



Psychosocial behavior change techniques

The Step by Step program uses a lot of communication and psycho-social tools, in order to produce behavior change and energy savings. This article explains some of those techniques.

Engaging communication and Foot-in-the-Door technique

One of the most famous behavior change techniques is the “foot in the door” technique. This technique involves getting a person to agree to a complex request by first having this person agree to a small request. A person will easily agree to a small request, and will then tend to agree to a more complicated one, because he feels “engaged”. This agreement to the bigger request would have been difficult to obtain without the first small request.



An experiment conducted in California, in 1977, is an excellent illustration of this phenomenon. Researchers called housewives and asked them if they would answer a few questions about the household products they used. Most of them agreed to answer these few questions. Three days later, the psychologists called again and this time, they asked if they could send 5 or 6 men into the house to go through cupboards and storage places during 2 hours, to enumerate household products. The women contacted before were two times more likely to agree to this 2-hour request than a group of housewives that were only asked the larger request.

The strategy of the Step by Step intervention, is based on this insight. Indeed, one of the main objectives of this project is to encourage households to adopt around 10 new energy-saving habits. First of all, we suggest households to try a few simple actions during a door-to-door questionnaire. Then we contact households regularly to ask them to give feedback on completed actions and we suggest them to try new actions, more difficult ones, or involving more efforts or motivation.



Feedback

In order to change one's behavior, it is very important to visualize the impact of one's actions. Therefore, to ensure long term behavior change, it is essential to give regular feedbacks on new behavior and the generated results. For instance, if a person starts to take a bike instead of his car to go to work, receiving feedback informing him that he saves 10€/day, and that his physical condition improves, will reinforce his resolution. This is what is known as "positive reinforcement" in behavioral sciences.

Therefore, feedback is largely used during exchanges with participants in Step by Step: global results are systematically provided by email or by phone when proposed to try new actions or to take part in collective challenges.



Social norm

Finally, to encourage people to change and to increase their motivation, it is very important to show them that other people in their neighborhood are committed to this change too. One of the most powerful tools leading to behavior change is social norm. Indeed, one's behavior is first of all shaped by the actions of others.

To illustrate this, an experiment conducted in California in 2003 is particularly revealing. Researchers tested different ways to convince households to turn off their air conditioning and turn on their fans during the hot summer. The territory where the experiment took place was divided into four groups. A sign was displayed on every door. The first group received the message "Did you know you could save fifty-four (54) dollars a month this summer? Turn off your air conditioning, turn on your fans". Another group got an environmental message. And the third group got a message about being good citizens and preventing electricity blackouts.

Which of these three messages worked best? Researchers guessed that the message about money savings would work best. In fact, none of these messages worked. They had zero impact on energy consumption. It was as if the households had never seen any message.



However, there was a fourth group with a fourth message, and this message simply said, "When surveyed, 77% of your neighbours said that they turned off their air conditioning and turned on their fans. Please join them. Turn off your air conditioning and turn on your fans." The households who received this message have largely decreased their energy consumption simply because they learnt that their neighbours were doing it.



An American society called O'power, working with electricity providers, developed a new service based on this experiment. Instead of regular electricity bills, they send the customers their electricity consumption compared to the electricity consumption of their neighbours (with a similar family composition). In the case of someone consuming more than his neighbours, he receives on

his bill some guidelines and simple tips to consume less. This service has been provided to over 50 million households in 9 countries. Within 5 years, inhabitants saved the equivalent of the electricity needed for a one-million inhabitants' city during one year (which is 2,5% energy savings per household).

In Step by Step we also use this social norms technique for instance **by sending each household a feedback of his energy consumption compared to his neighbors**. We also organize regularly **collective challenges to show all participants that they are acting together** and that they are not alone to commit to change.

