

Campaign Strategy Newsletter No 38, 04 March 2008: The Danger of Old Ideas

Dangerous Old Ideas

The economist John Maynard Keynes once said "The difficulty lies, not in the new ideas, but in escaping from the old ones", and as it is with economics, so it is with campaigns. One of the most powerful guiding assumptions for many campaigners in a good cause is that the way to achieve change, is through leadership and by example, for this will have a 'mobilising' or perhaps 'educational' effect. Unfortunately this is rarely true – otherwise many of the world's more pressing problems would have been solved by others emulating the actions of the far-sighted or virtuous few.

On 29 January the BBC fielded a report [1] which is a sad but neat case study of exactly this, and which is relevant to any 'good cause'. Here it is in full (visit the <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/sci/tech/7270218.stm> for some good graphics and for links) :

No impact from Energy Saving Day

By Richard Black, Environment correspondent, BBC News website

The UK's first Energy Saving Day has ended with no noticeable reduction in the country's electricity usage.

E-Day asked people to switch off electrical devices they did not need over a period of 24 hours, with the National Grid monitoring consumption.

It found that electricity usage was almost exactly what would have been expected without E-Day.

Colder weather than forecast in some regions may have led to higher use of heating, masking any small savings.

The event also received very little publicity, despite having backing from campaign groups such as Greenpeace, Christian Aid and the RSPB, and from major energy companies such as EDF, E.On and Scottish Power.

"I am afraid that E-Day did not achieve the scale of public awareness or participation needed to have a measurable effect," said E-Day's organiser Dr Matt Prescott in a message on his website.

The Grid's final figures showed national electricity consumption for the 24 hours (from 1800 Wednesday to 1800 Thursday) was 0.1% above the "business-as-usual" projection.

Lofty aims

The E-Day concept started life as Planet Relief, an awareness-raising BBC TV programme with a significant comedy element.

But in September the BBC decided to pull the project, saying viewers preferred factual or documentary programmes about climate change.

The decision came after poor audiences for Live Earth, and public debate over whether it was the corporation's role to "save the planet".

Dr Prescott then decided to see whether he could mount E-Day as an independent operation, and secured the backing of important partners such as the National Grid and the UK's major energy companies.

They are obliged by the government to offer customers ways of improving energy efficiency, and some used E-Day to contact people interested in loft and wall insulation.

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The event was launched on the steps of St Paul's Cathedral in central London by Dr Richard Chartres, the Bishop of London, who described climate change as a "moral issue".

"Let us remember people in the Ganges delta who are already feeling the effects of sea level rise and climate change," he said.

"The science changes year by year - though rarely in the right direction - but the moral imperative remains the same."

Lessons learned

Dr Prescott had hoped E-Day might bring a small but measurable reduction in electricity use, perhaps in the order of 2-3%, equivalent to the output of one or two fossil fuel fired power stations.

The idea was to demonstrate that numerous small personal actions could make a dent in greenhouse gas emissions.

But, he acknowledged on his website: "E-Day did not succeed in cutting the UK's electricity demand.

"The drop in temperature between Wednesday 27 February and Thursday 28 February probably caused this, as a result of more lights and heating being left on than were originally predicted."

"I will do my best to learn the relevant lessons for next time."

Poor Matt Prescott: a nice man but not perhaps a campaigner. Greenpeace et al maybe should have known better ?

The story of the BBC's about-face on climate change has been discussed in earlier newsletters (see no. 33) but there are some aspects of this sorry example which are a warning to any campaign designer.

First, it's often a bad idea to try and use an idea or a mechanism designed for one strategy, in another. I'm sure I've made this mistake myself but one that comes to mind is the Smile car created by Greenpeace in the 1990s. Originally part of a brilliantly conceived campaign created by the 'father of actions' German Harald Zindler, it was a proof of energy efficiency potential – a re-made commercial model which achieved a far higher mileage than the manufacturers claimed was possible. In Zindler's original plan that was merely a step to demonstrate Greenpeace's technical competence, designed to give the organisation psychological standing in a subsequent ask to the public about raising large sums for a serious challenge to the car industry, utilising a special petrol-buying credit card. Sadly the card end had to be dropped, leaving Greenpeace with the car, which had already been developed. Not wanting to waste this 'asset', Smile was then used in various climate campaigns but it didn't 'fit' with the frames of those campaigns, and had a somewhat controversial and inglorious history.

