COMMUNICATION MATTERS

Workshop 'Interventions and Approaches to motivate Sustainable Consumption'

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Abstract

Communication is key to change consumption behaviour. Consumers' information activities are mainly applied to influence the private consumption at an individual level. Empowerment at the individual level can be achieved through the provision of possibilities for acquiring a sense of competence and self-determination. Moreover, by convincing consumers to make specific changes in their lifestyle, people should be trusted to be able to infer the appropriate behaviour change. In this respect important measures are information about the impact of the current lifestyle and activating instruments that offer the freedom of choice. Behaviour is a complex combination of emotions, habits and normative factors, thus the change of these components is a challenge. Success of interventions to change people's everyday behaviour or lifestyle will depend on measures that address and stabilize individual habits. Stand alone advice programs might successfully change everyday actions that are weakly or not habitual while strongly habitual actions require disrupting present routines and establish new ones. One major strategy is the provision of feedback systems, i.e. providing consumer with frequent informative evidence on energy consumption, CO_2 reduction and associated costs. However, longevity of behavioural change from feedback needs to be taken into consideration, as often once the feedback is removed households tend to reverse back to their old behaviours. In this concern, the workshop will discuss the social dimension and new instruments to support the collective progress and to contribute the mainstreaming sustainable consumption patterns by building communities, e.g. around information campaigns or website platforms.

Keywords

Consumption behaviour, feedback systems, self-determination, individual habits

1. Introduction and Background

In a broader sense, sustainable consumption can be seen as a process of negotiation and the building of consensus – in some areas this process competes with conventional market operations. This means that if new consumption strategies are to be achieved, all actors must be willing to engage in discourse.

Therefore, sustainable consumption can be defined as a societal field of action, which could be characterised by three interacting areas of action:

- the **individual** area of action (divided in two sub-areas): demand-side area, which includes consumption activities in the context of households as well as of professional procurement activities and the informal area, in which private consumers undertake informal activities which are not market-oriented and are thus not visible on the level of demand;
- the **supply-side and structural** area of action, which includes the activities of companies and also governmental bodies to provide sustainable products, services and information;
- the **socio-political** area of action, which includes the activities of governmental bodies but also of organisations and associations to provide the general framework for governance in both the individual and supply-side or structural area of action. Furthermore, in this area of action societal factors of consumption behaviour such as visions and moral concepts will be formed.

As indicated above, the three areas are interrelated: Consumer behaviour is based on individual decisions, but it largely depends on external factors such as economic incentives, supply-side measures and an appropriate infrastructure - furthermore, the socio-political framing has to be considered (Eberle, Brohmann & Graulich 2004).

Thus, in the respective areas and at different levels of consumer practice, the decision making is influenced by a diversity of context factors. Regarding the individual level and the so-called internal factors of behaviour, one aspect is described as daily “micro-decisions” and has to be considered as a contributing element of lifestyle, driven by beliefs, norms and values.

As a consequence, Jackson (cit. Kaenzig and Wüstenhagen 2006, p. 295) stated that sustainable behaviour is “a function of partly attitudes and intentions, partly of habitual responses, and partly of the situational constraints and conditions under which people operate.” Following the concept of Jager (2000), Martiskainen (2007) associates the different behaviours with a typology which is shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Typology of consumer behaviour

	Automated	*Reasoned*
Individual determined	*Repetition/habit: conditioning*	*Deliberation* *Planned behaviour* *Attitudes* *Behavioural control*
Socially determined	*Imitation: social learning* *normative conduct*	*Social comparison* *Planned behaviour* *Social norm* *Relative deprivation/social comparison*

Source: Martiskainen 2007, p. 19.

This many-fold determination of consumption behaviour by individual habits or attitudes and social learning or comparison stresses that we could not examine consumers in isolation. Sustainable or unsustainable consumption patterns are always a result of social processes at the family, community or at institutional level (Wilhite et al. 2000; Grønhoj 2006). Moreover, individual choice is limited by the way cities, energy supply, buildings or products are shaped and organized (Wilhite et al. 2000). There is no "one-dimensional" consumer behaviour – and due to the context, the consumer acts in "a diverse and interdependent mix of roles as citizen, market participant, employee and as member of a household or family performing coordination, repair, provisioning and purchasing functions" (BMVEL 2003, p 21).

In the energy-related sector, two groups of individual behaviour have been further differentiated and their respective contribution has been discussed by several authors (see Martiskainen 2007):

While curtailment (saving) behaviour addresses the use phase, it includes conservation efforts such as turning appliances off. The second type of behaviour is defined as efficiency behaviours and includes buying decisions – thus, efficiency behaviour addresses the investment phase.

