

It's not easy being green: How can marketers make it easier for people to live sustainable lives?

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Outlines four strategies for marketers, grounded in behavioural science, that can build sustainable behaviour.

- Behavioural science can help to build understanding by improving carbon numeracy and avoiding eco-jargon.
- Defaults, or automatically opting people into a certain choice are probably the single most effective tool in the behavioural scientist's box and help to reduce the problem of putting things off until tomorrow.
- Another strategy to accelerate behaviour change draws on peer effects – we tend to be motivated to change our behaviour more if we know others are too.
- A fourth strategy is what's known as the snowball effect, that is starting with a small, but attainable first goal to build momentum for the larger goal.

Net zero marketing

This article is part of a series of articles from the WARC Guide to net zero marketing. [Read more](#)

Why it matters

Marketers have a critical role to play in helping to tackle these issues. Clever strategies, innovative technology and effective communications means sustainable behaviour change for the masses is within reach. Marketers are well placed to enable consumers to change in ways that feel low effort yet rewarding at the same time, but also to help build understanding and motivate consumers too.

Takeaways

- Help people to get their heads around the challenge of climate change by helping them understand the problem in simple terminology. How can information be made easy to understand using different frames and anchors – make it easy for anyone to grasp the language?
- Get people taking action today by making it easier for people to change by using defaults in order to reduce barriers and the intention-action gap.
- Build momentum in people's lives by leveraging peer effects and a feeling of accelerating change in society.
- Motivate people by identifying a first action to change which may then go on to have positive spillovers in the rest of their lives.

Introduction

Climate change awareness is all there – we are now facing its accelerating reality from multiple angles; from visible change in our weather including more extreme weather events and natural disasters abroad, to our children asking us how they can live more sustainable lives to daily coverage by mainstream media.

Yet many people lack a clear sense of how big the problem is and just how much needs to be done. Before we can even get started, we struggle to understand terminology, concepts, technology and innovation – sometimes known as ‘eco-jargon’.

Secondly, we still don’t know where to start, what’s going to make the biggest difference. Oftentimes we hear people say “I do my bit, but I know I need to do more” or “I wish I knew the top five things I can do as a consumer to help ease the burden on our planet”. There’s so much rhetoric right now, that it’s hard to find the signal in the noise.

UK consumers know action on climate change is urgent and are willing to live more sustainably yet they aren’t sure where or how to start.

The challenge of living more sustainable lives

Roughly speaking, in the UK we need to reduce our individual carbon footprint by over 50% to under 2 tonnes per person per year to have any hope of avoiding a catastrophic rise in global temperatures of 2 degrees. And yet the average Briton emitted nearly 5 tonnes in 2020. Even the global average is around 4 tonnes. Contrary to some perceptions, it’s not only more affluent people who need to change their lifestyle; a 2020 study of households on Universal Basic Income in Finland found that even their footprints were nearly 5 tonnes on average. Basic necessities like housing, food and daily travel were the main contributors. Clearly, major emitters such as companies and organisations – entire sectors even – need to take action, but changing individual behaviours and lifestyles is equally critical; the Committee for Climate Change estimate that 40% of UK emissions come from households.

Even with better knowledge, understanding and a plan of action in place, we face a third challenge; that human nature is often to defer action, to put things off until tomorrow.

Marketers have a critical role to play in helping to tackle these issues. We don’t have time for governments to waffle their way to taking action. The private sector has always been able to move much more quickly and nimbly and with clever strategies, innovative technology and effective communications, meaning sustainable behaviour change for the masses is within reach. Marketers are well placed to enable consumers to change in ways that feel low effort yet rewarding at the same time, but also to help build understanding and motivate consumers too.

