



Four key techniques to encouraging pro-environmental behaviour

A new analysis of how to encourage pro-environmental behaviour highlights four effective techniques: goal-setting, prompts or reminders, witnessing the behaviour of others and introducing new behaviours that correspond with existing beliefs.

Pro-environmental behaviours (PEB) are actions that people do in daily life that are comparatively better for the environment, for example, recycling and reducing energy consumption. There are a broad range of approaches to PEB, but there is no comprehensive review of the techniques for practitioners in this field.

The study analysed 87 existing studies on PEB to assess which techniques have been tested and found to be effective. Ten types of techniques were identified, which can be categorised into four groups:

- 1. Convenience techniques.** These make behaviours easier to do, such as providing water-efficient showerheads to householders, or prompts and informational reminders to perform a certain action, for example, stickers that say 'put recyclables out tomorrow'.
- 2. Information techniques.** These include justifications to perform behaviour, such as providing facts on the amount of recyclable waste in landfills, and instructions on how to achieve a goal, for example, instructing workers to use blinds in order to keep offices cooler and reduce the use of air conditioning.
- 3. Monitoring techniques.** These include feedback on the extent and/or impact of the behaviour, as is seen on electricity bills, or rewards/incentives for PEB.
- 4. Social-psychological techniques** involve people interacting. For example, 'social modelling', which includes methods where people observe or interact with others who already undertake PEB. 'Cognitive dissonance' involves understanding existing beliefs, to introduce new ways of acting according to these beliefs, for example, 'foot-in-the-door' techniques, whereby small acts, such as changing to energy-efficient light bulbs, can lead on to larger acts, such as installing loft insulation, that follow similar principles and correspond to the same underlying belief. 'Commitment' techniques require people to provide a written or verbal commitment to behaving in a certain way and, lastly, goal-setting asks people to set their own targets, such as certain reductions in consumption.

The analysis revealed that the most effective techniques were cognitive dissonance, goal-setting, social modelling and prompts. Using these techniques, about 20% of people performed more PEB than they would without them. The techniques that appeared to have much less of an effect were instructions and feedback.

Further investigation indicated that no single technique (or silver bullet) is highly effective for all PEBs, but certain techniques are more suitable for certain PEBs. Most studies considered looked at combinations of techniques, which made it difficult to evaluate separate effects, but patterns could be identified. In general, low engagement treatments, such as rewards and 'making it easy' techniques, are better for low-effort behaviours, such as recycling, whilst high engagement techniques, such as social modelling and commitment, are better for high-effort behaviours, such as energy conservation.

Although there are limits to the analysis owing to the combinations of techniques considered, it provides useful guidance for practitioners and highlights areas for future research, such as the need to investigate the distinction between long-term and short-term behavioural change, and exploring techniques that encourage the adoption of new technologies as a form of PEB.

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Contact: Richard.osbaldiston@eku.edu **Theme(s):** Environmental information services

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