



By Keith Neuman, Ph.D.

Good guidance

What will it take for consumers to act on their environmental concerns?

Surveys and focus groups make it clear that Canadians care about the environment. They see the environment as the number one problem facing the country. They express strong concerns about such issues as air pollution, water quality, and climate change. They continue to support aggressive policies on climate change (including the Kyoto Accord); and, notably, they increasingly acknowledge that they (along with other consumers) are part of both the problem and the solution, and express a willingness to act on this responsibility.

Yet, the level of consumer action is, by any measure, not consistent with these stated intentions. A majority of Canadians claim to have done something to reduce their ecological footprint in the previous few months, but for most these steps are token efforts (e.g. purchasing a couple of new light bulbs or recycling newspapers). Few take more than a couple of such actions. To date, consumer action has been largely symbolic.

The consumer-citizen gap

Does this mean that Canadians are simply hypocrites, and their expressed concerns and intentions should be dismissed as politically correct posturing? It would be simple for businesses and governments to draw this conclusion, but it would be a mistake. In more cases than not, our best intentions are often observed in the breach, and few individuals truly live up to their ideals and personal goals. Acting on environmental concerns is no different, and in fact present some unique challenges in today's consumer-driven society. There are six key reasons to explain the gap between consumer attitudes and actions when it comes to individual environmental responsibility:

1. The inherent and unavoidable tension between our roles as consumers (maximizing individual benefits) and as citizens (contributing to collective benefits);
2. Structural obstacles to making more environmentally-responsible choices, such as the absence of public transportation in one's community or control over energy consumption in workplaces;
3. Mixed signals that people receive through the media and our institutions — simultaneously pushing both consumption

(buying SUVs) and conservation (participating in the One Tonne Challenge). Most of our businesses, governments and other institutions are hardly setting a strong positive example for citizens to emulate;

4. A deep-seated tendency for people to deny or downplay the hazards and consequences associated with many of our environmental problems (e.g. the health hazard posed by the air we breathe, where our garbage is sent once it leaves our curb);
5. Consumer skepticism about green marketing claims, which is part of a broader social trend of increasing cynicism about marketing and authority; and

6. The absence of community peer pressure and support for making more environmentally-responsible lifestyle choices. Consumption is largely centered on the individual, but the impetus for environmental action must be rooted in a social context that reinforces consideration of collective rather than individual benefits.

Mobilizing consumer action around climate change is particularly daunting, because it necessarily involves substantive reductions in an individual's carbon footprint — which mean changes in lifestyle that are anything but token. But a careful reading of history demonstrates that significant social change simply does

not happen quickly (if at all) in the absence of a crisis. Self-imposed scarcity and cutting back on resource consumption will not happen by choice.

Lessons to learn

What are the lessons for business and other institutions? First, not to mistake a lack of initiative for lack of commitment. It's important to recognize that Canadians do care about the environment and do want to act, but face obstacles — not all of their own making. Second, given these obstacles (and the improbability of self-imposed restraint), consumers may be ready to follow but not lead the way to environmentally-responsible actions.

Experience with environmental education and promotion initiatives over the past 20 years (e.g. the One Tonne Challenge) has demonstrated that reliance on public

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education and the right messaging isn't sufficient to engage consumers to go beyond token actions on the environment.

Businesses and government need to demonstrate strong leadership by creating the appropriate structures, economics and policies that both tell people what is expected of them, and firmly guide them in these directions. This may take the form of a new array of effective green products, improved appliance and automotive standards, better transportation options, and finally, economic incentives of the kind that are known to shift behaviour.

And finally, mobilizing significant and sustained consumer action on the environment will require that attention be given to the social component.

This means designing initiatives that tap into community networks and peer pressure, which can act as powerful

reinforcers to socially-responsible actions. People are much more influenced by the people they know and trust than

they ever will be by even the slickest marketing campaign. Community blue-box recycling programs succeeded in achieving widespread participation because they exerted a subtle but powerful set of social expectations around the public act of what people set out on their curb each week. In the end, mobilizing public action on the environment is less about getting the product design and marketing right, and more about activating consumers' sense of responsibility to their community.

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