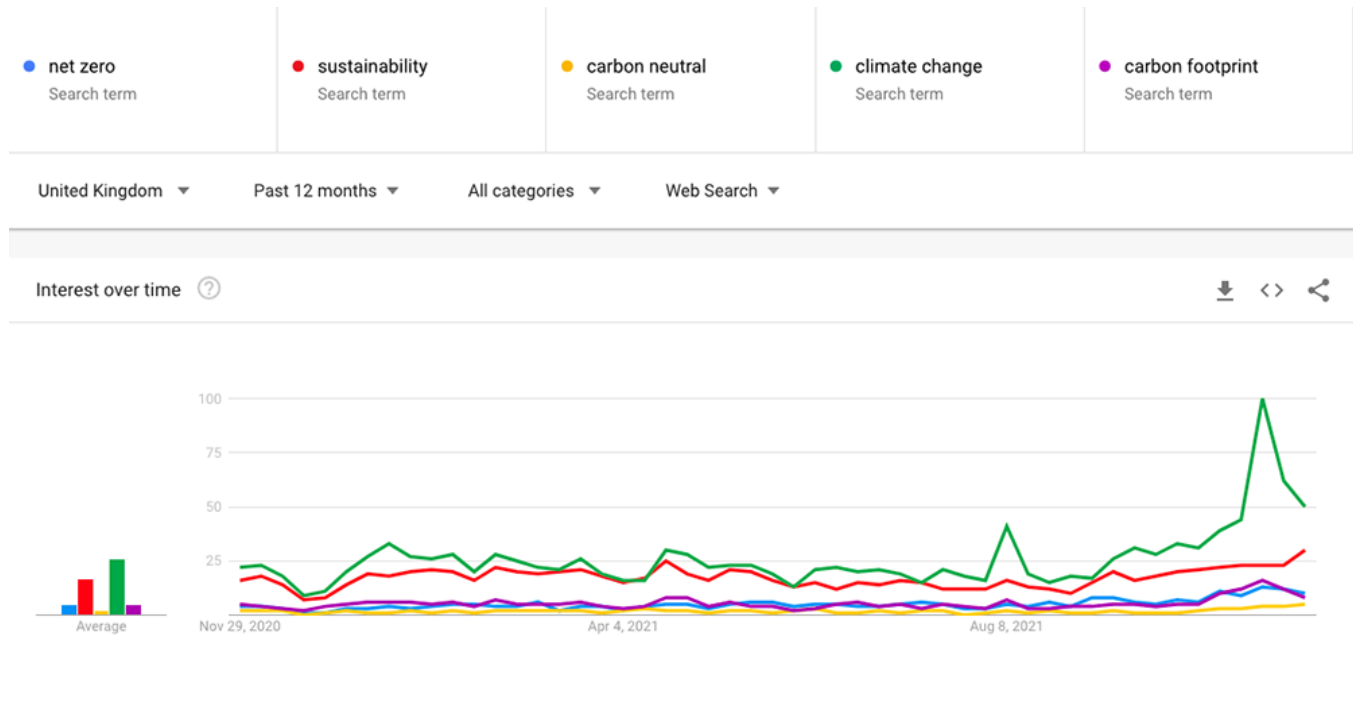
Drawing on our experience in applied behavioural science, we discuss these three key issues consumers face in changing their behaviour and identify behavioural-science-based strategies marketers can leverage to tackle these problems.

Problem 1: ‘Carbon what?’ – people struggle to get their heads around sustainability

The initial problem many people face before even taking any action is that they struggle to get their heads around what exactly sustainability means. Behavioural science shows how having to think too hard or navigate complexity – what’s known as ‘cognitive strain’ – can lead to lack of engagement and action. Cognitive strain is often high for those wanting to lead a sustainable lifestyle – it can be overwhelmingly complex to understand. Many consumers show large misunderstandings and lack of knowledge in terminology and concepts.

For one, ‘eco-jargon’ confuses people. For example, tonnes of carbon is a very abstract concept, with few commonly known reference points and one that is hard to visualise, making informed decisions difficult. In fact, recent research by The Behavioural Architects for Smart Energy GB found that people associated ‘tonnes of carbon’ with factories and transport rather than households and individuals.

We also found that people struggle with phrases like ‘carbon neutral’ and ‘net zero’ which mean little compared to terminology which is more embedded, such as climate change, sustainability and carbon footprint. Google Trends supports this finding (see figure below); searches for terms like climate change and sustainability are three to five times higher than terms like net zero and carbon neutral.