In this case Matt Prescott and co pressed on with the 'big switch-off' idea without the leverage of the BBC, and it failed.

Second, any campaign which sets out to generate numbers or some measurable result, sends a message of success or failure, in those terms. It invites such judgement. This is the age-old problem of 'demonstrations'. They are a demonstration or as the French say, a 'manifestation' of support or feeling. Naturally this is relative: to turn out 10,000

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people in almost any city in the world to 'protest' about an 'issue' that few people have heard of may have an impact on 'awareness'. It's new, different, unexpected. 10,000 concerned about an established issue like climate change would not be impressive. 10,000 if you clearly attempt to 'mobilise' a population of say 10 million, looks like a failure.

Just as the Stock Market discounts the share value of a stock based on expectations prior to results being announced, a 'numbers game' demonstration is judged against expectations. One way to avoid this is not to make it a simple numbers game. 10,000 families for example is a different idea. In which case gathering them together outside, say, a national Parliament, is probably a dim idea. 10,000 families inviting neighbours into their homes for a 'party' or to offer them tea (if British) and a chat about the issue of concern, would, on the other hand, be unusual and interesting. This might then generate the impression, which could be true, that there is a 'national groundswell' of some kind.

In the Switch-Off case this could perhaps have been achieved if instead of trying to show a reduction in electricity use as the measure of success, the organisers had focussed on participation: how many 'communities' were taking part, and even better, if they had found a way to measure their electricity usage locally. Then it could have generated a proof of feasibility, rather than a measure of 'interest'.

Third, this is a classic example of enthusiasm for a 'level two' type campaign idea running away with itself. Wouldn't it be great if ... in this case, enough people switched things off to make a measurable reduction in electricity usage nationally. Yes it could be great. But can it be done? This is important because it is relatively easy to generate interest in the test, and very hard to assemble the means to succeed. Hence it's easy to ensure any failure gets reported, and failure can be read in many unhelpful ways. Unhelpful because it can easily reinforce a host of types of scepticism (see Newsletter 34) about taking action in other ways or at all. It's a short brain-step from 'BBC says "No impact from Energy Saving Day"' to "energy saving has no impact".

Fourth, the way that the campaign appears to have been framed, is pure 'Concerned Ethical' [2]. The notion that 'to make the world a better place we need to be better people'. To think globally and act locally, as we were reminded here by the Bishop of London. To give up bad things. To be serious and not fun or frivolous. The point is that Concerned Ethicals can have fun giving things up for ethical reasons but most other value groups can't. The Prospectors for example, discussed in so many previous newsletters, want to be positive, to take things up, to buy, do or achieve things with a guaranteed result. They do not want to join noble but quite likely doomed efforts, they avoid anything that smacks of a futile gesture. They are quick to spot potential problems like free-rider effects, which in this case, were present in spades.

The Concerned Ethicals represent less than 10% of the population so a pitch which really only works for them, and a few others (who are less easy to mobilise), is a weak one to use if you set yourself a task of 'national mobilisation'.

Contrast this with that other BBC-supported ethical exercise 'Red Nose Day', which raises money for development causes in Africa. Every person who wears a Red Nose visually reinforces the message. Even if there is doubt about more money being raised each year the organisers can spread their bets by emphasising the diversity of people or

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groups taking part, or their inventiveness. The participants can be photographed and that can then be promoted. Putting on The Nose involves giving up nothing (even your own money) except a little dignity and once well-enough established, appeals to all the main psychological groups. It's a positive act. Even installing energy efficient light bulbs, while fantastically dull, would have left an unarguable legacy and impact, whereas the Switch Off wouldn't.

Fifth, and then this is enough arm-chair criticism from me, even success might have turned out at least equivocal. If electricity demand had dropped a percentage point or two, would it have been due to warmer than normal weather? What meaning would have been assigned to the result by the media? Would it have been seen as a one-off? Would it have labelled reducing electricity demand as an entertainment or once-a-year thing to do? The whole idea was vulnerable to both attribution and framing problems.

