green practices. Hartmann and Ibáñez (2006) note that green marketing activities have had little positive environmental effect, but attribute their disappointing performance to a gap between environmental consciousness and behaviour, and to perceptions of low individual benefits from pro-environmental behaviours. The gap between intentions and behaviour is supported by Bamberg and Moser's (2007) meta-analysis of 57 psychological environmental research studies: intentions accounted for only 27% of the variance in pro-environmental behaviour. Two problems with motivational models of pro-environmental behaviour are firstly, even if we can predict intentions from motives there is a gap between intention and behaviour, and secondly, the importance of egoistic benefit/ inconvenience dilutes the predictive value of motives based on altruism and social norms.

Research Method

The research aimed to understand consumer reactions to a range of pro-environmental objectives. Qualitative focus group research was appropriate because the research aimed to understand respondents' conceptions of greenness and to explore their reactions to a range of green marketing initiatives. The group dynamics of focus groups enable respondents to 'spark off' others (Gordon and Langmaid, 1988). Focus groups '...can be especially useful for topics where people are not in touch with or able to articulate their motivations, feelings and opinions' (Morgan, 1988, p. 58). Six two-hour professionally recruited and moderated focus groups took place between July and September 2008. Respondents were given a disposable camera and asked to take photos of things they believed to be 'green', bringing the prints to the group. Respondents were paid an incentive of £40 (including photo developing fee). A recruitment questionnaire that included a combination of attitudinal and behavioural questions (e.g. I try to recycle as much as I can) was used to categorise prospective respondents into three categories: light, dark and non-greens. Table 1 shows the constitution of the six groups. All the groups were recorded and the tapes were transcribed. The group moderator the third author of this paper analysed the findings; these were corroborated by the first author who listened to the tapes and coded the transcripts using Atlas.ti CAQDAS software.

Group	Sex	Demographics	Type	Location
1	Female	21-29, BC1	Dark Green	Birmingham
2	Female	25-35, C1C2	Light Green	South London
3	Male	25-35, BC1	Non-Green	Manchester
4	Female	40-55, C1C2	Light Green	Manchester
5	Male	40-55, BC1	Dark Green	South London
6	Female	55-65, C1C2	Non-Green	Birmingham

Table 1: Respondent Characteristics

Research Findings

A key finding of this research is that consumers assess greenness in two ways. At one level, they may attempt to evaluate a specific activity (such as a holiday or a car journey) in terms of its impact on the environment. This could involve, for

example, a calculation of the CO₂ that this activity creates. This type of evaluation is very difficult for consumers to make and they tend to avoid doing so. At another level, however, consumers find it relatively easy to identify activities which are 'green' or 'non-green'. Typical activities categorised as 'green' are recycling, reusing plastic bags or long life light bulbs. 'Non-green' activities are equally easy to identify – such as the use of too much packaging, driving a 4x 4 or going on excessive numbers of foreign holidays.

Paradoxically, consumers are able to think in terms of clearly defined categories of 'green' and 'non-green' whilst simultaneously agreeing that evaluating the green credentials of any specific activity is very difficult for them. So what is going on here? What has emerged from this research is that consumers use a third category of activities and that this enables consumers to maintain the clear distinction between what is 'green' and what is 'non-green'. This category are those taken-for-granted activities that are simply regarded as 'normal'; it includes almost all day to day activities – going to work, taking the children to school, running a home etc. This category of 'normality' is also understood in terms of social norms or how people are expected to behave.

Importantly, these activities act as a reference point in defining 'green' and 'non-green' behaviour – they are the norm. 'Green' behaviours are construed as activities which are different from the norm and which are deemed to be better for the environment. Conversely 'Non-green' behaviours, are those which are different from the norm and which are felt to be harmful to the environment. They may involve an element of excess that is defined relative to the norm. It was also evident in the two older groups that some older consumers have adopted green behaviours because they have a different view of normality. This relates to their life experiences in the 1960's etc., for these respondents green behaviour meant 'back to basics', and to an earlier understanding of normality. As a result, these consumers saw current consumer behaviour as being fundamentally excessive, as not 'normal', and, therefore, as 'non-green'.

