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Environmental action and the action of others

Submitted by [Robert Cialdini](#) ^[1] on Wed, 10/28/2009 - 08:30

The results of a large survey I conducted with my fellow environmental researcher, Wes Schultz, produced a pair of actionable results. First, people who thought their neighbors were conserving energy were more likely to conserve themselves. Second, at the same time, almost all of the nearly 3,000 survey respondents underestimated the conservation efforts of their neighbors. This suggests a simple way to increase conservation activity—by trumpeting the true levels of conservation that are going unrecognized.

To investigate this idea, we examined resource conservation choices in an entirely different setting—upscale hotel rooms, where guests often encounter a card asking them to reuse their towels. As anyone who travels frequently knows, although the wording of this card may vary somewhat, it always requests compliance for the sake of the environment. What the card never says, however, is that the great majority of guests do, in fact, reuse their towels when given the opportunity. We suspected that this omission was costing the hotels—and the environment—plenty.

To test our suspicion, we conspired with the management of an upscale hotel to place one of four cards in its guestrooms. Three cards employed some version of the typical environmental appeal. A fourth card added (true) information that the majority of guests do reuse their towels when asked. The outcome? Compared to the first three messages, the final message increased towel reuse by over 28%. How easily we can be influenced to act by honest information about how those around us are acting!

Two things are noteworthy about the results of the hotel study. First, the message that generated the most participation in the hotel's towel recycling program was the one that no hotel (to our knowledge) has ever used. Apparently, this simple but effective appeal didn't emerge from a history of trial and error to become a hotel "best practice." Instead, it emerged from a scientifically-based understanding of human psychology. This points out the need to call on scientific research to help advance sound environmental policy. The second notable aspect of the hotel study was that the significant increase in program participation was nearly costless. In most cases, for an organization to boost effectiveness by 28%, some expensive steps have to be taken; typically, organizational structure, focus, or personnel must be changed. In this instance, however, none of that was necessary. All that was required was to convey the facts about the preferred behavior of the majority.

Thus, when most people are behaving responsibly toward the environment, we'd be less than responsible ourselves if we failed to publicize that fact, as the information will serve to validate and stimulate the desired action. Of course, I'm certain that only a small, small minority of readers will fail to heed these lessons. The vast majority will surely begin employing them straightaway.

Dr. Robert Cialdini is a guest blogger on this blog. You can follow his regular blog at: <http://www.insideinfluence.com>.

Comments

Great application! Won't we ^[2]

Submitted by Anonymous on Thu, 01/07/2010 - 04:45.

Great application! Won't we observe similar behavioral change with a message that overstates, subject to plausibility, the true level of conservation effort?

Tags: [Behavior](#) ^[3] [Environment](#) ^[4] [Information](#) ^[5]

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