



Values & frames

One of the defining debates within the environmental movement over the past decade has been between those who believe that applying the techniques and strategies of marketing physical products is the best way of promoting sustainable behaviour (social marketing), and those who have argued that this approach – trying to ‘sell’ climate change – is ultimately counterproductive unless the right underlying values are targeted by campaigns, and unless the messages are ‘framed’ in a way that encourages sustainable behaviours across the board.

So what are ‘values’ and ‘frames’, and why are they so important?

A value is usually defined by psychologists as a ‘guiding principle in the life of a person’ (Schwartz, 1992). Over several decades, and through research conducted in over 60 countries, there is now a huge body of evidence that shows the certain values and beliefs tend to go together – while others tend to be opposed to each other. People who identify strongly with ‘self-enhancing’ values (e.g. materialism, personal ambition) tend not to identify strongly with ‘self-transcending’ values (e.g. benevolence, respect for the environment).

There are some important practical implications to this research: people who hold ‘self-transcendent’ values (especially pro-environmental values, and high levels of altruism) are more likely to engage in sustainable behaviour (Stern, 2000), show higher concern about environmental risks like climate change (Slimak and Dietz, 2006), are more likely to perform specific actions such as recycling (Dunlap et al., 1983) and are more likely to support climate mitigation policies (Nilsson et al., 2004).

These mean that unless campaigns to promote sustainable behaviour make an attempt to target ‘self-enhancing’ values, they may inadvertently be promoting precisely the types of personal and cultural values that will make sustainable behaviour *less* likely. And this is why the way that messages and campaigns are ‘framed’ is so important.

Intentionally or unintentionally, all information is ‘framed’ by the context in which it appears. This could mean the individual words and phrases that are used (sometimes called ‘conceptual framing’), and is more akin to the ‘spin’ that is put on a message (like describing a product as containing 50% less fat, when in fact it still contains more fat than any of its competitors).

But framing can also mean something more substantial, and this is called ‘deep framing’. ‘Deep framing’ refers to the connections that are forged between a particular communication strategy or public policy and a set of deeper values or principles (Lakoff, 2004), and offers one method of linking climate change engagement strategies with self-transcendent values (Crompton, 2010). For

example, putting a financial value on an endangered species, and building an economic case for their conservation 'commodifies' them, and makes them equivalent (at the level of deep frames) to other assets of the same value (like a hotel chain). This is a very different frame to one that attempts to achieve the same conservation goals through emphasising the intrinsic value of rare animal species – as something that should be protected in their own right.

There is now a growing body of work – much of it led by Dr Tom Crompton, Change Strategist for WWF – that has used these research findings about how values and frames impact on people's behaviours and beliefs, and applied them to the challenges of campaigning on climate change. In the resources list, some of these studies are briefly described. But here is a more detailed account of what Tom Crompton and his colleagues have discovered about how to use frames and values to most effectively promote sustainable behaviour.

Crompton's first piece of work was called 'Weathercocks & Signposts', and challenged many of the assumptions about how NGOs campaigned on climate change. It was one of the first publications to question whether social marketing approaches were necessarily the best way of achieving the aims of environmental NGOs, given that social marketing often advocates using financial/material incentives, which in the long term encourage values that are counterproductive to promoting sustainable behaviour.

His next report (with John Thøgersen), 'Simple & painless? The limitations of Spillover in Environmental Campaigning', expanded on these arguments and examined another assumption that many environmental campaigns were based on: that starting with 'simple and painless' steps like unplugging phone chargers or turning down the washing machine is an effective way of engaging people in the more substantial sustainable behaviours like changing their travel routines, or eating different types of food. Crompton showed that the psychological evidence for a 'virtuous escalator' of behavioural change is limited, at best.

In a short, downloadable e-book with Tim Kasser, Crompton set out in more detail the social psychological evidence on how people's sense of identity and their life goals affect their environmental behaviours. It looks in detail at three of the main psychological drivers for environmentally destructive behaviour (including materialistic values and life goals, prejudice against the 'out-group' who are perceived to be telling them what to do, and coping strategies people use against the 'threat' of having to change their behaviour). It proposes specific strategies for dealing with each problem, and includes case studies from environmental campaigns.

Crompton's work culminated in a recent, well-publicised report produced for a coalition of third-sector organisations called 'Common Cause'. As well as the main report, a handbook for campaign and community groups was produced, summarising the central arguments in the report and translating them into practical tasks and recommendations. There is also a website that includes new commentary and features showing how the Common Cause thinking is being used in practice.

The central argument of the Common Cause report is that for 'bigger-than-self' problems like climate change (i.e. problems that may not be in an individual's immediate self-interest to invest energy and resources in helping to solve), campaigns that propagate or endorse self-enhancing values may actually undermine the 'common cause' that links them. This means that there is a common cause that links not just different environmental campaigns, but 'bigger than self' problems across different sectors (e.g., dealing with poverty).

Crompton and his colleagues' work on values and frames has started to alter the landscape of campaigning on environmental and other social issues – it is well worth taking the time to read the work he has been involved in, and thinking about how its findings can be applied.

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