Activities like these are classic NGO campaign activities, classic in the sense that they are typical of those not in a position of power or influence trying to draw attention to an issue they care about. As President Roosevelt said: "do what you can, with what you have, where you are". As such they often say something clear about you, about what you think but may have no impact on others.

Contrast this with the dynamic of the Brabantia shopping line discussed in the last Newsletter. Their action on climate is made desirable to Now People (Uber-Prospectors) by doing it through a fashion-icon. See more at <http://www.treehugger.com> – apparently in the US there are municipalities that ban clothes lines. That's another element missing from the 'Switch-Off': it lacked any form of social censure or controversy, there was really no dilemma, no talking point.

Perhaps the last question which remains about Switch Off is why were large organisations like Scottish Power, E.ON and EDF taking part? As the BBC report mentions the UK Government imposes some obligations on them to try show efforts to increase energy efficiency so this offered a channel to reach people. However it also enabled them to 'play down' by adopting a NGO-like, or childlike role, innocents in the field, rather than major corporations whose main business is still selling fossil fuelled power. Anyone organising such an event needs to think hard about the costs and benefits of providing such an opportunity.

On this subject in the UK, the lesson for NGOs ought perhaps to be, that these old campaign ideas are not any longer the ones to be using.

Awesome

So says our Innovations Correspondent Jon Cracknell and he is right – see http://www.chrisjordan.com/current_set2.php?id=7 for a truly extraordinary set of visualisations. Mr Cracknell also points us to the excellent 'New Organizing Encyclopedia' at http://www.neworganizing.com/wiki/index.php/Main_Page. This Wiki based website is the sort of thing that will put steam powered efforts like this Newsletter out of business. There are a host of resources here – have a browse. I was interested to see for example, that the supporters of Defenders of Wildlife seem to identify more with wolves than they do with the idea that an anonymous donor will match any donation they make.

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More Lessons from The Big Ask

In newsletter 36 last year we looked at the successful Friends of the Earth campaign *The Big Ask*, which led to the current UK Government's commitment to introduce a law mandating annual or at any rate regular time-limited cuts in CO₂. The campaign has an impressive 'video wall' of personal messages and a brief account of what it's about at <http://www.thebigask.com>. Last time we focused on the use of a sub-brand and the 'dangle' in the proposition – the mysterious 'ask'. There are though, a few other aspects to the campaign that may be of interest. To cut a long story short here's a sample.

Why It Worked

- Friends of the Earth (FoE) got lucky. FoE started with a Parliamentary Private Members Bill, which in the UK is similar in effect to a referendum of 'popular initiative'. It can lead to legislation but hardly ever does: it's a way of drawing attention to a need, a case or an idea. The FoE Climate Bill encapsulated the main ideas which have now become government policy but it was put forward by a group of Parliamentary 'usual suspects'. As such it was unlikely to be seen as anything except a NGO exercise. Then fate intervened and David Cameron, the recently anointed leader of the Conservative opposition, picked it up and ran with it. The Tories (who have been tracking values and know that there's a benefit to be had by being 'green') produced their own version. As it happened there was an electoral competition in play within the ruling Labour Party as Gordon Brown was about to take over from Tony Blair and faced a possible challenge by young, glamorous and intelligent David Milliband. Mr Milliband was Environment Secretary. Brown didn't want to be out-flanked by Cameron, and had to listen to Milliband. In the end Milliband did not challenge Brown and published his own Bill, to outflank the Tories. So within a year or so the whole process that FoE had expected to take several years, was complete, thanks to political necessity and opportunism.
- It came at the right moment. Climate change was emerging from the general mush of 'environmental' issues as the no 1 concern and the Tories wanted to put clear green water between themselves and Labour on it. The clear, simple nature of the FoE proposition – budgets and a series of time-related targets to cut CO₂ by law – was a lightning rod and a neat divider in an otherwise complex subject.
- More good fortune – whereas his predecessor Margaret Beckett was a cautious party-machine politician who listened to her officials, Milliband was impetuous as well as intelligent and cared little for previous government policies. For Milliband picking up a NGO 'punt' was not a problem. For the Civil Service it would be tantamount to sacrilege.
- None of this would have delivered the result if FoE had not been superbly well organised at making the details of the operation tick. This they did Swiss-style, like well oiled clockwork. It all hinged on local lobbying of MPs, by FoE local groups and others they enlisted. Almost every MP was reached, and a huge number signed the FoE 'EDM' (Early Day Motion) calling for the Bill. FoE groups took care to get the MP photographed being helpful for the local press. This is 'simple' organisation and application of effort – FoE had to cut a lot of other work and ignore other opportunities to do it – but it's often the reason why elegantly designed campaigns fail: simple lack of application.
- The reason why FoE could do this is in no small measure because local political work is right in the centre of FoE's core competences. Unlike for example forays against multi-nationals or direct action or anything related to 'fun'. It was, by accident or design, a case of Sun Tzu's 'Strategy of Tactical Positioning': local political lobbying is FoE's best tactic and in this campaign design it was pivotal.

