

# SUSTAINABILITY COMMUNICATIONS: WHAT'S AMISS?

PART 1 OF A TRILOGY OF WHITE PAPERS ON THE  
SUSTAINABLE COMMUNICATIONS HEURISTICS THEORY:

1. WHAT'S AMISS?
2. [WHAT'S THE FIX?](#)
3. [WHY THE HESITATION?](#)

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### **Target readers**

This white paper is intended for professionals whose goals would be easier to reach if the next generation aspired more instinctively and sincerely to a sustainable lifestyle.

A short presentation of the author Mario Hytten appears at the end of the document.

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### CONVENTIONS

In this document, the following terms are to be interpreted as follows:

**Sustainability communications:** all forms of communications about sustainability, whether the purpose is to improve consumers' attitude towards a sustainable lifestyle, or to improve their perception of the sustainability credentials of the brands that affect their lives

**Him/his:** can be substituted with her/hers in all instances

**Product:** refers to both products and services

**Consumer/fan:** an individual who is a potential user of the products and also enjoys following one or several sports

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### PROLOGUE

Most stakeholders promoting the sustainability agenda seem to agree that communications need to reach people's

emotions. But none seems to know how to do it, or just how big a difference that would make.

It is fundamental to understand that emotion is not just an ingredient that can be sprinkled into traditional communications: humans actually process communications through two entirely distinct systems.

The commercial world has skilfully adapted its communications to this relatively young science, sometimes with extraordinary results.

Considering the dignity of the issue at hand, it is crucial that we learn from the most successful brands and adapt their communication methods to the task of changing attitudes about sustainability.

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## THE GREAT INCONGRUITY

There seems to be a consensus that sustainability communications have so far failed to engage consumers. The issue is, of course, of major concern. We are unlikely to make a successful transition to a sustainable society with an unmotivated consumer base. This paper will attempt to isolate the issue and propose a solution.

*(M.Cox, 2008) 'It seems that effective communication remains a missing link in the practice of CSR, especially to mass audiences. Although nearly nine in ten of the public maintain that the communication of a corporation's green activities is important, an awareness of this activity remains limited. [...] Only around 30% of the public can name a particular company helping society or the environment'*

Already in 2005, UNEP's Executive Director Prof. Klaus Töpfer clearly outlined the issues and his vision, in the foreword of the report 'Communicating Sustainability':

*(UNEP, 2005) [...] communicating effectively about sustainable lifestyles is a challenge. One needs to consider not only what*

*to communicate, but how to communicate it. [...] Many of these messages are simply too patronising, guilt-laden or disapproving. Instead of turning people on to the environment, they risk switching them off. [...] In order to bring about change, people have to want it [...] Inspiring examples and visions [...] to plan, develop and implement attractive and effective campaigns that make sustainable lifestyles fashionable and 'cool'.*

The authors used this cue and introduced the concept of a BHAG:

(UNEP, 2005)

*'Many organisations find a 'Big, Hairy, Audacious Goal' (BHAG) the most inspirational means to clarify their goal. The main benefit of a BHAG is to inspire and focus organisations on achieving long-term objectives that are consistent with their purposes. One of the most famous BHAGs of all time was John F. Kennedy's 1961 goal of landing a man on the moon before 1970. It energised NASA, captured the attention of the American public, and resulted in one of the most impressive technological accomplishments ever.'*

The case studies in the report, however, described programmes in various parts of the world aimed at educating consumers about environmental issues, ethical consumerism, sustainable transport, combating exotic diseases, saving energy, workshops about combating the destruction of the ozone layer, managing water resources and exhibitions about the trafficking of endangered species.

It was back to more complex science, more patronising warnings about the dangers of inaction. Like so many examples before and after this report, it smacked of yet another attempt to inject excitement into projects that had little prospect of igniting the passions of anybody but the most militant of activists. Not much that could be compared to landing a man on the moon. Nor were there any descriptions of what a BHAG might look like.



Paradoxically, NASA's cold-war inspired lunar mission was credited with inspiring the environmental movement, with the first pictures of the vulnerable 'blue planet'.

