



How to be engaging

Address by Les Robinson to Enviro 08 Convention, Melbourne, May 2008

Here's the bad news. There's no way to make people engage with you, or buy your product, or change their behaviour. You can't *make* people do anything.

We humans are manufactured with special features – standard in all models – that protect us against attempts by others to get us to do things we don't *want* to do. These features are called denial and resistance (properly "psychological reactance"). Together they explain the chronic failure of "tell" or "sell" techniques to motivate people to adopt new behaviours.

However there *is* a way to motivate people and it's got nothing to do with the tactics, tricks, messages or manipulations we use. It's whether we're credibly addressing real issues in their lives.

Think about the last time you personally "engaged" with government, or adopted a new socially- or environmentally-positive behaviour.

I'm willing to bet that you were motivated to engage or change by a personal frustration, guilt or worry. It's the same for everyone. Engagement or change are driven by the internal dissatisfactions or anxieties that people are experiencing in their own lives.

The art of being engaging is to be a credible answer to those frustrations, guilts or worries.

It's useful to think of this in two dimensions: hotness and credibility.

a) Are you addressing the hot frustrations, guilts or worries people are experiencing in their lives?

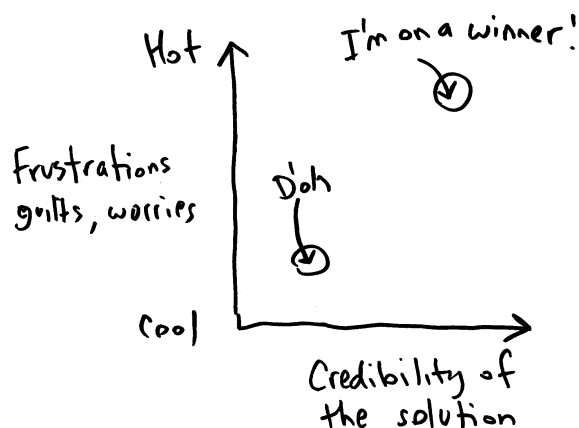
and

b) Does your solution appear to be a credible answer?

Let's say you want people to come to a community consultation event. If it's about "developing regional recreation plan" you can be pretty certain that practically no one will turn up. If, however, it's about "locating playgrounds and youth activities in your area" you can be sure of a good turn out because it connects to issues and concerns that people have in a particular neighbourhood. That's the first dimension.

The second dimension – credibility – depends on whether people perceive the consultation is not tokenistic but likely to have a genuine impact on the final decision. How could they know that? YOU can't tell them. Someone they trust has to tell them. That points to a vital fact about credibility: it's a quality of *people*, not organisations. So having neutral, known, trusted individuals endorsing your process is essential. And, of course, you can wreck the whole process by creating the impression that a decision has already been made. (If that happens you will have transformed engagement into its the evil twin – outrage!)

Exactly the same principle applies when you are promoting a new behaviour or product. Take rotational grazing. This technology tackles serious issues graziers are experiencing in their lives (weeds, soil fertility, succession). Although it's been technically "proven" for decades its adoption has depended on the endorsement of credible local farmers in each district. Once that's in place, adoption tends to be rapid. Permaculture, by comparison, has plenty of technical advantages, but it performs poorly on both these dimensions so its take-up has been weak.



Engagement – and adoption – seem to depend on two dimensions: whether you are addressing the "hot wants" in people's lives and whether your process, product or idea is credible.

(Interestingly, “hot wants” seem to be related to deep, abiding human values like safety, health, being a good parent or creating a good life for one’s children. “Cool wants” by comparison tend to be connected to more superficial values like materialism, popularity, coolness, and prestige. This may point to the importance of framing engagements around deeper human values. A recent paper by WWF UK highlights the point that, when it comes to people acting on climate change, hard, difficult actions are more likely to be motivated by deep values than by shallow ones.¹⁾

Über-wants

“Addressing hot frustrations” is an abstract idea that’s a little hard to translate into action. We need a more concrete way to think about it. A good first step is to flip frustrations and dissatisfactions into their positives, so they become “wants” (or “motivations” or “desires”).

