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CAN PERSUASION THEORY HELP ASSESS A DELIBERATIVE COMMUNICATION APPROACH?

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Introduction

Energy efficiency is increasingly being seen as a method to help the UK and the EU meet obligations to reduce carbon emissions (e.g. UK Climate Change Act in 2008, Directive 2012/27/EU on energy efficiency). Some of the changes needed to the way we consume energy will be achieved through regulation. Others will require us to choose to behave differently. Energy performance of buildings, for instance, is highly dependent on consumer behaviour (Faiers, Cook & Neame, 2007).

One way of engaging the consumers of energy in buildings is the provision of information as part of a marketing campaign (Collins, Thomas, Willis, et al., 2003). Social marketing, which uses marketing insights to address social behaviours, has the potential to make a unique contribution to encouraging voluntary behaviour change (Hastings & Saren, 2003). What makes information capable of encouraging behaviour change is contextual, according to the communication situation and the interests, cultural expectations and needs of the audience. As such campaigns should be pre-assessed when possible in an ex-ante evaluation.

This paper investigates the usefulness of applying a persuasive marketing theoretical framework to assess the likely impact of a social marketing campaign desiring to use information as a key component in driving behaviour change. The goal is to see if the framework continues to have utility when applied to a campaign which is not overtly persuasive, but rather adopts a 'bottom-up communication approach'. Such an approach involves both campaign designers and receivers in a symmetrical process using dialogue, participation and involvement in the process, as opposed to a top-down approach to communication featuring scientific persuasion or instructional transmission of information (Wilson & Irvine, 2013).

Theoretical framework

A key problem with campaigns to encourage reduction in energy consumption is that such consumption operates at the level of the subconscious for most people, with 'energy' and 'power' not everyday terms (Dobbyn & Thomas, 2005, p.6). People can be 'energy conscious, but not energy knowledgeable', in that they know that low energy use is important, but may not know how to achieve

it (EEA, 2013, p.29). Another key factor with provision of energy advice information is trust in the provider of the advice (ibid).

The Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986b) assesses both of these issues and has a track record of being a useful framework for consumer research (Lien, 2001). The ELM was devised as a 'framework for organizing, categorizing and understanding the basic processes underlying the effectiveness of persuasive communications' (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986b, p. 125). The ELM addresses variables internal to the receiver, such as motivation and ability to process information. It also assesses variables external to the receiver, such as perceived quality of the argument in the message and trustworthiness of the source of the message. The ELM framework is useful 'for investigating factors that may increase or decrease the likelihood of a message receiving thoughtful consideration' (Lundy, 2005, p. 267). The model describes how people process information to varying degrees of thoroughness, the depth of processing being a function of motivation and ability. If motivation and ability levels are high, thoughtful elaboration is more likely to occur (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986a).

Project background

The three year (2012 to 2014) EU-funded SMARTSPACES project proposes to discover ways to save energy in Europe's public buildings using information and communications technology. Pilot sites at eleven cities are developing services using data generated from smart metering systems. The SMARTSPACES system being developed in the Leicester pilot site will provide building users with a live, half-hourly comparison of energy (electricity and gas) performance across 20 public buildings (Stuart, Wilson, Irvine, et al., 2013). Non-technical users will be presented with a simple visualisation of the energy performance of their building. A key feature of the system is the feedback facility. All building users will be able to report or comment on building performance, or report a problem. This will be possible via commonly available social networking, such as Twitter, and also via a forum or web-based form. These reports and/or comments can lead to dialogue with other building users so that they collaboratively generate behaviour change, or passed on to building energy managers if technical adjustments are necessary.

Research methodology

The Leicester pilot involves five large De Montfort University campus buildings. Student users were identified as potentially the hardest to motivate. They have a shorter term stake in the financial economy of the university than staff. The cost of being at the university has recently increased dramatically (Paton, 2013) and the fee remains the same regardless of energy consumption. This creates a potential 'commons dilemma' (Hardin, 1968) in which students may understandably feel it is their right to extract maximum individual benefits by having resources at their disposal at minimum inconvenience.

Three focus groups were conducted with nine, six and five participants (20 participants in total). Each focus group first received a short presentation of the proposed SMARTSPACES service, including what it might look like, its purpose and how it was expected to work. Questions based on the four independent variables of the ELM and formed using keywords from existing literature were then posed to the groups. In the prototype, the source was a specially designed product brand (Balmer & Gray, 2003) comprised of the words 'My Energywatch' and an anthropomorphised animal cartoon character. The final phase of the focus group was for students to be shown alternative prototype sources for the campaign. Researchers wanted to know whether to use the proposed new product

brand, other existing product brands, or rely on the more established corporate brand (ibid) of the university.

Findings

Participants observed that the message should be more explicit and quantified. The prototype information about the comparative performance of buildings in using cartoon faces to signify a happy or sad face according to energy consumption (see Figure 1).

Figure 1 Prototype of energy feedback system

Performance this week - Click on a building to see more detail		
Building	Electricity	Gas
Hugh Aston		
Campus Centre		
Queens Building		
John Whitehead Building		
Kimberlin Library		

While students liked the smiley face concept they struggled to relate to how much worse an unhappy face was than a happy face. They recommended some indication of what each face meant in cost terms, either in environmental or financial, with financial quantification more favoured than environmental. Other suggestions included clearer guidance as to what actions to take, such as reminders to switch off lights or computers.

On involvement, most students said they'd be unlikely to interact, despite use of a familiar social media tool like Twitter. There were comments about whether it was the role of the student to engage in this way. One group felt the main achievement would be to make the student body more energy-aware and change the mind-set and the culture of the university towards energy waste, rather than judge the project on numbers of comments made.

There was no clear guidance as to which of the potential brand images would be more credible to act as the source of the intervention. Participants felt a product brand was positive, but there was strong agreement from all three groups that it should be clearly underpinned by a clear use of the university corporate brand. University branding was also recommended to be felt through the 'channel' used to communicate, with the staff and student portal or common internet landing page recommended as communication channels.

Conclusion

The purpose of the research was to see if the ELM framework was useful to assess the likely impact of a campaign desiring to change the behaviour of building users. The previous section set out how the framework elicited useful guidance on how to present the campaign, which has informed the planned roll out. Even though the ELM was originally devised to assess persuasive, or top-down,

communication, it appears a useful framework to assess a campaign that is designed to be deliberative and participative in approach. It is interesting to note that students appear to call for the proposed campaign to contain more persuasive features. Whether this is because the framework suggests these features or whether sophisticated media consumers expect them is not clear. The framework does appear to be worthy of further examination as a tool to provide an ex-ante assessment of an engaging campaign around energy advice, especially as such campaigns do not have a track record of quality evaluation (EEA, 2013).

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