Experts are in broad agreement that sustainability communications need to become more compelling and exciting, but no government, commercial brand, non-profit organisation, advocacy group, nor their agencies, have come up with anything that could remotely be described as a BHAG.

Among the comments of the World Economic Forum's report 'Engaging Tomorrow's Consumer':

*After financial considerations, 20% more brand managers rated 'communicating brand values' than 'executing the corporate vision' as the most or an important consideration for their job.*

[...]

*Make Sustainability an integral part of the brand.*

On the other hand:

*(Verdantix, 2012) Sustainability professionals are great at their jobs, they just struggle to communicate the technical side of their work to external audiences [...] effectively convey what progress a firm is making in the sustainability arena to each and every stakeholder*

Is the mission really to 'communicate the technical side of their work to external audiences'? How often is the description of a technical process the recipe for exciting and motivating consumers? We seem to be stuck with this incongruity that the subject is so important that we should be able to generate enthusiasm and change attitudes with data and rational arguments. Never mind the teachings of marketing, never mind the science of human psychology or neuro-science, never mind just plain common sense. We did not land a man on the moon by just dismissing the laws of gravity.

In Communications about Sustainability, the OECD stated:

*(OECD, 1999) 'Information alone, however, is not the 'missing*



*link' between a problem and a solution'*

A study from California Management Review had this to say about the proliferation of organizations that rate and monitor sustainability:

*(California Management Review, 2012) The result is a virtual fire hose of sustainability-related information that, despite the intention of creating meaningful distinctions between firms on the basis of sustainability, may have the opposite effect and create less distinction for any one firm or rating system.*

Ogilvy & Mather, in Mainstream Green:

*(Williams+Bennett, 2011) [...] if we are to drive sustainability beyond the Super Green niche to propel a truly mainstream movement, we need to revisit our Marketing 101 textbooks and get back in touch with what we know works when marketing to the mainstream. We need to stop trying to argue consumers into agreeing that sustainability is important. Instead, we must immediately shift our attention to identifying the behaviours with the greatest potential impact and to understanding the best ways to get consumers to embrace them. [...] And marketing around sustainability does carry its own unique, complex, and highly nuanced set of challenges. It is hard to do well and must be handled extremely carefully.*

As recently as 2013, the report Engaging Tomorrow's Consumer argued:

*(The World Economic Forum, 2013) Sustainability needs a makeover: Consumers need to be excited and motivated by sustainability in order to engage*

- and the recommendation is that -

*Business needs to use language that is more familiar and offer consumers incentives and sustainable choices that are more relevant to their lives and aspirations.*

This introduces the role of emotions in communications,

reinforced by the following quotes contained in the 'Motivating Millions' survey about behaviour change:

*(Corporate Culture, 2013)*

*'It is about establishing a clear, engaging and compelling (positive) vision for a different future state that resonates with individuals at both a hearts and minds levels'*

*'It encompasses the understanding of both cognitive and subconscious triggers, the psychology of choice and action, (and inaction), and using this knowledge to encourage sustainable behavioural changes'*

The consensus is that something is amiss with the way we communicate sustainability. Many are pointing to the fact that we need to generate enthusiasm and motivation. Some think the solution lies in improved information, some don't. The need for big bold ideas crops up, but nobody has described a big bold idea. It all seems very incongruous.

First of all: very few seem to acknowledge that there are two very distinct ways of communicating.

## TWO DISTINCT WAYS OF COMMUNICATING

In stark contrast to commercial advertising, sustainability communications overwhelmingly use old-fashioned and arguably defunct techniques for communicating with large audiences. The reasons why this happens are quite understandable, which we cover in the third part: [WHY THE HESITATION?](#)

First, let's explain the crux of the issue: the art of advertising has of course evolved enormously since the 1950s; if we want to strip it down to one big theory, advertisers have learnt to address consumers' emotions rather than their intellect. In parallel, they went from promoting products to promoting brands. Some may have acted on pure inspiration, some may have based their actions on science. In either case, they most probably assumed that they were moving the needle from



one side to the other on the same dial, from the rational to the emotional side of the consumers' spectrum.

