

SPECIAL SERIES  
WORD ON THE STREET

## 54 Flocking to Conserve Energy

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Utility bill smackdown, part II.

For decades, advocates have tried emotional and rational appeals to get people to conserve energy. It'll benefit the planet and save money, we tell people. It seems like a no-brainer to a lot of us. But millions of Americans remain unmoved.

Motivational speaker and persuasion guru **Robert Cialdini** may have found the "sweet spot" that could get people to turn off the lights, program the air-conditioner, and unplug idle appliances. It's tapping into our powerful **flocking tendency**. It seems what we really want is to keep up with our neighbors.



It turns out that keeping up with the Joneses is a bigger motivator than subsidies, incentives, and moral appeals. Yep, better than cold hard cash. When we think our neighbors are saving energy, we want to do it too. People right next door are doing it, why can't we?

**Clark wrote about this a year ago.** But what's new is that **Cialdini**—psychology professor and author of the best-selling book on "weapons" of persuasion, *Influence*—has recently put his theories to the test in a California neighborhood.

Working for OPOWER, a firm that studies utility customers, Cialdini conducted a door-to-door study over a couple months and found that telling homeowners that their neighbors were saving energy was more effective at spurring them to action than three other types of messages. (Smiley faces kept big energy savers from slipping back to the average when peer pressure let up!)

And the best thing? This kind of campaign costs far less than most efforts to drive conservation. Cialdini suggests letting the US Post Office do the work—reminding people what their neighbors are capable of, for the cost of second-class postage.

Image courtesy: [MorgueFile](#)