Several studies postulate that there are specific time-frames in the life of persons where they have a greater sensitivity towards changing their energy using routines and their investment decisions. Schaefer and Bamberg (2008) report about an outline of a target-group-specific intervention for two target groups in phases of life changes based on a phase-model of behavioural change. Similar to this approach, Throne-Holst, Strandbakken and Sto (2006)

argue that windows of opportunity are needed – and get opened – when fundamental changes in life occur such as marriage or change of workplace. As a consequence of these findings, also communication instruments have to be designed more targeted to the specific life event. Another individual context issue was raised by Jensen (2004): with regard to energy efficiency, he points to the findings that consumers are sceptical towards energy savings that do not contribute positively – or perhaps negatively – to the resident's "symbolical communication" with his/her personal relations. Sustainable consumption underlines social status or ‘reputation’. Thus, residents are most likely to realize energy savings if these are both visible and contribute positively to his/her symbolical communication with others. Visible and positive symbolic meanings of savings seem to help overcome the “inertia” against behavioural change.

2. Elements and interventions of consumer information and communication

The necessity of more information for consumers is a well founded conclusion of many authors – mainly in the field of housing. Mourik et al. (2009) identified the lack of knowledge and information at different actor groups as one of the main barriers toward more efficient energy behaviours. Some authors describe, for example, the effect that the perceived energy efficiency does not match the present situation of the household (de Almeida and Fonseca 2008). Recent studies underline this observation: On average, participants of a US evaluation on the consumption of household devices underestimated both energy use and energy savings by a factor of 2.8 (Attari etal. 2010).

In Comini (2008) various recommendations are given from the “Enerbuilding” project with regard to building up consciousness and increase awareness for the energy efficiency improvement options through spreading information and support. Also in UNL (2008) it is concluded that well-informed consumers are more receptive to implement energy efficiency improvement measures. Uitdenbogerd (2007) detects knowledge about choices and costs as strongest internal determinants of behaviour and the possibility of choice as the strongest external determinant.

A tailor-made approach for the dissemination of knowledge is favoured by Abrahamse (2007). The implementation of streamlined routines in activity patterns of households can reduce energy requirement and can promote attention to energy saving. APE (2006) comes to the finding that specific, simple and clear information needs to *reach* households in order that they adopt the measures and change behaviour.

3. Communication instruments

A variety of communication instruments and intervention strategies has been elaborated over the last ten years. While in the area of energy efficiency and mobility the provision of communicative programs and instruments from different sources has a long tradition, in the sector of food and home care products new experiences on communication instruments have been gained recently.

Information instruments are designed in different forms and with different foci, due to the informative objectives and causes. The most well-known are:

- Product information like energy label or barcode systems via PDA at the point of sale
- Awareness raising methods like campaigns, competitions
- Feedback systems to influence everyday life and consumption routines
- Social modelling and social marketing.

In the following a brief description and discussion of these four main instrument types is given.

3.1 Campaigns

Primarily campaigns raise awareness for general issues as e.g. climate protection and might secondly provide additional information on selected aspects of e.g. reducing CO_2 in private households. In a more elaborated concept also educational aspects can be addressed and influencing behaviour can be targeted (Mourik et al. 2009).

While a mass media campaign aims at getting people's attention and make them aware of the issue, additional channels – as part of the same campaign - can point at more detailed information. Bauknecht (2008) describes that – in the case of a standby-campaign - this information has been made available via a website set up and through a telephone hotline that was provided for people to call and ask specific questions. There was also a brochure providing more details on standby power and how to reduce it. Moreover, a workshop for specific stakeholders and multipliers was included.

The target group itself can vary from very broad, i.e. population of a country or region as a whole, to a very specific target group, i.e. house-owners, neighbourhoods or multipliers (Mourik et al. 2009).

It is also mentioned by several authors that the design of the campaign should follow a structured process, should be based on theories of human behaviour and communication and should include the needs of the target group. (Brohmann 2000; Jackson 2005). Also Laustsen (2007) states, that well-structured dissemination of knowledge is important, if a broader target group should be reached.

Through the combination with measures of feedback and evaluation, the outcome of information campaigns can be improved.

3.2 Feedback

Feedback systems in general are seen as a very successful instrument to promote sustainable consumption. While in the sector of home care products, different models of giving feedback are still experimental level of (see Schneider 2009), feedback systems have a long tradition in the energy sector. Here, the instruments of metering and feedback encompass different fields of application. In general, feedback systems aim to provide consumers with more detailed, comparable and comprehensible information on their energy use. One can distinguish between various instruments:

- informative billing (mostly on electricity, in some cases gas or district heating),
- feedback by energy audits or advice programmes,
- single measurement (e.g. of electric power consumption) and
- smart metering (home automation).

In recent years, there has been a growing interest in metering and feedback due to the advance of information and communication technologies, and due to electricity utilities' heightened interest in variable energy pricing and load management. The knowledge about the (comparative) level of consumption and the amount of costs provides the motivation for a change towards a more efficient energy use: feedback stimulates energy savings (Fischer 2008, Bruppacher 2001). Darby (2006) analyzed that up to 20% of energy consumption may be reduced by an improved feedback. In this context Fischer (2008) points to the invisibility of electricity as a specific barrier because of a lack of control and experience with the "diminishing" potential – without an improved feedback system.