Towards the end of the century, a number of psychologists had variously described how we actually communicate and process information in a dual-processing system, operating so differently from each other that they actually activate different parts of the brain. Petty and Cacioppo first referred to two different routes to making a decision in 1986, the 'peripheral route' operating when an individual uses shortcuts to make judgments, and the 'central route' when he thinks carefully about a situation before making a decision. Prof David Kahneman finally popularized the terms 'System 1' and 'System 2' thinking in his 2011 book 'Thinking, Fast and Slow', which became a best-seller.

*(Kahnemann, 2011)*

*System 1 operates automatically and quickly, with little or no effort and no sense of voluntary control*

*System 2 allocates attention to the effortful mental activities that demand it, including complex computations.*

From the description, you have probably already guessed that the immense majority of our daily tasks are processed instinctively by System 1.

System 2 requires effort and we therefore love to delegate decisions to System 1 whenever we can, drawing from our enormous bank of subconscious experience to make instinctive, 'gut-feel' decisions. Prof Kahneman likes to say that System 2 is lazy. That is a good descriptive, because delegating a decision to gut-feel is easily regarded as a weakness. But it is far from being a rule. Experimentation has shown many situations in which System 1 does a better job at retrieving and analyzing the relevant data for a correct decision, especially when time is of the essence. Even when we deliberately activate System 2, we are not infallible at disentangling emotions from our thought process, simply



OLD-STYLE ADVERTISING: LABORIOUSLY ARGUING THE BENEFITS OF THE PRODUCT



because we are human. Prof Kahneman compares the two systems as follows:

*System 1 is in charge of almost everything we do. Most of everything we do is skilled, and skilled activities are largely carried out effortlessly and automatically. That even includes routine conversation; it's very low effort. So System 1 is a marvel, with some flaws. System 2 is slow and clunky but capable of performing complicated actions that System 1 cannot carry out.*

To fully understand the potential importance of this theory on the field of sustainable communications, let's consider its impact in a different field: Behavioural Economics, the field studying why financial agents make systematic errors. Since 1738, the financial industry was governing fundamental issues such as risk assessment, market prices and returns on the basis of a theory called Expected Utility. The theory assumed that trained professionals operate as rational agents, evaluating expectations of losses and gains on the basis of data, capable of separating themselves from psychological or social influences. Just like sustainability communicators think consumers will make that separation.

In 1979, Kahneman and Tversky published the Prospect Theory, which disproved the long-held Expected Utility theory. This had a profound impact on the financial industry. It eventually led to Prof Kahneman being awarded the Nobel Prize in 2002, the first psychologist to win a Nobel Prize in Economic Sciences. His work on dual processing is likely to also have ramifications in fields such as Law and Justice, Medicine, Military, Politics, or in fact in any domain in which people's lives can be profoundly affected by the decision-making processes of individuals who are, well, human.

It should also transform the way we communicate about sustainability to consumers.

*(R.B.Zajonc, 1980) Affect doesn't require extensive cognitive*

*processing to occur [...] Quite often 'I decided in favor of X' is no more than 'I liked X' [...] we have also had limited ability to make attitudinal changes via communication and persuasion [...]*

The world's journey towards sustainability is an eminent example of a domain in which people's lives can be profoundly affected by the decision-making processes of individuals. Therefore, it is essential that we re-examine the way we communicate about sustainability, in relation to the dual-processing theory.

#### COMMERCIAL COMMUNICATORS ADAPTED, SUSTAINABILITY COMMUNICATORS DID NOT

Mass communication, advertising, is a domain in which the dual processing theories will have the deepest impact. It is also a domain in which progress relies more on inspiration and creativity, rather than science. Theories of dual processing were often experimented with, well before the publication of the scientific evidence. Some past campaigns were so remarkably efficient at adapting communication to System 1-type thinking, that some exceptional communicators were clearly ahead of the science.

Dr Robert Heath, a psychologist with a long career as an advertising executive, illustrated in his 2012 book 'Seducing the Subconscious' the fascinating contrasts between the old fashioned methods of persuading consumers, against the more modern tendency to seduce them (for readers who fear their concentration straying because of the use of the word 'seduce', I would like to remind them of less charged synonyms, such as 'entice' or 'attract').