The research suggests that the way consumers understand 'normality' is a critical factor in their response to green initiatives and underlies the extent to which they feel motivated to act in a pro-environmental way. Clearly there is a relationship between 'normality' and 'sustainability' in that unsustainable behaviours cannot continue to be regarded as normal. Interestingly, 'Dark green' respondents were more likely to see the current status quo in society as being unsustainable – and, therefore, were less willing to accept it as 'normal'. Less green respondents were more likely to accept current consumption levels and to view only excessive consumption behaviours (of other people) as 'non-green'. They argued that most consumer behaviour is outside of the green arena. These behaviours are normal, and therefore, by definition, not excessive – they are neither 'green' nor 'non-green'.

Applying this to energy efficiency, the research would support initiatives that position energy efficiency measures as popular and normal, rather than as extreme and extraordinary measures to avert global crisis. Although all respondents were familiar with longlife bulbs and their ecological benefits, they were **not** accepted as the norm and were often regarded as unsatisfactory. In this context, the EU ban on 100 watt electricity bulbs should help to change what is perceived as 'normal'.

Our findings led to a second, and much larger, project called CHARM, which focuses on behaviour change and the use of descriptive social norms to alter perceptions of what is normal.

Part Two

CHARM: Social Norm Research for Energy Efficiency

Introduction

CHARM is a three-year EPSRC funded UK project that evaluates the impact of individual and social group feedback on behaviour in three different contexts, including electricity consumption. The research aims to develop, evaluate and understand the ways in which digital technology can be used to shape individual behaviour by informing and thereby challenging 'normal' practice. As shown in the research described above, much of what people do is based on their conceptions of shared conventions, although these conceptions may be misinformed. Furthermore, social norm research suggests that we can influence behaviour by telling people what other people do (Perkins, 2003). People do not consume energy directly but use it in practices such as cleanliness, cooking, and travel. Everyday energy-related practices and habits are grounded in taken-for-granted assumptions about 'normal' practices, e.g. that one should wash bedding every two weeks, tumble-dry clothes, leave kitchen appliances plugged in and switched on, set thermostats to 22° , etc. (Shove, 2003). This sort of behaviour is often not the result of a calculated choice based on attitudes, but rather habitual and taken-for-granted, as an inherent aspect of modern life. This helps to explain why traditional approaches that try to change behaviour by directly influencing attitudes and intentions often prove ineffective. Rather than telling people what to do, it can be more effective to use 'social proof' (Cialdini, 2001); influencing behaviour by showing people what others do. Studies in several related disciplines suggest that everyday practices are malleable, and can be nudged in a socially desirable direction by subtle forms of social influence. In particular, research indicates that feedback on an individual's level of performance (e.g. electricity consumption) can change their behaviour, and moreover, that this effect is enhanced if supplemented by feedback on the performance of a relevant social group. This project will evaluate this process, using and developing digital technology to facilitate the capture and feedback of individual and social group information in a non-invasive and cost effective manner.

The project draws on complementary research from four different disciplinary areas: sociology, behavioural economics, social psychology and social marketing.

Theoretical Background

Writing from a sociological perspective, Shove (2003) explores the social organization of normality and argues that patterns of consumption are shaped by the taken-for-granted practices of everyday life: 'much consumption is customary, governed by collective norms and undertaken in a world of things and sociotechnical systems that have stabilizing effects on routines and habits' (p. 9). Shove emphasises the collective conventions that underlie individual conceptions of basic needs such as cleanliness and comfort. Thus, a year-round indoor temperature of 22 °C has become an accepted standard of comfort that shapes buildings, clothing habits and energy consumption patterns, while daily showering has become an accepted cleanliness practice in the UK, with consequent impact on energy and water consumption. These expectations are taken-for-granted, and treated as inherent aspects of 'comfort' and 'cleanliness', but their contingency is

demonstrated by historical and global variation. Although Shove highlights the complex sociotechnical, economic, cultural and symbolic systems that underlie conceptions of 'normal' practices, she argues that what people take to be normal is not fixed but 'immensely malleable' (p. 199). Consequently, she claims, it is important to understand the 'dynamics of normalization', that is, how do the habits and practices of everyday life change and evolve?

