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Why Behaviour Change is at the Heart of Sustainable Business

Brands must find ways to be innovative in order to push people towards sustainable living without preaching to them

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Removing bins to force staff to use recycling points is a small change that may have a big impact on a firm's sustainability goals. Photograph: Martin Argles for the Guardian

Research shows that changing people's habits through sheer force of persuasion is hard, especially if their surroundings stay the same.



Marketing campaigns can try to encourage people to live more sustainably, but "it's entirely in the hands of the consumer whether they do or not", says Lucy Shea, CEO of sustainable communications agency Futerra. "It rests entirely on the efficacy of that campaign, and often [behaviour](#) change doesn't result."

An alternative is for brands to "build in behaviour change so there is no choice but to use a product in a lower impact way", says Shea. Innovations that push people towards [sustainable living](#) without preaching can range from large-scale infrastructure such as cycle hire schemes, to hair-cleaning products.

"Dry shampoo is one of my favourite examples. It was never made to be environmental, it was made basically for ease" says Shea. "But the result of being able to spray your hair between

washes, and therefore wash it less, is actually the same as all of these worthy environmental campaigns asking you to spend less time in the shower."

Smart technology has great potential for designing sustainability into everyday life. Parcel carrier UPS, for example, has programmed its truck drivers' navigation systems to [minimise the amount of fuel they use](#) for each journey. On American roads, turning left at a junction leads to higher fuel consumption because drivers have to wait to cross an extra lane of traffic before they can turn. By programming their drivers' route maps to avoid left turns, UPS makes sure they drive more efficiently.

Smart thermostats in homes go further still, not just guiding consumers but acting sustainably on their behalf. The "learning thermostat" designed by the former head of iPods at Apple, for example, can sense whether anyone is at home, or what the weather is like, and adjust the house's temperature accordingly. [According to the BBC](#), its makers claim it can cut household heating bills by 20-30%.

Jon Fletcher, sustainable behaviours lead at accountancy firm PWC, says that the buildings we inhabit can mould our actions in many ways. When PWC [moved into a new office](#) in the spring of 2011 the company tried to embed sustainable living into the fabric of the site.

This included making sure the new location had good public transport links (they chose London Bridge), minimising car parking to five or six spaces, offering about 250 bike stands, building "far more" video conferencing units than in previous buildings, removing personal bins to force people to use the recycling bins on each floor, setting all printers to print double-sided and even programming lifts so that staff choose their floor before getting into the lift, and people who are going to the same floor are sent to the same lift.

"People have responded positively to the whole building," Fletcher says. "The changes might sound small and simple but they can have quite a significant impact." Paper usage went down by 15% in 2010, for example.

But nudging staff and consumers towards sustainable living is not enough on its own, Fletcher warns. "Changing defaults and decision-making structures so that people behave differently is hugely important. But it's also important for us to talk to them about sustainability." Bike racks might be a prerequisite and a prompt for cycling to work, for example, but without well-designed communications to encourage and equip people to get on their bikes, takeup would be lower.

Fletcher believes that big changes will only come about through a mixture of built-in behaviour change and communication. "We'll never make a big impact unless we can get culture change as well, and in order to do that you have to be part of the conversation with people."

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