The bottom-line is: the science is now available. From now on, there are no excuses for communicators to ignore the profound implications of dual process thinking or, by extension, dual-process communicating.

Help ease strain on the environment.  
And your pocketbook.



**Did you know?**

As of June 2008, Wal-Mart will carry only liquid detergents in concentrated forms to reduce packaging waste.

We're encouraging all our suppliers to reduce their shipping packaging and to ensure all their packaging materials are made from renewable or recyclable materials.

Heating water is one of the most expensive energy uses at home. **Tide® Coldwater** lets you wash all your clothes in cold water, saving you energy and money — up to \$65 per year. And it actually works better in cold water than other detergents do in warm water.

**YOU = 200 million =**  
If every Wal-Mart shopper switched to washing in cold water with Tide Coldwater for 50 loads, we would save 14 billion kilowatt-hours of energy.



Back to laborious persuasion

This is precisely where those who communicate about sustainability have fallen way behind the cutting edge. Almost universally, they obstinately stick to outdated communication methods that require System 2 thinking from the consumer: long-winded advertisements that demand full engagement and effortful attention; arguments and facts about the benefits of adopting the message, alternatively warnings about the downsides of not doing so; the assumption is that the target will rationally analyse the facts, modify attitude and behaviour towards a product/service/brand, and act on this at the time of purchase. It is all very reminiscent of the clunky advertisements of the 50s and 60s.

Or worse: clueless attempts at influencing the subconscious with generous use of the colour green and peppering the website with close-ups of water drops on leaves or plants growing out of children's cupped hands...

So, what is cutting edge today? Let's step out of the world of sustainability for a moment, to look at the communication strategies of one of the most iconic and successful brands of the early 21<sup>st</sup> century: **Red Bull**.

The energy drink brand uses practically no advertising about the product, no communication that requires System 2 thinking, no rationally analysing the pros and cons of the product. The company built the brand almost exclusively on sponsorship, single-handedly creating a lifestyle around extreme sports and adventures, outdoor activities, projecting a youthful, risk-taking, in-your-face attitude. It is estimated that the company spends in the region of £600m/year on its sponsorship activities. Red Bull represents the ultimate case-study of a marketing strategy that addresses only System 1-type thinking: effortless, non-verbal, implicit, associative.

The company has understood that its target audience is anti-establishment and impervious to any hard-sell tactics; the drink just becomes a natural component of the lifestyle.



The result? In spontaneous recall studies, the brand regularly rivals Coca-Cola, despite its 100-year head-start. Sales: 5.4 billion cans worldwide in 2013. Their success is absolutely remarkable.

Other brands that have reached global recognition by appealing almost exclusively System 1 thinking are Marlboro, Virgin and Ferrari, completely re-inventing the way we communicate with large audiences. They are all remarkable success stories, that any self-respecting mass-communicator must study and understand.

For instance, anybody who is serious about shaping the attitude of 7 billion people towards the notion of sustainability...

#### SYSTEM 1 AND THE SUBCONSCIOUS SEDUCTION MODEL

In his book "Seducing the Subconscious, the psychology of Emotional Influence in Advertising" (Heath, 2012) Dr Heath describes two separate communication methods, which match Prof Kahnemann's two thinking methods:

The Persuasion model, which needs to elicit the target to activate System 2 thinking.

The Subconscious Seduction Model: which delivers its message even when the target is disengaged (System 1 thinking).

Not surprisingly, Dr Heath met resistance from within the advertising industry. His experiments disproved a theory that defined a core skill in the profession: catching the attention of the target.

The results of his experiments were counter-intuitive to say the least, hence absolutely fascinating. Not only was it possible to deliver a message without catching the attention of the target, the efficiency was almost inversely proportional



Time to improve the symbolism

to the degree of amount of awareness from the target. One experiment found that:

*(Heath & Hyder 2005). Favourability towards a brand increased more amongst those who could not recall having seen the advert*

On his side, Robert Bornstein had noted:

*(Bornstein, 1992) Perception which takes place without awareness leads to inexplicable familiarity, which in turn raises favourability*

Both are consistent with the dual processing theory.