Here are some of the strong human wants which have been identified by social scientists over the years: altruism, skill mastery, frugality, bettering one’s community, luxury, relationships, self-esteem, autonomy, freedom from fear, freedom from coercion, loyalty, doing the right thing, pleasure, playfulness, and curiosity^{2 3 4 5 6 7}. Interestingly, depending on the situation, these motives have been shown to drive human behaviour far more powerfully than threats or incentives.

Although everyone is different, and it’s dangerous to generalise, three wants seem stand out more than others in the practical lives of human beings.

Oddly enough, “saving money” isn’t one of them.

It’s been shown, for instance, that:

– Voting in US Congressional elections is more influenced by party loyalty, perceived risks to the environment and health, and altruism (“the right thing to do”), than by the economic self-interest of voters.^{8 9}

– Farmers’ decisions to adopt conservation practices are more influenced by attachment to the land, wanting to make their farms appear well managed, and aesthetic appreciation than by financial incentives.^{10 11}

– Recycling is more influenced by consumer knowledge and environmental commitment than by financial incentives.¹²

We tend to overestimate the influence of money on other people's decision-making because we don't have access to their internal decision-making processes. If we did we'd find that three wants tend to trump financial considerations in most situations.

These three über-wants are: control, time, and self-esteem.

Control: The drive for personal control explains why people prefer cars to trains; trains to buses; iPods to Walkmans; cell phones to land lines; drip irrigation to trenches; owning to renting; detached houses to apartments; driving to walking; democracy to dictatorship.

The drive for control also, unfortunately, explains the adoption of SUVs, air conditioners, firearms, security alarms, gated communities, domestic violence, anorexia, human Resource Management, and neo-conservatives.

Control is about how people get results in their lives. The more control they have the more certain they are of getting what they want with a minimum of disruption, delay, danger, doubt and uncertainty. Lack of control, on the other hand, is stressful and exhausting.

The drive for control explains, for instance, why green-waste collection services achieve a 70-80% participation rate but backyard composting is firmly stalled at 30-40%. The first offers more personal control than the second.

People have a profound need to feel in control their lives. The link between lack of control and stress, burnout and illness is well known.^{13 14} A study by Michael Marmot and colleagues at University College London, for instance, found that the incidence of heart disease in workers varied with their degree of control over their work. Compared to workers with the highest degree of control, those with middle control had 20 per cent more heart disease, while those with the lowest control had 50 per cent more.¹⁵

When we propose a new program, gadget, technique, process or behaviour to people, we need to ask: will it credibly increase people's sense of mastery over their lives? If so, it's almost certain to spread. If not it will languish and die.

Time: There is a huge premium on practices or inventions that save

people time. Frozen food, microwave ovens, automatic dishwashers, online banking and cheap flights are successful because they replace tedious drudgery with free time. Saving time is the breakthrough quality that guaranteed success of the great inventions that define the twentieth century, from Rudolf Diesel's internal combustion engine (1897) and Johan Vaaler's paperclip (1899) to the ATM machine (1967).

Unfortunately most environmental, social and health changes seem to require *more* of people's time. Cycling to work, mulching the garden, volunteering, turning off unused lights, insulating the ceiling, voting, and driving under the speed limit all take time. This tends to put limits on the rate of adoption. However there's a solution: although these activities may look like they have fixed speed limits, what really slows things down is often not the activity itself, but the *hassle rate*. Hassles are the annoying disruptions and obstacles that get in the way of actually doing something. One study, for instance, compared commuters' blood pressure when traveling to work by different routes.¹⁶ It found that "high impedance" routes – those with the most congestion and interruptions – caused the highest blood pressure. Reducing the hassle rate will make most activities less stressful and more likely to be sustained.

Smoothing routes, processes, forms and ordering systems is one way to minimise the hassle rate. Another is reducing the number of choices people are forced to make to get something done.

Even if we can't *give* people time, we need to recommend changes that *take* as little as possible. The less time we take, the more likely it is that people will get involved in our projects.

Time and control together explain, for example, why most people drive everywhere, despite the horrendous costs and stresses. In a survey of Dutch drivers, for example, "rapidity" and "independence" were rated as their top motivations for choosing cars over public transport. Significantly, this was in a city with excellent and pervasive public transport.