Whereas Shove avoids a rational choice model with its focus on individual choices, the relatively new field of behavioural economics retains a focus on individual choice, but contests the assumption of a rational economic agent, in the light of research on the psychology of choice. Thaler and Sunstein (2008) argue that choices are inevitably influenced by the context or 'choice architecture', and that it is legitimate to deliberately 'nudge' people's behaviour in order to improve their lives. A 'nudge' is 'any aspect of the choice architecture that alters people's behaviour in a predictable way without forbidding any options or significantly changing their economic incentives' (p. 6). Thaler and Sunstein highlight research in social psychology that shows one can nudge people simply by telling them what other people do.

Whereas earlier research on conformity (e.g. Asch, 1956; Milgram, 1974) relied on overt social pressure, more recent research has focused on subtle, indirect influences of which participants may be unaware (Cialdini and Goldstein, 2004); these are more analogous to nudges. Cialdini, Kallgren and Reno (1991) distinguish between two types of social norms, descriptive and injunctive. The former simply state what most people actually do, the latter express an overtly normative message about what people should do. Both can be effective, but descriptive norms are less invasive. Social norm research (Perkins, 2003) typically includes descriptive social norms, e.g. '70 % of students on this campus do not take drugs', and has been widely used in social-norm marketing campaigns aimed at alcohol and substance abuse among young people. Research suggests that the impact of social norms depends on the extent to which they are focal (i.e. salient) and in alignment (Cialdini and Goldstein, 2004).

Two field studies are directly relevant to electricity efficiency. In these studies participants' electricity meters were read by research assistants who provided feedback on doorhangers. Nolan et al. (2008) tested descriptive social norms such as:

In a recent survey of households in your community, researchers at Cal State San Marcos found that 77% of San Marcos residents often use fans instead of air conditioning to keep cool in the summer.
Using fans on energy instead of air conditioning—Your Community's Popular Choice!

The study found that these had significantly more effect on consumption than injunctive appeals to self interest, protection of the environment or social responsibility, although respondents in an earlier study (reported in the same paper) thought that the descriptive norm message would be least motivational. A study using a similar methodology (Schultz et al., 2008) again used doorhangers, giving participants feedback on their individual and local neighbourhood electricity usage figures. This research compared a feedback only condition (descriptive social norm) with an intervention that combined feedback with a positive or negative emoticon or 'smiley' (descriptive and injunctive social norms) In the feedback only condition, participants who were using more than their neighbours used significantly less after the intervention, but those who were using less moved

towards the norm, and started to use more electricity (the 'boomerang' effect). In the second condition, when descriptive and injunctive social norms were combined, the 'destructive' movement towards the norm was avoided: usage of those below the norm remained stable while the usage of those above declined. Note, these two studies used personal meters readers attached handwritten feedback to respondents' front doors; this personal element may have enhanced the normative effect of the communication. A large scale year long trial conducted by Cialdini at Positive Energy (O Power) combines descriptive and injunctive social norms in energy bills, with promising results (www.positivepower.com)

The study by Schultz et al. combined individual and social group feedback, but did not distinguish between the impacts of these two interventions. There is considerable research on the impact of individual feedback in energy efficiency. Darby (1999) identifies feedback as the single most promising method for reducing household energy consumption, and calls for more field testing. Research shows that more frequent feedback is more effective, and that feedback can be effectively conveyed through a website (Abrahamse, 2007). Research on social group feedback in energy bills is more equivocal. Surveys conducted in the US and Norway indicate that consumers are receptive to comparisons of their energy consumption with relevant social groups, but the idea of social comparison was unpopular in UK focus group research (Roberts, S., Humphries, H. & Hyldon, V. (2007). Iyer (2006) reviews different expressions and formats of comparative social feedback and advocates small comparison groups preferably based on physical location.

Research Method

The CHARM project aims to develop, evaluate and understand the use of digital technology to shape individual behaviour by informing and thereby challenging conceptions of 'normal' practices. The project evaluates the efficacy of individual and social group feedback in three contexts: 1) electricity consumption, 2) active lifestyle and 3) Facebook. This paper is restricted to the electricity consumption research.

