In a recent experiment in Norway, electrical appliance stores increased their sales of energy-efficient tumble-driers when consumers were made aware of their cheaper lifetime operating costs by shop staff and a new product labelling system.

There are many reasons why consumers do not always buy the most energy-efficient products. For instance, they may not be given the information they need to make an informed choice, or they may underestimate the cost savings they will make through reducing their energy use, focusing instead on purchase price. One way to overcome this problem is to introduce sales taxes on more inefficient products.

However, a ‘softer’ alternative is to provide more information about energy savings at the point of sale. Many studies based on surveys of hypothetical consumer behaviour have attempted to assess the effects of this approach, but the researchers of this study were able to investigate the effect of this additional information in a real-life scenario.

They set up experiments in six electrical stores in Norway to test the effects of modified energy labelling and information about energy costs provided by sales staff. The experiments ran for five months. The current EU labelling system for household appliances sold in Europe focuses on energy grades (the G to A+++ system) and reports on energy use in kilowatt-hours annually. However, the study trialled an alternative system, which labelled tumble-driers and fridge-freezers with lifetime energy costs, as well as the EU energy rating. They also trained the shop staff to promote energy-efficient appliances to consumers by focusing on these reduced operating costs.

In their analysis, the researchers converted sales of energy-efficient appliances into home energy usage. The results suggest that the combination of new labelling with staff training led to around a 5% decrease in energy usage of tumble-driers, compared to energy usage of appliances sold by 26 other similar stores monitored as part of the test. The effect was stronger at the start of the experiment, over 12% on average for the first three months, with energy savings declining over the course of the trial. The retailers suggested this could have been because staff training needed to be refreshed.

Importantly, the effect on consumer behaviour was only felt when staff and labelling information were combined. Staff training alone reduced energy consumption of tumble-driers sold by over 3%, but evidence was too limited for this effect to be considered statistically significant. Similarly, labelling alone was not sufficient to convince consumers to buy more energy-efficient products.

The researchers did not identify any change in consumer behaviour for fridge-freezers. They speculate that this may have been partly because the difference in energy costs between the most and least efficient fridge-freezers is relatively small (€250), compared to tumble-driers (over €625). Additionally, nearly all fridge-freezers sold by the stores had an EU energy rating of ‘A’, which may reduce the significance of any differences between products.