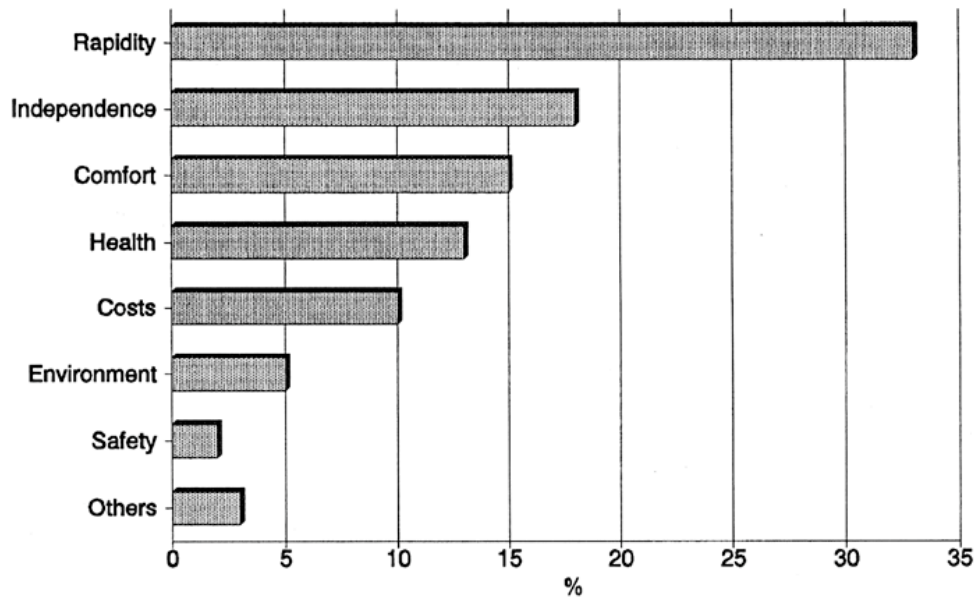


Fig. 1. Most important aspects in relation to car use, as mentioned by the participants in a preliminary study (N=418).

Why people drive. Speed and control trump comfort and health. Environment and safety hardly rate. The lesson for public transport authorities is: if you want more people catching trains then comfort, health, safety and environment are nice options, but speed, reliability and frequency are what make the difference.

Source: Tertoolen, G. et al (1998) ¹⁷

Self-esteem: Our self-esteem depends to a very large degree on what others think about us. As a result people are always on the lookout for excuses to engage with others and present their best selves. Products and experiences are vital props in this process. As a result these things have “social value” quite apart from their practical utility. They help people interact with each other, express their dynamic specialness, bragg about their successes, and demonstrate their social status.

The social value of programs, products or behaviours is rarely considered, but it can be vital ingredient in their adoption.

A study of households in Santa Cruz County, California, for instance, examined why people spent thousands of dollars on solar water heaters, wood stoves, insulation and greenhouses, but tended to ignored caulking and weather-stripping – simple actions that are just as effective at warming homes and lowering heating costs.

The reason, researchers found, was that caulking and weather-stripping were seen as dirty jobs, lacking in glamour compared to the highly visible and heroic business of house renovation. Caulking suggests a leaky or old house. It was something people couldn’t talk about it without feeling a little bit ashamed. It had no social

value. "...other energy retrofits are visible to neighbours, serving social ends," they wrote, "the gurgle of water in hot water pipes is seen as rewarding and is pointed out to guests, as is the heat from a woodstove, even when hands are burned and the room smells of smoke. Weatherization [by comparison] offers little feedback and few opportunities for bragging." ¹⁸

Fortunately there are ways to increase the social value of an event, product or behaviour, for instance novelty, rarity, and association with subjects or people that are "buzz-items". We often intuitively include these qualities in our projects, and, of course, advertisers use them all the time – for good reason.

An engagability test

So, here's a test of the engagability of your program, product or behaviour.

- 1) Does it address real life frustrations, guilts or worries (the "hotter" the better) of your target group?
- 2) Does it give them more control over their lives?
- 3) Does it save them time (or is at least time neutral)?
- 4) Does it have social value?
- 5) Are there credible peers who will endorse these qualities?

Pass this test, and you're likely to be engaging no matter what tactics, messages, tricks or manipulations you use to reach people.

But if you don't pass the test then don't give up. All it means is that you need to pause and do some product development, starting with the question: How can we transform our program, product or behaviour into one that credibly addresses the real wants that people have in their lives? To do that you'll need to spend time with people and ask them about their lives, which is one way great programs and products are born.

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