Households will be randomly assigned to one of three conditions: control; individual feedback only; individual and social group feedback. Participants will be professionally recruited in coherent geographical areas and will be paid an incentive for their participation. Recruiters will administer a pre-trial questionnaire (e.g. ascertaining house type, the number of rooms in the house, heating type, etc.). Each respondent will receive a visit at the beginning of the experiment for an initial briefing, and to attach a device to an electricity cable between the meter and the fuse box. Each unit will contain a micro-controller board, a GPRS unit and a SIM card in a rugged and secure container. This device will transmit electricity usage data via SMS messages to a 3G wireless modem and SIM card attached to a computer. This will transmit daily SMS messages detailing usage to a server, which will relay individual and social group feedback in various formats to the participant. In the control condition, meters will be read manually at the start and end of the experiment and a dummy container will be used. Initial feedback will be postal to increase awareness, but subsequent feedback will be email and web for those who have Internet connection. Feedback will combine descriptive data with injunctive emoticons. Once we have collected baseline data, participants will receive either individual feedback on their comparative usage, or individual and social group feedback with averages based on their neighbour's usage. The website will include a section on energy saving tips and a blog to which

respondents can contribute. At the end of the research period we will remove the devices and ask the respondent(s) to complete a questionnaire.

In addition to the questionnaires, we will conduct approximately 35 face-to-face semi-structured interviews, with a purposive sample of subjects. Interviews will occur in respondents' homes and involve all adult household members as feasible, and will include observation and discussion of home configuration, energy efficiency features, types of energy consumed and appliances used. A number of respondents will be interviewed both before and after the experiments, in order to benchmark conceptions and practices and to facilitate identification of changes (these respondents will be excluded from the field trial analysis). A number of respondents will be re-interviewed at least 6 months after the trial to identify any long term changes in overall levels and underlying practices. Respondents will receive an additional incentive for their participation in the interviews. In addition, we plan 3 professionally moderated focus groups, to elicit discussion of the trials and normative discourse in a social context; the focus groups will be reconvened after a period of 6 months to explore the longevity of any changes in practices. All interviews will be transcribed, coded and analysed with ATLAS-ti qualitative data analysis software.

Discussion

The research on pro-environmental initiatives reported in the first part of this paper helps to explain why motivational models are of limited value for predicting pro-environmental behaviour. Normal behaviour is routine; adoption is taken for granted, rather than founded in beliefs, attitudes and rationalisation. Pro-environmental initiatives could be more successful if they focused on creating new patterns of normal behaviour rather than on advocating new 'green' behaviours, which are seen as of interest only to a minority of 'green' consumers. Describing a product, or an activity, as 'green' or 'environmentally friendly' has the effect of categorising it in a way that can diminish its appeal (see Grant, 2007 for a discussion of 'greenophobia'). Recycling is an example of a behaviour that has moved over the last five years from being 'green' to being perceived as normal, those who recycle are now regarded as normal, and those who refuse to recycle are castigated as 'non-green'. Hopefully, longlife bulbs may move from being 'green' to normal, while incandescent bulbs move from normal to 'non-green'. However, it is far from clear how we can change conceptions of normality to include pro-environmental behaviours such as energy efficiency.

CHARM is based on several interdisciplinary approaches that all contribute to understanding the complexity that underlies normality, the way in which what are seen as 'normal' practices evolve and change, and the potential influence of information about what other people do. The theoretical perspectives reviewed and our research highlight the different, but overlapping, meanings of normal, including normal as normative, normal as average, normal as taken-for-granted, normal as familiar, normal as usual, etc. These meanings range from the normative (what people ought to do) to the descriptive (what people do), but as the literature on the fact/value distinction demonstrates, it is far from clear that this difference is clear cut. Our research suggests that behaviour change may be achieved through communication of what other people do. In terms of energy consumption, what people do can be understood on different levels, as overall usage, e.g. kilowatts per week, and in terms of the energy consuming practices that lead to this usage, e.g. tumble drying clothes. CHARM will focus on understanding how feedback can be used to shape behaviour by informing perceptions of normal practice, and on understanding how conceptions of what is

taken-for-granted as 'normal' can be changed. The study seeks to elucidate conceptions of normality, and to find out if and how we can use individual and social group feedback both to change overall usage and to change the underlying practices that result in this usage.

Increased concern about the environment highlights the importance that marketing can play in encouraging pro-environmental behaviours. Marketing can potentially help to redefine the concept of 'normality' to include pro-environmental behaviours, and social norm marketing techniques can encourage the adoption of pro-environmental behaviour.

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