



The missing pieces

Why most of us aren't doing much about climate change – and what could change that

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If you're reading this, chances are you think climate change is a problem and you want to know more about it.

But if you own two cars, blast the heat in your house and use incandescent light bulbs, George Marshall would call you a climate-change denier, perhaps even more so than those who don't believe in it.

"The people who outright say, 'This thing isn't happening, this is an international conspiracy, the science is all wrong'... they at least have an internal coherence between what they say and what they do," says Marshall, the U.K.-based activist and author of *Carbon Detox*.

"The real denial, the definition of denial, is the disconnect between what you know and what you do. In other words, denial isn't not knowing something; denial is much more knowing something but not letting that in any way affect what you do."

By this definition, the majority of us look like a bunch of Armageddon-inviting hypocrites. And yet even after reading this article, even after a twinge of guilt, we will still leave the heat on, grab our keys, and drive an empty car to work.

Why? With environmental calamity fast approaching, why is it so hard for us to get up and do something?

This is the next generation of climate-change denial, and it's as



RAFFI ANDERIAN/TORONTO STAR

WORKING NORMS

The CBC and the Canadian arm of Internet tech giant Cisco Systems Inc., have discovered the power of social norms. The One Million Acts of Green campaign, a social-networking website, hit its target on Wednesday after barely three months – five months ahead of schedule. "We're not stopping, though," says Willa Black, Cisco executive and team leader of the campaign. "We're still

big a problem as the first. Because if we keep it up, the road to hell really will be paved with little more than good intentions.

Don't beat yourself up just yet. Adopting pro-climate behaviours is about more than willpower. And it's about more than being informed, too.

"The assumption has always been that all that we have is an information deficit," Marshall says. "That assumption has underlined climate-change communication and the entire way we speak about it for 20 years. And still does."

We're all familiar with these campaigns: the melting glaciers, the stranded polar bears, the IPCC updates that say things are getting much, much worse.

But there's little evidence that information alone, no matter how terrifying it is, actually changes people's behaviour. In his book, *Fostering Sustainable Behaviour: Community-based Social Marketing*, Canadian environmental psychologist Doug McKenzie-Mohr cites numerous studies on energy-conservation campaigns, from handbooks to workshops, that show that even if people's attitudes change, their actions usually don't.

One part of the problem is external barriers. Obviously if the infrastructure is lacking, we won't change. We won't take the bus to work if there is no public transit, for instance.

But an equally important issue is our own internal struggle. Psychologists now know there are a number of tripwires in the human mind that prevent us from doing all the climate-friendly things we'd really like to do.

Social psychologists know what motivates us to change. In fact, we sound a lot like children, and spoiled ones at that.

People are programmed to want results right away – clear, immediate indications that what they're doing matters. Unfortunately, we will never see ecological "results" from our carbon-cutting efforts. The best-case scenario is that we manage to ward off the apocalypse – someday.

This is exactly why we have to change how we think and talk about climate change, says Ed Maibach, director of the Center for Climate Change Communication at George Mason University in Virginia. "If I want you to change your behaviour, I probably should spend a lot less time scaring you about the enormity of the global problem. I should spend more time helping you think about what you as an individual can do to reduce your own personal footprint."

Not that climate-change campaigns don't do this – we often find "10 Things You Can Do" at the end of a dystopian forecast – but even then we tend to look the other way because of

going!"

The site uses the collaborative strengths of Web-based technology to get people and communities to tally up their climate-conscious behaviours, set targets and compare them with others. Individuals, schools, universities, municipalities and businesses have joined.

The result is a "social media hub for people who care about the environment," where groups compete, blog about strategies, and track their progress.

And while Black says government has not shown any interest in the campaign's popularity, "The response from businesses has been fantastic.

"What was really wonderful about this site is that it sort of became a mirror for companies that had environmental and green strategies in place. Here is a way, at no cost to them, where they can share their strategy more broadly in an online environment, engage their employees, if they so choose, engage their

another human foible known as the "single action bias."