Why It Almost Failed

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- As well as the direct and narrow lobbying of MPs about the need for a Bill, FoE also tried to link all sorts of climate-related campaigns to The Big Ask. For example work on roads and road widening, transport policy, coal fired power station decisions, airports and air travel, even food. In communication terms the reach was too great – the link was not really made because causally, it was not there. The problem which The Big Ask so elegantly addressed was not climate change but the lack of political action on climate change. So long as they stuck to that, they were in fruitful territory. If on the other hand they had succeeded in convincing large numbers of people, or small numbers of influential people, that a Climate Bill would require stopping particular roads, airports, holiday plans, farm systems (etc) then it's quite likely, I'd say very probable, that the opposition to the Bill would have been organised and considerable, certainly enough to put off Messrs Milliband and Cameron. So because that bit failed, the campaign succeeded

There are other lessons that can be drawn from The Big Ask. For example despite the success of the free-standing brand in the proposition, it lacked a visual totem or leitmotif to simply signify support. It had no ribbon or red nose. It also struggled with the UK NGOs complicated relationships around 'Stop Climate Chaos', the organisation modelled on Jubilee 2000 which started out in life trying to be popular and has now sensibly decided it really is an activist vanguard. Nevertheless The Big Ask was a considerable success and I hope that FoE will sometime post its own more detailed account of what happened, so that other campaign groups can learn from their model.

Mike Childs of Friends of the Earth comments on the above:

"I think you've slightly overdone chance (Milliband, Cameron) and underrated hard slog. I think we would have still got there with the Bill without so much chance but through much more hard grind at constituency level. Also the Government didn't have any great climate ideas of their own but the external agenda on climate was very big (IPCC reports, loads on BBC) so they had to find a good idea".

Pro Protest

A while back I suggested that we needed a new word to describe 'positive protests'. Someone wrote to me with a much better one but sadly my PC died and took that email to its grave. If you are out there, let me know again and I'll put it in a subsequent issue.

Two Research Pitfalls To Watch Out For

These days more campaigns are 'researched', that is they use some form of audience research or segmentation – tailoring approaches to groups rather than just 'the public'. That's a good thing but quite often the results are contaminated by unintended or unrecognized influences.

One set could be called horizontal contaminants: this happens when for example, people invited to attend a focus group or other qualitative research session know in advance what the subject is, or who it's for. That means they come pre-armed, as it were, with a set of views. The research session then becomes a set of performances rather than an exploration of what they might perceive, feel, say or do in 'real life'. Another form of horizontal contamination occurs if you mix people who affect each other: for example where the presence of one 'type' of person affects how another type responds. This may not matter if you intend to reach them in the same mixed groups but if you are thinking of reaching them through channels which can segment them, then it does matter as it skews or edits or changes the 'responses' when you don't need to do that.

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The other set I call 'vertical contamination' (I've no idea if this is the 'right' term). This happens when the assumptions of the user, conductor or commissioner or the research introduce layers of meaning or assumption onto the 'results'. An example is the segmentation quite recently released [3] by the UK Government department DEFRA, which has spent large sums trying to model the UK population to influence 'sustainability' of behaviours.