Source: Google Trends, accessed November 2021

Problem 2: ‘I don’t know where to start’

The second problem builds on the first; consumers also lack clear understanding of what’s most important to change in their lives. Recent research has highlighted people are often confused about the impact of sustainable and unsustainable behaviours and how they compare. Authors of new research published in December 2020 investigated what they call low ‘carbon numeracy’. For example, several surveys show that when people are asked to rank the impact of different actions on their carbon footprint, people seem confused about which behaviours they need to reduce or stop, and which are important to start or do more of:

- **Behaviours to reduce or stop:** For example, people forget that flying has one of the highest carbon footprints, yet are acutely aware that they need to stop using plastic bags and plastic straws. People also have little idea of the scale of impact of an action and cannot make tradeoffs. For example, people believed that to save the same amount of emissions as a year of not eating farmed red meat, it would take just one to two years of purchasing food without packaging. In fact, it would take a decade.¹ People also underestimate the negative impact of eating red meat; researchers have found that people thought eating a serving of beef was only slightly worse than running a standard 100 watt incandescent lightbulb for 1 hour. In fact, it is nearly 10 times as bad in terms of carbon footprint. Few people in one study were aware of the four main behaviours which could make the most impact: having fewer children; living without a car; reducing long haul air travel; and eating a vegetarian diet. Only a handful of survey participants identified having fewer children and less long haul air travel as making a major difference. Overall, people correctly answered tradeoff questions less than 20% of the time. Interestingly, accuracy was also linked to basic numeracy.
- **Behaviours to start or do more of:** Similarly, people are unaware of how large an impact using renewable energy has, yet hugely overestimate the impact recycling can actually have.² People also judged the impact of recycling to be more significant for reducing emissions than becoming vegetarian.

Overall, consumers lack joined up thinking on sustainability and how to build a low carbon footprint, partly due to the proliferation of lists of tips and generic carbon calculators in the media. The chart below ranks the true impact of selected lifestyle changes.

Whilst the ranking is useful, it illustrates the problem of still meaningless data since it is ranked in tonnes of carbon and may fail to get people really motivated to take action.

Climate impact of lifestyle changes

Bars indicate tonnes of CO2 equivalents

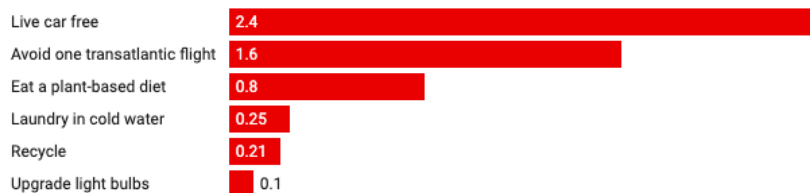


Chart: Seth Wynes • Source: [Wynes and Nicholas 2017, Environmental Research Letters](#) • [Get the data](#)

Low carbon numeracy is due in part to a concept called availability bias in behavioural science – where people give more weight to things that spring to mind more easily. Campaigns have often focused on simple tiny changes such as using reusable coffee cups or bags for life. Yet as climate psychologist Adam Corner says “people assume the actions they hear the most about are more impactful than they really are.”³

This can lead to poor decision-making and behaviours; such as people feeling licensed to take a flight because they do their recycling.⁴

Households lack guidance or feedback to help them see in simple ways what steps will have the greatest impact and how they can feasibly and practically cut their carbon footprint by the required 50%. People desperately need to be given a clear goal and then have laid out in front of them the steps they need to take to get there and how to go about achieving them.

