



# ARE THEY ALL STUPID?

INFORMATION DOES NOT NECESSARILY LEAD TO ACTION

As a small time environmentalist and general campaigner, I have always thought that spreading information was more than half the battle. If people know the facts, then, of course, they'll do something about it. So, I was a great fan of the leaflet, the flier, the pamphlet, the report and, where possible, the documentary film. In 1997, I co-authored a book called *Campaigns and How to Win Them* - give it to people straight, no holes barred, then set up a group, organise a petition, lobby the politicians, call public meetings, have our say in the media, make a few banners, and bring our message to the streets.

And if people don't respond favourably, it has to be because they don't know enough, so out with another round of leaflets, press releases and public talks. And if that fails, well, what can you do, are they stupid?

If only things were so simple.

According to Simon Retallack et al<sup>1</sup>, it is now widely accepted that the "information in, action out" approach, which has been the basis of pro-environmental strategies for NGOs and government agencies since the early 1970s, simply does not work. Fostering awareness of a problem, the threat it represents, its causes and what can be done about it will not necessarily lead to the desired response.

They refer to evidence<sup>2</sup> which suggests that attitudes and behaviour can change without any assimilation of new knowledge or persuasive messages, and that learning and behaviour can occur without any change in attitudes at all. In some cases, a change in behaviour precedes and is responsible for the attitude change.

And a campaign that aims to change attitudes can backfire. Research<sup>3</sup> suggests that when people's actions and attitudes clash, a desire for consistency can lead them, not to change their behaviour, but to reject the attitude itself. Also, the incentives to re-adjust long-term goals rather than change a lifelong habit may be particularly strong when the rewards from the habitual behaviour are high.<sup>4</sup> There is also a danger that flooding people with information on an issue over which they feel little control can leave them feeling afraid but helpless. Denial, avoidance, distancing, and apathy can set in, or the person can deflect the problem by refusing to accept any personal responsibility, or by blaming others.

---

<sup>1</sup> S. Retallack et al (2007) *Positive Energy*; p. 84-5

<sup>2</sup> Greenwald (1969); Petty and Cacioppo (1981)

<sup>3</sup> Halpern et al (2004)

<sup>4</sup> Jackson (2005)

*In response to the energy crisis of the 1970s, Scott Geller and his colleagues studied the impact that intensive workshops have upon residential energy conservation. In these workshops, participants were exposed to three hours of educational material in a variety of formats (slide shows, lectures, etc). All of the material had been designed to impress upon participants that it is possible to reduce home energy use significantly. Geller measured the impact of the sessions by testing participants' attitudes and beliefs prior to, and following, them. Upon completing a workshop, attendees indicated greater awareness of energy issues, more appreciation for what could be done in their homes to reduce energy use, and a willingness to implement the changes that were advocated in the workshop.*

*But, despite these changes in awareness and attitudes, behaviour did not subsequently alter. In follow-up visits to the homes of forty workshop participants, only one had followed through on the recommendation to lower the hot water thermostat. Two participants had put insulating blankets around their hot water heaters, but they had done so prior to attending the workshop. In fact, the only difference between the forty workshop participants and an equal number of non-participants was in the installation of low-flow shower heads. Eight of the forty participants had installed them, while two of the non-participants had. However, the installation of the low-flow shower heads was not due to education alone. Each of the workshop participants had been given a free low-flow shower head to install!<sup>5</sup>*

*In 1978, an Act passed by the United States Congress introduced the Residential Conservation Service (RCS). The RCS mandated that major gas and electricity utilities in the United States provide homeowners with on-site assessments in order to enhance energy efficiency. In addition, homeowners had access to interest-free or low-cost loans and a listing of local contractors and suppliers. In total, 5.6% of eligible households requested that an RCS assessor evaluate their home. Of those who had their home evaluated, 50% took steps to enhance the energy efficiency of their dwelling, compared with 30% for non-participants (the non-participants were households who were on the waiting list to have their homes assessed). In general, the actions taken were inexpensive and did not involve a contractor. Frequent energy efficiency actions included caulking, weather stripping, installing clock thermostats, turning down the hot water and installing a hot water heater blanket. These actions reduced energy use per household by between 2% and 3%. Given that millions of dollars were spent on the RCS and that it is possible to reduce residential energy use by more than 50%, an initiative that produces annual savings of 2-3% cannot be seen as successful. The programme failed because it didn't pay adequate attention to the human side of promoting more sustainable energy use. It was assumed that retro-fitting would happen if people were told they would save money. This approach ignored the rich mixture of cultural practices, social interactions, and human feelings that influence the behaviour of individuals, social groups and institutions.<sup>6</sup>*

