

Evaluation “Angels and Demons” (WP-116)

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Introduction

One way to generate the money needed for sustainable innovation is by consumer choosing freely for sustainable products. This way, consumer choice pays for the innovative production method. This requires consumer willingness to buy these products. Willingness to buy is however not so easily measured as the intentions to buy may only partially predict actual purchase behaviour. There is a gap between what consumer say they want, and what they do in practice.

For the specific case of sustainable production, consumers often say they are very positive about sustainable products (angelic opinion), yet in their daily behaviour they frequently tend to choose convenient and cheap products (demonic behaviour).

Aim

This project tries to provide insight in the underlying causes for these differences between attitude and behaviour, with the aim to provide action perspective for the positioning of sustainable products.

Set up

To achieve the aim the project has a 3-pronged approach.

- 1) To gain insight in the issue of attitude behaviour discrepancies a symposium was held where experts in the study of attitude-behaviour discrepancies (or multiple selves – Consumer versus Citizen) presented recent work, and where policy makers and applied scientists participated in the audience and the discussion.
- 2) A research project investigating the attitude behaviour gap from the construal level theory. Leading is the difference between positioning product benefits as more abstract, and more socially and temporarily removed (leading to socially driven choice) compared to products positioned as concrete, here and now (leading choice resulting in immediate and personal gratification).
- 3) A second research project on consistency theory. Although there is a difference between attitude and behaviour, it is unlikely that consumers willingly exhibit inconsistent behaviour. This implies that at the moment of unsustainable behaviour, the sustainable attitude is not active in the mind of consumers.

Results

- 1) The symposium: The setting of a small scale symposium around a common application (sustainability) was a first to many of the disciplinary scientists. The drive for (social) scientist to produce the own, specific approach and theories, conceals there are in fact many similarities between different theories. This thematic conference allowed scientists to see outside the box and consider similarities rather than differences. This resulted in a positive atmosphere and engaged discussions. However, transferring the specialist knowledge to practice was not achieved, as the scientists remained largely focused on their own topics. The need to create liaisons between fundamental science and application was thus underlined. The composition and response of the audience gave some pointers to who might take up this role. Most suited appear to be institutes for applied science (DLO, TNO etc.), governments, intermediaries, and consultants. Additionally a role for universities of

- applied sciences (HBO) may be in this field. The flow of cutting edge fundamental knowledge to people in these fields is often insufficient.
- 2) Within the construal level study, a series of experiments has been conducted. The studies showed counterintuitive findings. We expected that (abstract) sustainable benefits would be linked to long term preference, while (concrete) taste benefits would be linked to immediate choice. Participants, however, especially showed a low preference for taste based purchase in the immediate future. This effects was found among students in Wageningen in 3 consecutive studies. In depth discussion among several involved researchers has come up with a possible explanation that the participants (Wageningen students) maybe heavily involved with sustainability, making sustainable choice a concrete and immediate issue for this segment in the population. Follow up studies (to be conducted outside Wageningen and measuring involvement) will have to shed light on this. This study suggests that the specific context and personality characteristics in which interpretation of abstract versus concrete gains may differ between participant groups, which would support a segmentation approach to the sustainable market.
 - 3) Consistency theory experiments showed that activation of pro environmental attitudes leads to more sustainable behaviour in practice. When you are actively considering sustainability, non-sustainable behaviour is inconsistent. Activation of pro sustainability attitude was achieved by two different sentences: "Do you like it when chicken have free roaming space" versus (neutral) "Do you like it when the sun is shining". This has been tested in 2 studies. In a first study an online shop was simulated. Before the shopping task, participants were asked to answer questions in which for some participants sustainability related questions were given and for others neutral; after which a choice task among sustainable and non-sustainable options was done. In the second study similar sentences were presented on paper placemats placed on trays in the university cafeteria, where some placemats had the sustainable sentence and others the neutral. The amount of organic products actually bought, depending on placemat was tested. In both studies, the activation of sustainable attitudes resulted in more choice for sustainable products.

Meaning for TransForum

Considering the sustainable consumer as a rational actor is not the way forward. Segmentation, activation of positive attitudes and the implementation of a host of insights in environmental, evolutionary and mental processes that balance different mind-sets of consumers gives better predictions of actual consumer behaviour.

Implications for Metropolitan agriculture

Metropolitan agriculture presents a pallet of different approaches to sustainable development in the agri sector. Aligning different initiatives with different consumer group will strengthen this approach. By its emphasis on the agri sector as a shared resource for recreation of city-dwellers, metropolitan agriculture has a prime position to work on cues strengthening sustainable consumer behaviour. However, these cues are likely to work at an unconscious level of subtle cues, so information alone is expected to have limited impact.

Implications for connected value development

People adopt different roles in their life. At work, one maybe a conscientious scientist, at home the same person maybe a hedonistic consumer. These "multiple" selves imply that we should consider the role, context and position a person is in to determine the relevant values. It also implies that these roles may not always be the same. During shared value development it is therefore essential to tune the situation in the discussion to the envisaged final outcome, as mistuning may result in some partners adopting different roles, and thus different value sets in later stages of the project.

Implications for Knowledge infrastructure

The symposium showed that fundamental (social) science is making progress but is not aligned to solve the large and wicked problems in practice.

First of all, each researcher had his/her own version of key drivers and a generally accepted model or terminology was absent, making robust application high impossible. Secondly (and related) each researcher has specified his/her own small area, which may shed light on some of the effects but does not easily add up to the larger scale issues present in practice. In that way, this project provided an example of classical scientific approaches.

However, some observations may give a direction to the future. First of all, there was appreciation from practice for the complexity of seemingly simple problems, and the practice community got insight into "science in action" communicating a lot about the limits of classical science.

Secondly, applied scientists (e.g. from DLO's) were very enthusiastic as this symposium allowed them an in depth update and discussion from leading theorists in the field. In conclusion, organising relays between science and practice could benefit from the applied sciences being the "interpreter". This means that changes in the institutional context are needed to allow applied sciences to be organised in such a way they keep in touch with leading theories, while at the same time applying their findings in practice. The role of research institutes and HBO (professional colleges) might be ideally suited for this type of bridging function.