**The Persuasion Model:** overt, it requires high attention to cause active learning, therefore aims to engage analytical, logical, deliberate System 2 slow thinking. This in turn raises consciousness of 'being sold to', causing perceptual filtering, whereby our System 2 weighs up the information in relation to our own standards and experiences. The role of the Persuasion Model is to provide persuasive rational information that creates brand-linked beliefs. These are committed to explicit memory, which deteriorates over time.

**The Subconscious Seduction Model:** covert, it causes implicit learning without requiring any conscious attention, therefore aims to elicit emotions that trigger visual, intuitive, associative System 1 fast thinking. The role of the Subconscious Seduction Model is to build intuitive brand relationships and associations. As it enters the subconscious, it is committed to inexhaustible memory without being filtered.

As consumers, we will use System 2 to evaluate the purchase of a car or a house, but we switch on System 1 'auto-pilot' to choose toothpaste or a fizzy drink. Most of us like to think that we are firmly in control of the auto-pilot system. People will strenuously deny that they are influenced by advertising to any significant degree. They probably do so in very good faith. By 'advertising', they can only refer to Persuasion

Model advertising, which they remember critically analysing with all their senses alert and protection barriers raised. They have very little scope to analyse their exposure to Subconscious Seduction Model advertising.

As humans we are constantly absorbing all sorts of sensory information from everything we are exposed to, even as we sleep. This information is both absorbed and processed subconsciously. Although the exact mental processes are far from being entirely explained, there is enough evidence to show that our behaviour is influenced by them in a very significant way. Dr Heath's experiments demonstrated how advertising messages are also being absorbed in this way. Although it means that they are competing against massive amounts of information of all kinds, they can be quite effective. Their effectiveness increases with the degree of emotion, or affect, they manage to generate. They have an unfair advantage over traditional advertising: they enter our mind 'under the radar', hence without any filtering. We cannot choose to re-prioritize or un-learn them, since they are committed to implicit memory, which is inexhaustible and 'always on'. By definition, we are unaware of their very existence, let alone their effect on our behaviour. If this sounds dark or clandestine, relax. It is in fact very natural, and indispensable for humans to function. From an evolutionary point of view, System 1 thinking predates System 2 thinking by thousands of years. Today, the average consumer is exposed to 3,000 to 20,000 advertising messages every day. But he processes billions of signals, sounds, smells and images, including those that only appear in his peripheral vision, the things he sees without looking. Consider that our arc of vision is 120deg, but the arc we concentrate on consciously is only 3deg. For instance, the peripheral vision processes random faces we encounter in the street, a function that has roots in evolution. All this information plays a big part in who we are and how we act, for good and for

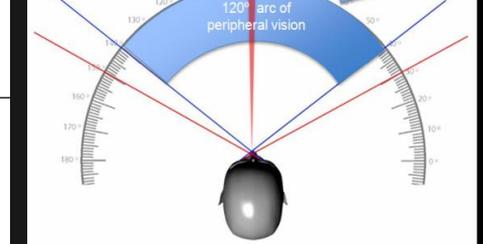
bad. As much as we would like to deny it, it helps in programming our auto-pilot system.

In his book *Brainfluence* (Dooley, 2011), neuromarketing consultant Roger Dooley proposed to quantify the issue:

*'Ninety-five percent of our thoughts, emotions, and learning occur without our conscious awareness, according to Harvard marketing professor and author Gerald Zaltman. He's not the only one to think this way; the 95 percent rule is used by many neuroscientists to estimate subconscious brain activity.'*

To anybody engaged in sustainability communications, the above should set a whole array of alarms bells ringing. If sustainability communications continue to be heavily reliant on the explicit Persuasion Model, we will have very little input into people's everyday implicit actions and purchasing decisions. Decisions about sustainability issues will continue to require the activation of laborious System 2 thinking, alongside big item issues such as buying cars and houses.