The DEFRA segmentation [4] divides up the UK public by twelve 'headline behaviours' which policy makers are interested in, such as install insulation or waste less food. So far so good but it then casts upon these behaviours, explanations about 'ability to act' and 'willingness to act'. Ability to act is not clearly explained but is apparently assumed to be a mixture of opportunity and affordability (income). Willingness is deduced from various factors including whether people say they'd like to 'do more'

Using these two axes of 'willing-unwilling' and 'able-unable' DEFRA then divides the population into seven segments according to their 'green-ness'. This forms the lynchpin of their strategy, and they go on from here to infer such things as which groups might be targeted to do what and in which ways, even which may influence others.

However it seems that there is little evidence that the axes are real, ie that they exist independently of the behaviours and that they are not just a restatement of the behaviours (which are also self-reported not observed). It is anyway odd that DEFRA's segmentation rests on things such as income when its own preceding surveys of attitudes and behaviours reported [5] in 2006:

"Which groups are most positive in their attitudes? There were no really marked differences in attitudes towards the environment between different sex, age, and social groups."

and

"Which groups are most environmentally friendly in their behaviour? The groups most likely to say they had already made certain changes to their behaviour (recycling more, wasting less food, cutting down on gas, electricity and water usage) were those aged 65+ and, to a lesser extent, those living in rural areas, or in higher social grades."

Which is hardly much of a segmentation. Returning to the 2008 document, the main report never defines 'willingness' but refers to a separate Annexe C. Annexe C tabulates segments by 'willingness' and explains in a footnote:

"Willing to act is interpreted to include all who are currently acting, thinking about acting, and just not thought about it; those who actively disagree with the behaviour, state they will not carry it out or have tried but failed, or say they think they will give up are categorised as unwilling."

To then map behaviourally defined groups against an axis which itself comes from behaviour seems bizarre, and is clearly auto-correlated. As to ability to act it says:

"Ability to act is interpreted to include the responses for all who are currently acting, thinking about acting, just not thought about it and don't want to. Where possible it also accounts for external and physical barriers including affordability, building constraints,

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lifestyle demands, geographical constraints. This is based on a combination of quantitative and qualitative research and is intended to be indicative only."

How this is done, is not explained.

So underlying the weakness of the DEFRA segmentation, which has been widely circulated to NGOs and others, is the absence of any independent motivational model which segments people by type of motivation in order to match that against observed or claims rates of behaviour. For example DEFRA makes much play of 'norms' but it has no way of splitting out why different people undertake a behaviour which is so common that it is a norm, ie 'normal'. Recycling for instance.

To fall back on assumptions about access or opportunity or wealth is simply to fall victim to the old embedded ideas: this is a social-marketing approach and embedded within that are the assumptions of many sociologists that wealth and economic opportunity drives society, and this will in the end explain everything.

DEFRA seems to have no other data to explain this with. It does not for example, even present behavioural-consumer segmentations such as MOSAIC, against behaviours such as recycling. This is a shame as a great deal of hard work has gone into these studies, and much useful data is found in the voluminous reports but most of it is contaminated by the tangled segmentation. This is made all the worse by laying on findings from a wide range of other research into behaviours which are all referred to as applying to 'people', ie everyone.

A more useful approach might have been to take the headline behaviours, chose a segmentation independent of those behaviours, and unpick existing rates of target behaviour, and then use qualitative research to investigate how to create propositions to increase it. Then one could conduct actual experiments to validate or disprove the hypotheses. Similarly, with this level of resources one could actually test willingness and ability by experiment and observation.

Apology

Sorry for the long silence this year – I've been busy on projects that I can't write about yet but hope to in future.

[1] <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/sci/tech/7270218.stm>

[2] See Using Value Modes at www.campaignstrategy.org

[3] <http://www.defra.gov.uk/news/latest/2008/attitudes-1401.htm>

[4] <http://www.defra.gov.uk/evidence/social/behaviour/index.htm>

[5] <http://www.defra.gov.uk/environment/statistics/pubatt/download/pas2007report.pdf>

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