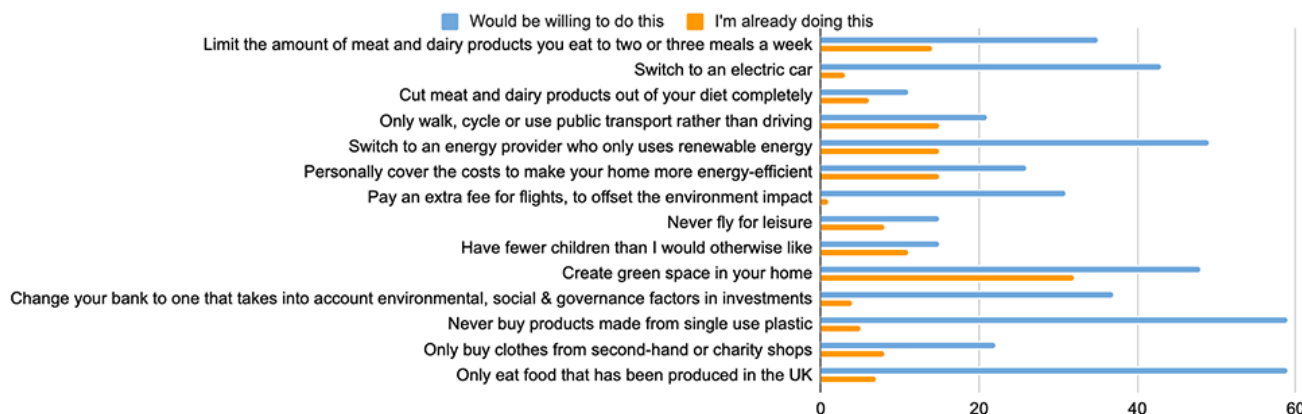
Problem 3: Putting it off until tomorrow

Human nature is often to put things off until tomorrow. Even if consumers are given a clear goal and improve their carbon literacy and numeracy, they often find it hard to change behaviour. Many are willing to live low carbon lives and adopt more sustainable behaviours, but only a small minority are already doing them. We’re often short of time, mental bandwidth, or procrastinate if there are choices to make. In behavioural science, this is often called the intention-action gap.

A recent YouGov survey illustrated the extent of this problem.⁵ For example, 43% of those asked said they were willing to switch to an electric car, yet just 3% have already switched. Similarly 49% said they were willing to switch to a renewable energy provider, yet only 15% are already doing this and 35% said they were willing to limit consumption of meat and dairy to two to three meals per week but only 14% were already doing this.

Personal actions to address climate change

Q: Taking into account the personal costs or changes to lifestyle that would be required, please say whether you would or would not be willing to do each of the following to address climate change



Source: YouGov Nov 2021

Similarly, a 2018 study by Milena Buchs and her colleagues at the University of Leeds and Southampton found that although providing households with personalised carbon footprint estimates using a comprehensive carbon footprint calculator raised awareness of how they could reduce their footprint, a year on there were still no measurable changes in people's travel behaviours and home energy use. Qualitative follow-up with households also found that people often felt they couldn't make many more daily routine changes than they already were. Buchs says "many participants stated they would find it difficult to make additional changes as they felt they were already reducing their emissions as much as possible." For example, one respondent commented: "I think we already do quite a lot of stuff [in the home], we've got to the point where we're down to the marginal stuff like not using the toaster which isn't going to save the world (laughs) frankly."⁶

Four strategies grounded in behavioural science to build sustainable behaviour

The good news is that behavioural science offers ways to tackle these three different problems and ultimately shift behaviour to become more sustainable. Some mean people don't need to think or do much, others help build momentum and energy to take action. We've highlighted four different strategies below to help marketers find footholds in this complex area.

1. Making information easy to understand

The first two problems above highlight how information needs to be much more accessible and easy to understand to guide people in making the right sustainable choice. Behavioural science can help to build understanding by improving carbon numeracy and avoiding eco-jargon.



As an example, many consumers don't realise that buying energy efficient appliances (e.g. A+ rated) can make a substantial impact in reducing a household's carbon footprint as well as being less costly to run. However, the upfront cost of more efficient appliances is often higher even though households will gain money back in the future through lower running costs which puts consumers off – we dislike (monetary) pain now for future gains – a concept known as present bias in behavioural science. This means consumers often opt for the cheaper, less efficient appliance.

