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Editorial

How to communicate on sorting? Several individual definitions and several strategies

There are three ways of understanding the individual: as a motivated person, a rational person or a rationalizing person. The first is moved by his interests and takes the path he believes will provide the greatest reward. This is the behaviorist approach, in which individuals act in response to stimuli. The second approach holds that people think before acting. Behaviors are guided by ideas, opinions, beliefs, etc. For example, individuals may believe that sorting waste is important for the environment, and not burdensome, so they will sort. The third approach argues that individuals think and behave according to their past behavior. Behaviors are the key drivers of cognitive and behavioral dynamics: “If I sorted my waste yesterday, I must be an environmentally conscious person. I’ll do it again today.” The importance of these three definitions of the individual may not be immediately apparent. They are, however, the underlying factors behind the major techniques of communication and influence: incentive, persuasion and commitment.

The first studies on influential techniques applied to waste management were conducted by behaviorists who used incentive strategies. In these experiments, individuals would receive a reward if they sorted their waste. Different forms of rewards were used, including raffle tickets, discount vouchers, money, etc. Most of these experiments saw the same results: as soon as there was no longer a reward, the sorting behavior would cease. At best, after the incentive period, the level of sorting would return to its initial position. This is known as the boomerang effect. Due to their external nature, rewards do not provide the motivation necessary to sustain a particular behavior. Incentive systems tend to favor a calculated and instrumental involvement. However, it has also been shown that ecological behaviors do not follow a logical cost/benefit ratio. This type of argumentation could even impede the adoption of such behavior. Incentive methods are only effective if the reward is continuous, and if users perceive it as valuable.

Informational, persuasive and educational strategies are based on the premise that the individual is a rational being. It is the most commonly used form of intervention in communicating about waste to citizens. These operations inform citizens about sorting instructions that are not being respected, the amount of waste that has been recycled during a previous period, ways to reduce waste production, etc. The urgency to the environment and the citizen’s duty to sort are used to justify users’ active participation. Studies on these paradigms have provided a list of recommendations. Thus, although it seems that individuals sort mainly for environmental reasons, effective communication must also touch on the altruistic side of sorting behavior. Several studies have concluded that communications with descriptive norms

(e.g., “most people in your town make home-composting”) is better than communications that argue for environmental protection. Indeed, environmental arguments should not be used alone in the effort to modify practices, because we cannot pretend that the environment is the only thing that matters to people. Sorting and prevention practices also benefit from being associated with ethics, economics and security. Moreover, information should highlight how preventive and sorting behaviors will benefit individuals. Communication must be adapted to individual motivations and values. It is also advisable to avoid injunctive speech, and rather use an optimistic and positive tone. Despite the many perspectives that have been explored, the link between beliefs, motivations and behavior is not conclusive. Interest or concern for the environment does not explain more than 10% of the variance in environmental behaviors such as waste sorting (Bamberg, 2003). Finally, the most predictive cognition of sustainable behavior in waste management is knowledge. Indeed, while there is no typical profile of the recycler, the non-recycler is always very misinformed. To conclude, we might say that argumentative strategies fail to convince and are most likely limited by the hypothesis of the individual’s rational nature.

An alternative to these forms of communication are the behavioral strategies that are backed by the psychology of commitment (Kiesler, 1971). This approach challenges the hypothesis of a rational individual and focuses directly on behavior. This approach is based on a simple principle: individuals avoid going backwards or changing direction and tend to adopt and maintain a coherent line of action. One single decisive declaration can thus provide individuals with a direction that they subsequently maintain. Several experiments have shown that, in certain circumstances, an individual’s waste management practices will improve if they sign a charter. This type of communication traditionally requires individuals to sign their name, and is administered door-to-door or during public awareness campaign and is made public through the press. In this charter, the individual promises to adhere to the target behavior. There are seven necessary and sufficient conditions to commit an individual to a certain behavior:

- Individuals must feel as though they are committing freely. It has been shown, for example, that adding the sentence “but you are free to accept or refuse...” at the end of the request can increase the behavioral effects (Pascual and Guéguen, 2002). The principle is very simple. The responsibility must fall to the individual himself. He must be able to think: “If I act this way, it’s because I am someone who...”. In this case, there is no need for authority, reward or penalty to

justify this behavioral choice. Allowing individuals to choose one or more behaviors out of several will only increase their sense of freedom.

- The commitment must be public. Indeed, consistency is a social norm. In other words, deviating from one's commitment is not socially acceptable. This means that people are more likely to keep their commitments if other people are made aware of them. For example, this could involve publishing the list of people who signed the charter, or leaving one copy with the signer and one with the interviewer.
- The commitment must be explicit. For example, avoid phrasing such as "I pledge to try to be vigilant in my waste sorting," as this is very ambiguous. A preferable phrase would be "I pledge to sort paper over the next six weeks."
- The behavior must be repeated. One-time behavior has a superficial impact on future behavior and thought processes. For example, the contract should require the individual to sort waste several times over a period of weeks, not just once. (NB: six weeks is adequate for the long-term adoption of a sustainable daily practice).
- The commitment must be irreversible. For example, it has been observed many times that verbal agreements have no effect on behavior. A written contract is a visible act which leaves a trace.
- The commitment must have consequences and be costly to the individual. If a person already sorts waste, there is no use in having them commit to this behavior. It won't have a behavioral or cognitive effect. The target behavior must be significant to the individual so that it is meaningful. It can be costly in terms of time or physical effort (e.g., go to collective compost), finance (i.e., purchase a composter), or other concessions (e.g., drink tap water), etc.

Citizens appreciate this type of communication, and if it meets the necessary conditions, it is more effective than persuasion. It allows individuals to be voluntary participants in the process, while individuals play a passive role in persuasive communication.

The principle of individual involvement is the backbone of participatory communication. Although this type of communication is rare, experiments have shown that it provides very interesting perspectives in bringing about change. In a study we conducted (Dupré, 2009), we met with people door-to-door in a building, requesting that they visit neighbors of their choice to ask them to commit to sorting their waste over the six following weeks. The results showed that the residents who communicated with their peers improved greatly in their own sorting habits, and reduced the number of errors they made. Residents who were contacted by their neighbors improved their sorting practices as

much as others households that were contacted by professional agents of communication. The psychological principles behind these effects are not easy to define, especially as some people are actively involved in the communication effort. However, this approach recalls studies from middle of the last century that showed that individuals who must argue for something will adopt these arguments more fully than individuals who are simply exposed to the arguments. It is also known that information is better retained when it comes from a peer, and as we have already seen, a public commitment will increase the behavioral effects. There are several theoretical arguments in favor of this kind of operation. When individual households contribute to increasing awareness, this can allay some of the cost. Moreover, this approach is well received by the public, especially in places where citizens wish to participate, or where the government is viewed with suspicion or hostility. Finally, because all policies on household waste management depend on citizen participation, it is only logical to encourage citizen involvement and responsibility.

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