Fischer and Duscha (2008) underline the individual control by the consumers through informative metering and feedback. This gives an important stimulus - when the information is linked with concrete action items, such as interactive tools or an appliance specific breakdown (Fischer 2008). They further mention that the electricity meter – in its simple function – already could provide continuous feedback but that in most cases it is not used because of invisibility.

Metering and feedback can be related to audits and advice programmes. Energy audits provide detailed information on energy use and savings potential by identifying cost-effective ways to save energy. Advice programmes aim to provide target groups with skills and solutions for energy related problems.

3.3 Labelling

With the implementation and use of labels, three main issues might be addressed: one is the provision of information by standards as the European Energy Label is offering, another issue is the aspect of visibility Jensen (2004). Thirdly, also the producers should be motivated indirectly to provide appliances with an advanced technical standard.

The importance of awareness rising and of spreading the idea of efficiency through the increasing use of energy labels for buildings was underlined by different authors (Gruber 2005; Sammer 2008). Furthermore, Cowi (2001) observed that owners of labelled/certified houses carry out energy saving measures to a larger extent than owners of houses without energy label. Shorrock (2008) comes to the conclusion that the information provided in the energy performance certificate (EPC) – linked with the label/energy pass for buildings - may impact on consumers' decision to improve their property furthermore.

That a coherent quality assurance system for labelling is decisive to safeguard public acceptance and trust in the labelling scheme was claimed by Laustsen (2003) and Jensen (2007). The design of a labelling scheme should also include a continuous evaluation and the option to adjust the scheme. Moreover, Laustsen (2003) points to the importance of a dialogue between the consultant and the (future) house-owner within the process auf auditing and certification.

Evaluations of, for example, the Nordic Ecolabel and the EU Energy Label have found that the labels do not always influence producers via a simple model in which consumers favour products designated as 'green'. Producers often like to use favourable labels in signalling overall quality and they are also motivated to improve their performance by an attempt to avoid gaining a bad reputation. Thus, labelling systems might have been more influential than would be predicted on the basis of consumer awareness and active consumer attention to labels and the importance of independent verification that Truffer, Markard and Wüstenhagen (2001) underlined as one result of a previous focus group research on labelling becomes obvious.

3.4 Social networks

A sense of disempowerment was identified as one of the major obstacle to low-energy lifestyles and a more sustainable behaviour: if I couldn't realise the consequences of my individual effort, then it appears as useless unless others participate. Some authors describe this dimension as social dilemma (Thøgersen 2005) and point to the importance of a

supportive social context (Olli, Grendstad and Wollebaek 2001) to overcome this hindrance. Thus, there seems to be a need to engage local groups and supportive actors, alongside individuals, in the change of behaviour and lifestyles (Heiskanen et al. 2009).

The aspect of social dilemma is also a debate of potential green electricity buyers as mentioned by Truffer, Bruppacher and Behringer (2007). People are willing to pay more for green electricity, but on the condition that everybody is involved and engaged.

As a consequence, consumer communication framed by social networks and web communities has risen in recent years. Already ten years ago an increasing use of community-based social marketing in behavioural change initiatives was observed (McKenzie-Mohr 2000). Examples of community-based measures – as mentioned by several authors - include the use of peer-to-peer communications, the activities of local intermediaries, and the linking of behaviour change to initiatives as the Transition Towns movement. Furthermore, new communication technologies and independent platforms allow the exchange of consumers directly and their recommendations are highly trusted (Brohmann 2009). Besides the initial stimulus (of investment behaviour), also the lasting and sustainability of change (of routines) can be supported by social networks, as Rohracher (2001) showed.

The importance of 'community' for behavioural change is also visible in recent policy strategies, such as in new initiatives by the UK Energy Saving Trust (Martiskainen and Watson 2009; Heiskanen et al. 2009).

4. Conclusions

Besides individual attitudes and habits, behaviour is shaped by existing infrastructures, institutions, social norms and structures. For changes in behaviours to last, they need to be supported at least by their social and institutional environment. Thus, change of lifestyle is a process of negotiation and a process of social learning is required. This learning has to be based on communication and interaction between the relevant actors and social groups (Russel and Williams 2002; Rohracher 2001; Rohracher 2003).

This means that various stakeholders, in addition to consumers need to be addressed in policy strategies. It also means that consumers need to be addressed not merely as consumers (targets), but also as citizens with an interest in the acceptability and social implications of the policies (Spaargaren and Mol 2008). Interpersonal processes, various kinds of intermediaries and 'multipliers', such as social role models, are also looked at decisive for the durability and reinforcement of change (Brohmann 2006).

Moreover, as consumption is seen as a central issue in defining the consumers' identity and social relations, interventions need to enable the creation of new social identities by including participatory groups of consumers, such as neighbourhoods or entire residential areas (Mulder et al. 2006; Ornetzeder et al. 2007).

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