Therefore, behavioural science practitioners have looked at how to drive up such purchases by aiding carbon numeracy. A 2018 trial by the Behavioural Economics Team in the Australian government (BETA) sought to encourage more households to buy energy efficient appliances by helping to make this information more salient to consumers. They trialled simple, salient energy labels (see image) with 40,000 consumers on an online appliances store and found they led to an increase in purchases of more energy efficient appliances. Consumers who saw either type of energy rating label were 20% more likely to purchase higher efficiency appliances.⁷

Initiatives like these help us move in the right direction by improving carbon numeracy by making information simple and salient so people find it easy to make sustainable purchases.

2. Change the default and make a behaviour the automatic choice

Defaults, or automatically opting people into a certain choice are probably the single most effective tool in the behavioural scientist's box and help to reduce the problem of putting things off until tomorrow. In a recent review of 308 behaviour change interventions across 100 studies, looking at the impact of ten different types of nudges, defaults were found to be the most powerful with a typical median impact of 50% – that is, they increased participation or selection of a choice by 50% – a

phenomenal rise.⁸ In some cases they can even increase selection of a choice by up to 99%.

As the behavioural scientist Cass Sunstein comments “Of all of the tools in the choice architect’s repertoire, default rules may be the most promising; they are almost certainly the most discussed. Whether the area involves savings behaviour, poverty reduction, or the environment, default rules have had significant effects on outcomes.”⁹

Defaults show significant promise for helping to reduce a household’s carbon footprint, particularly for large high-hassle-factor infrastructural changes such as retrofitting housing (insulation, solar panels and heat pumps) and switching to renewable energy sources which current research shows people are unlikely to undertake voluntarily. Yet it is these sorts of big, one-time changes that will help to make significant leaps towards more than halving our individual carbon footprints.

There are many studies which show that changing defaults can change behaviour, including several on green energy. For example, a 2020 study in Germany found that uptake of renewable energy tariffs was higher in regions that offered it as the default, removing the choice. A default tariff for renewable energy led to an increase of almost 20 percentage points in green electricity consumption. Previously, other information-based or switching campaigns failed to change household choice of tariff. Although households remained free to opt-out of the green tariff, few did do. Making the choice to use renewable energy easy – and feel recommended – helps reduce any friction in choosing to draw on renewable energy sources.¹⁰

Similarly, a utility company in Denmark offered free upgrades to heat pumps to make them “smart”, consisting of an “intelligent steering unit” that would be installed during the household’s next regular maintenance if they agreed. An impressive 85% of households accepted the offer in the default condition – where they were opted in automatically. If a household had to opt in themselves – as you still need to with most energy providers – just 35% of households accepted.¹¹

Importantly, implementing a default strategy takes some of the responsibility off the consumer’s shoulders and onto the backs of energy providers and governments, just as auto-enrolment into a pension in the UK has successfully lifted some of the pressure from employees and put it into the hands of employers, government and pension providers.

For marketers, applying this default strategy in practice could mean either mainstream brands need to become visibly sustainable or new, sustainable brands need to become mainstream. Ultimately, consumers end up purchasing a sustainable brand. Let’s see if we can identify opportunities in more sectors where changing the default to a low carbon sustainable option could play a significant part in cutting our carbon footprints by the needed 50%.

3. Leverage peer effects

Another strategy to accelerate behaviour change draws on peer effects. We tend to be motivated to change our behaviour more if we know others are too, a concept known as dynamic social norms. For example, statements telling cafeteria users that many others are starting to choose meat-free options was found to have a noticeable impact on people’s food choices.

Surprisingly, the numbers of people already doing sustainable behaviours are impressive and suggests we are not far from a tipping point for some of them. For example, according to the recent YouGov survey above 15% of people have already switched energy provider, 15% already walk/cycle/public transport rather than drive, 15% have already invested to make their home more energy efficient, 14% already limit how much meat and dairy they eat whilst 6% have already stopped eating meat and dairy completely.

