



Executive summary

# Weathercocks & Signposts



**The environment  
movement  
at a crossroads**

April 2008



This is the Executive Summary of a report written by Tom Crompton, Change Strategist, as part of WWF-UK's Strategies for Change Project.

The full report is only available electronically, and can be downloaded at:  
[wwf.org.uk/strategiesforchange](http://wwf.org.uk/strategiesforchange)

Additional information on this Project will also be found at this page. For information not available on-line, please contact Tom at:  
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## Executive summary



**As our understanding of the scale of environmental challenges deepens, so we are also forced to contemplate the inadequacy of the current responses to these challenges. By and large, these responses retreat from engaging the values that underpin our decisions as citizens, voters and consumers: mainstream approaches to tackling environmental threats do not question the dominance of today's individualistic and materialistic values.**

***Weathercocks and Signposts* critically reassesses current approaches to motivating environmentally-friendly behaviour change. Current behaviour-change strategies are increasingly built upon analogy with product marketing campaigns. They often take as given the ‘sovereignty’ of consumer choice, and the perceived need to preserve current lifestyles intact. This report constructs a case for a radically different approach. It presents evidence that any adequate strategy for tackling environmental challenges will demand engagement with the values that underlie the decisions we make – and, indeed, with our sense of who we are.**



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### The marketing approach to creating behavioural change

Pro-environmental behavioural change strategies often stress the importance of small and painless steps – frequently in the expectation that, once they have embarked upon these steps, people will become motivated to engage in more significant behavioural changes. Often, these strategies place particular emphasis on the opportunities offered by ‘green consumption’ – either using marketing techniques to encourage the purchase of environmentally-friendly products, or applying such techniques more generally to create behavioural change even where there is no product involved.

Market segmentation techniques, for example, are used to characterise different sectors of the target audience according to the motivations presumed to underlie their willingness to undertake behavioural change. As a result, messages are tailored to fit with the

particular values dominant within different segments of the target audience – rather than engaging these values directly.

Consequently, it is frequently asserted that campaigners should be indifferent to the motivations that underlie behavioural choices. Much as in the case of selling a product, they should ‘go with what works’. Frequently, this may entail encouraging individuals to change their behaviour for reasons of social status or financial self-interest, rather than environmental benefit.

### The failure of the marketing approach

Marketing approaches to creating behavioural change may be the most effective way of motivating specific change, on a piecemeal basis. But the evidence presented in this report suggests that such approaches may actually serve to defer, or even undermine,

prospects for the more far-reaching and systemic behavioural changes that are needed.

There is little evidence that, in the course of encouraging individuals to adopt simple and painless behavioural changes, this will in turn motivate them to engage in more significant changes. The results of experiments examining the ‘foot-in-the-door’ approach (the hope that individuals can be led up a virtuous ladder of ever more far-reaching behavioural changes) are fraught with contradictions. Current emphasis on ‘simple and painless steps’ may be a distraction from the approaches that will be needed to create more systemic change. Such emphasis also deflects precious campaign and communication resources from alternative approaches.

Of course, this is not to argue that engaging in simple pro-environmental behaviours such as turning TVs off stand-by or switching from incandescent to compact fluorescent light bulbs is inherently wrong (*en masse*, these behavioural changes can clearly help). But it is to argue that such behaviours are the wrong focus for pro-environmental behavioural change strategies.

Worse, emphasis on the opportunities offered by ‘green consumption’ distract attention from the fundamental problems inherent to consumerism. This report reviews arguments that the consumption of *ever more* goods and services is an inherent aspect of consumerism, and that the scale of environmental challenges we confront demands a systemic engagement with this problem. While alternative patterns of consumption (for example, car sharing, or keeping and upgrading computers rather than replacing them) are important, these models cannot be properly disseminated, and seem unlikely to lead to change on the scale required, without first

engaging the underlying motivations for consumerism.

Car sharing, for example, may not lead to net environmental benefits if the money that an individual saves by selling their own car and joining a car-share scheme is spent on buying into a time-share apartment in Spain. Treasuring objects for longer may not help either, if rather than buying a new computer each year, a consumer upgrades their existing one and spends the money saved on another new electronic product.

This report also argues that, contrary to the assertions of proponents of marketing approaches, the *reasons* for adopting particular behavioural changes have very important implications for the energy and persistence with which these behaviours are pursued.

An individual might be less inclined to spend money saved by selling their car on an additional foreign holiday if they were motivated to part with their car for environmental reasons, as opposed to economic incentives. Similarly, to the extent that specific pro-environmental behaviours may 'spill-over' into other behaviours under some circumstances, such spill-over may be encouraged if initial behavioural changes are adopted for environmental reasons – as opposed, for example, to financial savings.

### Lessons from the marketing approach

Despite these criticisms, there are some lessons that should be drawn from marketing approaches to motivating pro-environmental behavioural change.

Proponents of the marketing approach recognise the importance of values in driving behavioural choices – even if they tend to argue that dominant values should be taken as 'given'. This is a crucial point. Firstly, it underscores the recognition that we should not expect information campaigns to create behavioural change. Secondly, it has an important bearing on our understanding of the gap between what people say and what they do.

It has been argued that it is futile to engage values and identity in the course of pursuing pro-environmental behavioural change, because of the so-called 'attitude-behaviour gap'. This is the disparity between the importance that an individual may ascribe to environmental issues when interviewed, and his or her actual behavioural patterns. This report draws a distinction, however, between attitudes and values, and points to evidence which underscores the importance of engaging values and self-identity as a basis for motivating pro-environmental behavioural change.