"When we do feel a need to respond, we as humans tend to want to respond by doing one thing," Maibach explains. "And that's why a lot of the climate-change communication efforts ... have suggested trivial things for people to do. You know, like 'Change your light bulbs.'

"On some level it works ... but do we really want people to be doing something that's truly, in the grand scheme, meaningless, when we have every reason to believe that's all they will do if that's what we ask them to do?"

In light of this, warding off climate change may seem more daunting than ever. But there is a silver lining to our idiosyncrasies: our susceptibility to peer pressure.

Humans are social beings. Whether we admit it or not, we love to conform. Acting as part of a group makes us feel secure, and knowing how we're doing relative to others lets us take stock of ourselves. Falling behind the group: bad. Keeping up with it or ahead of it: good. We try to stay in line with what sociologists call "social norms," otherwise known as the status quo.

Wesley Schultz, a California-based environmental psychologist who specializes in social norms, has seen how powerful, cost-effective and behaviour-specific they can be.

In a study published in 2007, Schultz and his colleagues used "normative messaging" to try to get people to lower their home energy use. Simply giving households regular feedback on how they were doing relative to the rest of the group, along with a little social approval or disapproval of their consumption (in the form of happy- or angry-face emoticons) was enough to get virtually everyone to cut down on their energy use. Not

because it saved them money, not because they thought they were saving the planet. but simply because they were being graded relative to their peers and given a pat on the back.

It works so well, in fact, that social psychologists are trying to pressure governments and policymakers to stop thinking about financial incentives and information campaigns and start thinking about norms. The Australian Psychological Society has already committed to compiling research on the subject to educate authorities on how to more effectively reduce carbon-emitting behaviour.

"The most important influence on our behaviour is not the media, as we think, it's actually other people," says Susie Burke, senior researcher at the APS.

Moreover, norms are not only effective by virtue of peer pressure, they also combat the powerlessness we feel when we think about climate change.

"We often feel that when we do make an effort, it's a small thing, so what's the point? But if other people see me doing it, I am therefore participating in the establishment of a social norm, which encourages and invites other people to change. It's about knowing that

customers."

Cisco is already thinking bigger. "One of our very big focuses is taking this program global," Black says. "Right now, we've got green acts registered from over 50 countries. Individuals from 50 different countries! We don't include them in the Canadian number, they're not counted in any one collected place on the site right now, but we're going to post them. We're going to show results for Canada, and results for 'Other,' and then we've got all the country breakdowns so people can see what other countries are doing."

— Momoko Price

and trusting that that is a very powerful social force. And that encourages your own actions even when they seem so small in the midst of such major problems."

So what would a social-norm-based campaign look like? "We need smart meters," says Schultz. "We need houses, buildings, entities that can give real-time information about their consumption. And this real-time information needs to be coupled with some kind of normative element, or specific targets. So if we need to conserve five per cent, you can see `Where am I relative to that target, and where is my group, my community or my city, relative to that target?'"

Governments are finally getting on the same page – sort of. On Jan. 24, U.S. President Barack Obama called for the installation of 40 million smart meters in American homes; the provincial government has already promised to install smart meters in every house and small business in Ontario by 2010.

But they're still thinking in terms of electricity-bill savings, even though behavioural science has shown that money isn't a reliable incentive. While they continue to hope that people will be driven by cutting costs, the Arlington, Va.-based start-up Positive Energy is testing the norms approach on thousands of homes across the U.S., and it's working.

In Sacramento, Calif., PE used sophisticated data analysis to give 35,000 residents tailored information about their individual energy consumption and goals relative to other community members. The result? In about a year, overall energy use has dropped by two per cent. That may sound small, but considering the district's original goal was to reduce their consumption by 15 per cent in the next 10 years, they're actually right on track.

Hopefully, this is just the beginning. Applying psychology to climate-change issues is a new and neglected area of research, but it's showing immediate promise.

If the failures of past climate campaigns have taught us anything at all, it's that thinking about global warming isn't enough – if we really want to change, we have to think about *how* we think about it, too.

As if this wasn't hard enough.