Estimates vary on what the exact social tipping point is, from 10-40%, but a recent study by Damon Centola, a Professor of Communication who studies Network Dynamics, found in online trials that only 25% of the group needs to change their behaviour in order for the group as a whole to switch.¹²

Marketers could also help to correct people’s perceptions of what’s known as injunctive and descriptive social norms. The YouGov survey found people perceived that others like them were less willing than they were to do many of these more sustainable actions. Asked ‘Do you think most other people like you would or would not be willing to do each of the following?’ many underestimated the numbers willing to change. Just knowing that there are more like-minded people out there willing to change could help drive that acceleration of change we need.

Similarly, local peer effects may help to drive change extremely effectively in small community clusters. Centola has found that we are strongly influenced and persuaded by multiple exposures with those immediately around us – close peers – family,

friends, colleagues and neighbours with whom we interact with regularly, are similar to us and crucially, in whom we trust. This means that initially there is cluster-based behavioural change as one by one different peer groups adopt a new behaviour. A locally critical mass of people feed off each other's emotional energy and change their behaviour, and as that becomes visible to other groups, spreads there too.

Whilst word-of-mouth is likely to be an important factor, at an even more basic level, simply seeing behaviour change in our community seems to be significant, a concept known as spatial peer effects. For example, a recent study using machine learning found that the main driver for the uptake of solar panels in Fresno, California was being within 200m of another house with solar panels. Solar panels show up in geographical clusters on maps. The theory is if our neighbours get solar panels, we see them, we might chat to them about their experience ... and then we go and install our own. This supports previous research in Switzerland, Germany and elsewhere in the US. Indeed, research in Switzerland found that visibility was a critical driver – the more visible panels were, the more likely others would install them too.

There is also some new evidence that the workplace may be a driver of change. Researchers at the National Center for Sustainable Transportation Research Report have not only recently found neighbourhood-based patterns of adoption for plug-in electric vehicles, but at the workplace too. Using spatial analysis of data from 2014 to 2016 in California, they found evidence of both a neighbourhood effect at home locations and a workplace effect where people commute to by car. Specifically, exposure to an electric vehicle within a 1-mile radius was associated with a 0.2% increase in EV sales. This was in a context where plug-in EV sales still only made up 7.8% of new car sales, meaning EVs were relatively uncommon on Californian highways. Exposure to plug-in EVs was also associated with fewer hybrid vehicles, presumably as people prefer to choose a plug-in EV over a hybrid. This effect may be impacting here in the UK; by the end of 2021, electric vehicles made up over 11% of all vehicle sales in the UK, which means they are becoming ever more visible in neighbourhoods.

4. Harnessing snowball tactics to build momentum

Finally, a fourth strategy is what's known as the snowball effect, that is starting with a small, but attainable first goal to build momentum for the larger goal. For example, one study found encouraging people to wipe out their smallest credit card debt motivated them to go on to pay off all their debt on other cards faster and more effectively than people who followed more traditional strategies. But the technique is by no means restricted to financial issues – it's equally applicable in other areas of life such as sustainability.

The key thing is that the first step doesn't need to be the one that makes the most logical, rational sense. What's needed is a buzz, a feeling of achievement so people are motivated to keep going and tackle other problems and to leverage what are known as positive spillovers – when taking an action actually changes or embeds a particular identity to the point where we feel we should take further steps in order to make our new found identity credible. We feel uncomfortable making a sustainable choice in one area, but maintaining an unsustainable choice in another, especially when the science shows we need every tool in the book to save our planet. Positive spillovers are driven by a desire to be consistent, have moral integrity and not appear hypocritical particularly if our actions are highly visible. Think of Kate Middleton, the Duchess of Cambridge arriving at COP26. Not only did she arrive by train, but she backed it up with more sustainable fashion choices.

Max Bittner, chairman and CEO of cyclical economy Vestiare Collective highlights this effect on his behaviour: "once I became an active Vestiaire customer, it became harder and harder for the rest of my life to be unsustainable. I'm German, and Germans like their German cars, going too fast on highways. I'll look at the motor and it makes such a great noise and all that stuff. But I just can't do that anymore. Like, I can't sit there in a petrol car, and pretend like this matters. You start changing the rest of your behavior. You start buying an electric car and you start making other decisions differently."

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