Work on marketing approaches to motivating behavioural change also highlights the need to communicate with different people in different ways.

This is crucial, but it says nothing about the effects that a communicator may be seeking to achieve with such communication. It need *not* imply that communications should be constrained to work with those motivations which currently dominate within a particular audience. Rather, it may be necessary to work to bring other, latent, motivations to the fore, while of course communicating with different people in different ways.

Proponents of the marketing approach are also right to emphasise the importance of social context. Whether motivating people to buy a smart electricity meter, or to join a local carbon rationing action group (CRAG), social norms and status will be critically important. But again, this need say nothing about the values upon which those norms are based.

Finally, the wider constraints on adopting new behaviour are generally well-recognised by proponents of the marketing approach – and this understanding is critically important. Any campaign to motivate individuals to join a car share scheme will meet with more limited success if these cars are located far from where the target audience live; and any campaign to motivate people to leave their cars at home and commute by train will meet with more limited success if the trains are over-crowded and don't run to time. But, crucially important as such concerns are, there is evidence that the willingness of people to suffer



inconvenience and difficulty in engaging in pro-environmental behaviour is related to their motivations for doing so. Values underpinning environmental behaviour will be of critical importance both in motivating individuals to engage in pro-environmental behaviour where such barriers persist, and in activating public demand for government intervention to remove these barriers.

### An alternative approach

This report begins to build an alternative approach to motivating pro-environmental behavioural change. This approach draws not on analogies from marketing, but rather from political strategy. It is supported by recent work that underscores the importance of framing a political project in terms of the values that underpin this – rather than constantly moulding this project to reflect the results of the latest focus-group research. Any successful movement, it is argued, must be unequivocal in articulating what it stands for. But of course, in itself, recognition of the importance of achieving consistency and clarity in the values that underpin environmental campaigning says nothing about *what* those values should be.

Some argue that it will be most effective to frame environmental campaigns in terms of a set of individualistic or even materialistic values – for example, highlighting the personal benefits that can accrue from more efficient energy use, or the social status that might be conferred by ownership of a hybrid car.

But this report presents evidence that appeals to individualism are unlikely to be adequate. Research has found that many people have a more ‘inclusive’ sense of self-identity – one that may include closer identity with other people, or with other people and nature. These individuals thus tend to value others more in their behavioural choices, and research has repeatedly found that such people tend to care more about environmental problems, favour environmental

protection over economic growth, and engage in more pro-environmental behaviour. The issue of how such values are nurtured and ‘activated’ is critically important.

There is also evidence that materialistic values cannot form the basis for motivating systemic pro-environmental behavioural changes. Importantly, we pursue our self-identity through the products we buy – our material possessions come to define who we see ourselves as being, and who we want to be seen to be. This is a sense of identity which the marketing industry has become adept at manipulating, in order to motivate us to buy particular products as a means of further developing and confirming this identity. And of course, these same marketing techniques are increasingly used to sell ‘green’ goods and services.

Individuals who engage in behaviour in pursuit of ‘intrinsic goals’ (of personal growth, emotional intimacy or community involvement) tend to be more highly motivated and more persistent in engaging in this behaviour than individuals motivated by ‘extrinsic goals’ (for example, of acquisition of material goods, financial success, image and social recognition). Moreover, more materialistic individuals tend to have higher ecological footprints.

This report presents evidence that motivations which are intrinsic are more likely to lead to pro-environmental behaviour. Moreover, this effect is found to be particularly strong for more difficult environmental behaviours – those requiring greater effort.

Conversely, motivations that stem from external motivations (for example, a financial reward for behaviour) or even what are called ‘internalised forms of external constraints’ (these might include a sense of guilt, or feelings related to self-esteem) are less likely to lead to pro-environmental behaviour. This evidence raises critical questions about whether ‘simple and painless steps’ urged upon us for reasons of self-interest will contribute to motivating an individual to engage in more significant (and

potentially inconvenient or costly) behavioural changes.

So it may be critically important that a campaign to motivate pro-environmental behavioural change should reflect, unequivocally, the values that underpin this campaign. Moreover, the nature of these values themselves may also be of critical importance.

Given the scale and urgency of the environmental challenges we confront, these are important assertions, and this report highlights a number of possible practical responses.

However, this report also highlights the relevance of this debate for the future of environmental organisations themselves. The enthusiasm of the private sector to embrace environmental imperatives has raised questions about the continued relevance of environmental organisations. It may be that environmental organisations will indeed become side-lined in the debate, unless they are prepared to reframe their contribution in terms of a set of values that are distinct from those identified with the private sector.

Many will still see the approach outlined in this report as unrealistic. But that perception is changing. Unfortunately, it is changing in part because as our understanding of the severity of the environmental challenges that confront us develops further, current strategies for engaging them seem increasingly inadequate. But WWF is also finding an increasing number of people, not easily pigeon-holed as environmentalists, who are nonetheless embracing a radical change agenda from within their respective sectors. The irony is that the mainstream environmental movement has yet to take on a leading role in responding to this challenge.



The mission of WWF is to stop the degradation of the planet's natural environment and to build a future in which humans live in harmony with nature, by:

- conserving the world's biological diversity
- ensuring that the use of renewable natural resources is sustainable
- reducing pollution and wasteful consumption



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