

Combining communications and social science to foster sustainable behaviour

 By [Hugh Tyrrell](#)

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The use of behavioural science together with communications to help people in communities and organisations act in more sustainable ways is increasing worldwide.



Abubaker Nackerdien, Saldanha Bay Municipality's acting manager: solid waste receives the Silver Award at the recent Eco-Logic National Environmental Awards ceremony for their separation-at-source recycling programme.

Campaigns that depend on 'awareness-raising' or education and training alone often have limited effect in the long-term. They also seldom consider that people are complex, make decisions aligned with their emotions and values, and with groups to which they belong.

What is now seen as more effective are programmes which integrate the psychology of how, why and when people take on new practices and routines, with communication messages framed appropriately and delivered over time in suitable ways and media. Regular feedback is a key component.

The processes aim at allowing behaviour change to be embedded as a social norm in the culture of the organisation or community in which change is desired. It is a process which requires time and perseverance, adequate budget, and the right planning, creative and implementation skills.

The purpose is to help people do common good

The purpose is not to change people against their will, but to help them do what is seen as for the common good, which includes that of their environment.

The methodology can be used by sustainability-oriented companies, conservation and advocacy organisations, municipalities and government for saving water and energy, optimising resource use, managing environmental areas, conserving biodiversity and wildlife, and reducing litter and pollution.

I used the approach with Saldanha Bay municipality's residential separation-at-source recycling programme which recently won an Eco-Logic Environmental Award. It's based on my earlier experiences as communication and behaviour change consultant to the roll-out of the City of Cape Town's highly successful Think Twice 'two bag' (wet/dry) kerbside collection programme.

What I found was that the participation uptake of residents in separation-at-source recycling behaviour practices closely follows the well-known 'social diffusion of technology' curve devised by Everett Rogers in the 1970s.

Different personality types change at different stages

According to the model, different personality types take on change at different stages of a new intervention. Innovators and early adopter personalities take on the change first, followed by the early majority then the late majority, with laggards last to come on board. It's a slow but steady process.

In the case of Langebaan, a suburb of Saldanha Bay, the innovators and early adopters were the 'deep greenies', keen and ready to take on the new separation-at-source behaviour. They already had the passion to participate and made up some 15% of the population.

Next came the early majority who were prepared to participate in the separation-at-source recycling, but had lives and homes to manage and who, because it was made easy, convenient and free, joined in.

The late majority were those who wanted to know if the system was working efficiently before they expended time and energy on participating.

As participation went up, the laggards saw that many of their fellow residents were recycling, and finally joined in too.

Messaging guided by diffusion phases

This phased diffusion of behaviour change guided the framing and messaging of campaign communications to the different personality types.

After eight months, household recycling participation amongst the nearly 5,000 residents of Langebaan had reached 45%, which is a very acceptable rate.

The City of Cape Town's Think Twice programme is achieving participation rates of over 60% amongst the 150,000 households where the service is being provided. This is excellent for cities nationally and internationally.

It also means there's been no need to introduce by-laws to make residential recycling mandatory, as is happening in Johannesburg.

More research together with guidelines for designing and implementing programmes based on social science and community-oriented communication methodologies can do much to enhance recycling and sustainable behaviour practices generally in South Africa.

ABOUT HUGH TYRRELL

Hugh Tyrrell designs science-based communication campaigns that influence behaviour for environmental good. These combine social psychology, communications, media and marketing with environmental sustainability. He is director of GreenEdge, an independent communications consultancy to business, non-profit and government clients.

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