<sup>5</sup> D. McKenzie-Mohr & W. Smith (1999) *Fostering Sustainable Behaviour*; p. 9/10

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid*; p. 12/13

A number of contributors to the book *Creating a Climate for Change*,<sup>7</sup> agree that information on its own is not enough and that the gap between “knowing” and “doing” should not be underestimated. Neither high levels of education, nor knowledge about environmental impacts of personal actions, guarantee environmentally responsible behaviour.

According to John Tribbia,<sup>8</sup> merely obtaining information can have a counterintuitive effect. Studies<sup>9</sup> have shown that individuals can view “getting more information” about a problem as having “acted on it”. He says that only the most internally motivated can be expected to change behaviours if environmentally friendly alternatives are not provided, or are so inconvenient and costly that people leading full, busy, and complex lives cannot enact them.<sup>10</sup>

Sharon Dunwoody<sup>11</sup> refers to research which demonstrated that the best predictor of behaviour change is not seeing a public service announcement on late-night television but talking to someone.

Laurie Michaelis<sup>12</sup> says that messages directed at individuals in isolation have little effect. External support is important from peer groups, social norms and institutions, and enabling infrastructure. The most effective strategies are those that engage people in groups, and that give them opportunities to develop their understanding and their narratives about their consumption, in dialogue.

Civic participation in identifying solutions increases the likelihood that people will accept decisions that are made, that they will find the solutions valuable, and actually implement the new rules. People need to identify themselves as part of the process.

Doug McKenzie-Mohr and William Smith<sup>13</sup> say that information alone can sometimes change behaviour if the problem is immediate and the required response is clear and doable, as has been seen in the area of health promotion. For instance, the widespread distribution of information about heart disease has significantly altered the number of men getting regular checkups.

However, this does not mean that this works for other issues. Many programmes to foster sustainable behaviour rely on large-scale information campaigns; media advertising, information stands and workshops, brochures, fliers and newsletters, which are aimed at increasing knowledge and changing attitudes. The authors stress that numerous studies document that such education on its own often has little or no effect.

A US study carried out by Paul M. Kellstedt, Sammy Zahran, and Arnold Vedlitz in 2008<sup>14</sup> concluded that the more informed respondents feel less personally responsible for global warming, and also show less concern for global warming. This may have something to do with the media’s framing of the global warming issue as an unsettled controversy. Referring to films like Al Gore’s *The Inconvenient Truth*, the authors say that their research refutes the underlying assumption that providing information about global warming - in effect, taking the scientific consensus and popularizing it - will lead to increased public concern about the risks of global warming.

They also find that confidence in scientists has unexpected effects: respondents with high confidence in scientists feel less responsible for global warming, and also show less concern for global warming, as they feel that the scientists will sort it!

---

<sup>7</sup> S Moser & L Dilling (Eds.) (2007) *Creating a Climate for Change*

<sup>8</sup> S Moser & L Dilling (Eds.) (2007) *Creating a Climate for Change*; p 242

<sup>9</sup> Flinger (1994)

<sup>10</sup> S Moser & L Dilling (Eds.) (2007) *Creating a Climate for Change*; p 246

<sup>11</sup> S Moser & L Dilling (Eds.) (2007) *Creating a Climate for Change*; p 246

<sup>12</sup> S Moser & L Dilling (Eds.) (2007) *Creating a Climate for Change*; p 254

<sup>13</sup> D McKenzie-Mohr & W Smith (1999) *Fostering Sustainable Behaviour*; p.8-11

<sup>14</sup> [www.cfa.harvard.edu/~wsoon/ArmstrongGreenSoon08-Anatomy-d/Kellstedtetotal08KnowledgeGWvsApathypdf](http://www.cfa.harvard.edu/~wsoon/ArmstrongGreenSoon08-Anatomy-d/Kellstedtetotal08KnowledgeGWvsApathypdf)