There is a strong argument for implicit sustainability attitudes to be hard-wired into people's auto-pilot system. Research (Rydell, 2006) confirmed that implicit attitudes were responsive to subconscious communication, while explicit attitudes were responsive to conscious communication. This confirmed previous work (Wilson, 2000) on dual-attitudes, showing that people can carry ambivalent attitudes towards the same subject, one implicit, and one explicit. We are all familiar with the experience of people saying one thing and doing another. This does not need to stem from a lack of sincerity: by definition, people are mostly unaware of their implicit attitudes. (Smith, 2000) showed that implicit and explicit attitudes are formed by separate mechanisms, operate in different situations and are stored in separate memory systems. What does it mean in practical terms? You may have been successful at persuading an individual about the virtues of brand A, which he will become his new favourite when his explicit attitude is in action. But he will continue to pick brand



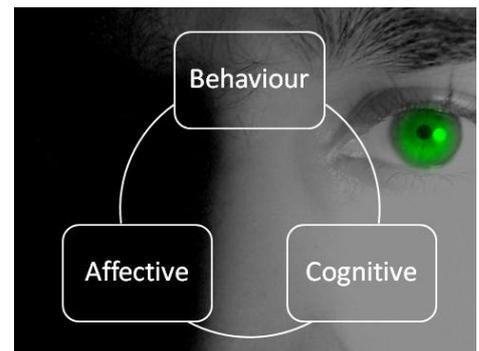
B when guided by his implicit attitude.

There is the explanation to why people's answers to market studies about sustainable behaviours bear no resemblance to real-life behaviours. Anybody engaged in marketing sustainability will be familiar with the phenomenon.

*(Heath, 2012) Every year governments use advertising to try and make us live better... Many of these campaigns are made using the defunct traditional model of advertising. They try to persuade us to behave correctly...*

*Suppose this sector of advertising were to employ the Subconscious Seduction Model... And suppose they did it as effectively as the commercial brand marketers do.*

To achieve behaviour change, it is necessary to persuade the cognitive side, and seduce the affective side. It's what we commonly refer to as 'winning hearts and minds'.



## CONCLUDING REMARKS

The transition to a sustainable society will require lasting attitude change on a large scale. Effective communications are not peripheral to this goal, they are essential.

Current sustainability communications are not working and cannot work. The reason is that they are based on inadequate communication methods. Lasting changes of attitude can only occur by combining the characteristics of the Persuasion Model and the Subconscious Seduction Model.

The communication techniques used in successful commercial campaigns must be adopted.

Ambitious communication programmes (based on BHAGs: Big Hairy Audacious Goals), are required, leveraging the power sports sponsorship to cause lasting attitude change and efficient image transfer to sponsors.

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## ON THE SAME SUBJECT

### Part 2: [WHAT'S THE FIX?](#)

Why is sponsorship necessary? What can be achieved? How does that happen? What's the science? Who could take the initiative and is it realistic?

### Part 3: [WHY THE HESITATION?](#)

Is anybody measuring the consequences of ineffective communications? What has prevented sustainability stakeholders from adopting this earlier? Is there an ethical issue? What are the best and worst examples of the method being applied?

## THE AUTHOR

Mario Hytten is the founder of Planetaire AB.

His concept derives from the cumulated experiences over a thirty-year career in sports sponsorship, mainly in motor-racing, including Formula 1. The sport has been a locomotive for the whole sponsorship industry, responsible for some of its very best aspects and some of its worst. Mario saw the industry from both sides of the fence, since he himself was a professional racing driver for thirteen years, switching to a managerial role in 1993.

In 2010 Hytten concluded that sponsorship could solve a significant problem in the market: companies that were leading the race towards sustainability were not seeing the returns they deserved in terms of brand value. That led to the foundation of Swedish company Planetaire AB.

Born in Sweden, the son of a UN official, Mario's life story has been nomadic. He studied and worked in Italy, Switzerland and the UK before moving to Gothenburg in his country of origin, where he now lives. He has three teenage children. He attributes his innate enthusiasm for the environment to his Scandinavian roots.



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