



Using Upward Trends to Promote Sustainable Behaviors

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Research Question: What is an effective strategy for increasing environmentally-friendly behaviors that only a minority of people perform?

We propose that when only a minority of people engage in a certain behavior, framing this information as an upward trend influences those outside the minority to adopt this behavior.

Background

- Why do people recycle, save energy, conserve water, and believe in climate change? One reason is that people follow those behaviors they perceive to be common – “**descriptive norms.**” Presenting a behavior as common, then, influences people to conform to that behavior.
- However, **some behaviors can't be increased via a descriptive norm message because only a minority of people engages in the behavior.**
- How can we harness the power of descriptive norms for behaviors that are in fact uncommon?** One strategy may be to present information that a particular behavior, while still uncommon, is on an upward trend.

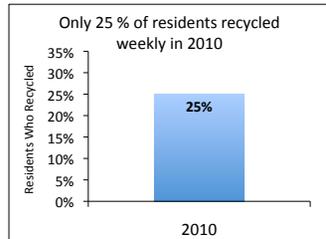
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Presenting environmentally-friendly behavior as an upward trend may be an effective way to get others to engage in proenvironmental behavior.

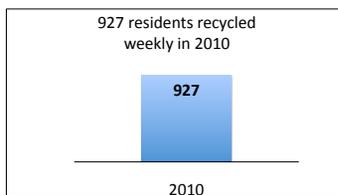
- Many desirable behaviors, such as recycling or conserving energy, are performed by only a minority of people
- Hypothesis: Framing a prosocial behavior (e.g., recycling, saving energy) as an upward trend influences people to adopt said behavior.
- An upward trend gives the impression that a majority of people will perform a prosocial behavior in the future, thus inciting others to “jump on the bandwagon” by adopting the behavior in the present, instead of waiting for the behavior to become the norm.
- The purpose of this poster is to present the *concept* of framing information in terms of trends. Formal experiments of this concept will begin this year.
- To illustrate this concept (see graphs below), perhaps in 1995, 10% of an area's residents had recycled weekly; in 2000, 12% had done so; in 2005, 16% had done so, etc.
- The graphs demonstrate the use of trend information compared with other message framing tactics, such as presenting a single large number or a lamenting plea.

Common tactic: a “Lamenting Plea”



Problem: Emphasizing how few people engage in a behavior (e.g., *only* 25% recycled) is often ineffective, even counterproductive.

Common tactic: a Large Number

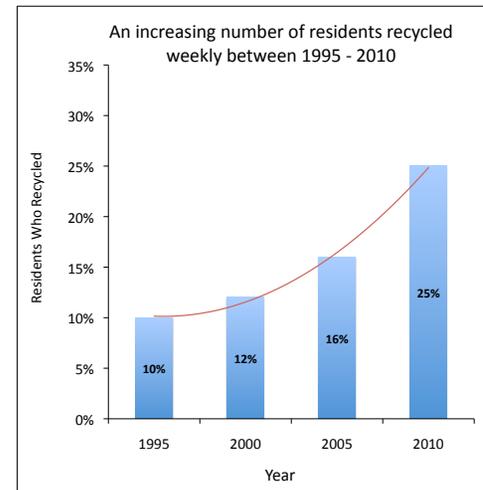


Problem: Emphasizing a number, even if it seems large, does not provide powerful normative information, which may make this method ineffective.

Common Methods
vs.
Trend Information



New tactic: an “Upward Trend”



Advantage: An upward trend conveys likely future normative behavior, which may act as a powerful descriptive norm to encourage others to join the trend.

Discussion

- We designed an experiment to test this hypothesis, **comparing the effects of an upward trend on behavior compared to other plausible, but possibly less effective or counterproductive, tactics (presenting a large number, a lamenting plea, etc.).**
- However, the experiment is preliminary, and certain design issues need to be addressed. We will conduct further experiments this year.
- This year, we plan on testing this hypothesis in a variety of applications.** Upward trends may be effective ways to engage people in such real-world behaviors as recycling, conserving water, and reducing household energy consumption.
- It may be that any normative information is better than none, and this is an issue that will be made clear with further experiments. For now, the use of trends seems like a promising way to frame prosocial behaviors performed by a minority of the population.
- Upward trends may be an effective way to honestly promote behaviors that are sustainable, but that haven't yet become commonplace.**