

Advertisement



Powered by Clickability

Click to Print

[SAVE THIS](#) | [EMAIL THIS](#) | [Close](#)

'Green' bandwagon is getting a big push

By Marilyn Elias, USA TODAY

Advertisement

"The missing ingredient is the force of public opinion."

That's the line Cathy Zoi recalls from former vice president Al Gore when he urged her to become CEO of the Alliance for Climate Protection.

Americans are aware of global warming, "but they don't get the urgency of it and that this is solvable," says Zoi, who took the job last year.

TRUE OR FALSE: [This 'green' quiz is for you. True!](#)

The new group is about to launch the most ambitious U.S. marketing campaign ever on climate change, at a cost of more than \$100 million a year for three years, to focus on the urgency of the problem and solutions.

The need for a different approach is apparent, environmentalists say.

"We've come up against a brick wall with Americans," says Lee Bodner, executive director of ecoAmerica, an environmental group based in Washington, D.C. Despite Americans' widespread familiarity with global warming, "only a small group are changing their behavior."

There's little research on how to lower people's energy use, but early evidence suggests that many people will change if:

- They think others similar to themselves are jumping on the "green" bandwagon.
- They get frequent positive feedback for effort.
- They feel able to make a difference by taking concrete steps.
- They think their children will be harmed by global warming, or children encourage the family to lead a greener life.

THE BASICS: [Understanding climate change](#)

Though research about green behavior is sparse, there's strong evidence on what sparks behavior change in general. "We just haven't applied it to global warming the way we have to public health issues like smoking and cholesterol," says Douglas McKenzie-Mohr, environmental psychologist in Fredericton, Ontario.

Fact-jammed books — appeals often used by global warming activists — and terrifying threats about the future that don't offer solutions won't motivate many people and may even backfire, says Anthony

Leiserowitz, director of the Yale University Project on Climate Change. The more people are inundated with facts and figures, the more emotionally turned off many become, "and you have to have an emotional response — bad or good — to put a high priority on doing something."

That's not to say dire threats work better. If not paired with positive, doable actions, fear tactics can make people feel overwhelmed and powerless, Leiserowitz says.

Spreading the word

It's understandable that activists want to heighten a sense of the threat. Most Americans see global warming as a problem of the future in a far-away place, likely to affect other species but not people, Leiserowitz's surveys show. Although concern has grown, fewer than one-fifth of Americans are passionate about the issue, suggests a sweeping 2007 poll by Jon Krosnick of Stanford University.

Amping up awareness could raise pressure for policy changes by government but won't necessarily change personal behavior. Decades of research show little correlation between attitudes and behavior, says Carrie Arnel of Stanford's Precourt Institute for Energy Efficiency. On global warming, action can be hard: Even concerned people may live where there's no good public transportation and be unable to afford solar heat panels.

So what does spark change?

For one thing, many are prompted to take green actions if they think others like them are doing it.

In studies at hotels, guests who read in-room cards urging them to reuse towels to save energy were much less likely to comply than travelers whose cards said most hotel visitors recycled towels. Cards that said most who stayed in that very room had reused towels were even more likely to recycle.

"We most want to follow those who seem similar to us," says study leader Robert Cialdini, a persuasion expert at Arizona State University.

Cialdini's studies also have found that people use less energy if they think most neighbors have cut back.

"This 'everybody's doing it' pitch is almost never used in the PSAs around energy conservation." If people hear they're doing better than neighbors, they'll raise their energy use. But they'll come down again if they just get a smiley-face icon on their bill praising their extra effort, Cialdini says.

Tailoring messages to diverse audiences and hearing them from many sources also fosters change, says Edward Maibach, director of a new center on climate change and communication at George Mason University in Fairfax, Va.

"We have to mainstream this. It has to become easy and normal," Zoi says.

The Alliance for Climate Protection will buy ads and partner with grass-roots groups to spread the word on how to cut greenhouse gases. It also is seeking partnerships with consumer product makers "to amplify the message" on how to curb global warming through their packaging, websites or ads, Zoi says. The website www.wecansolveit.org, scheduled to launch in the next week, will spell out concrete steps for change.

Even with mass exposure, "you need to offer a reason to make changes that connects to something they care about, probably something close to home," says ecoAmerica's Bodner.

At work and at home

For Brian Flynn, it was bears creating havoc in Aspen, Colo. Bears were coming into town a few years ago, breaking open containers of discarded vegetable oil behind restaurants and scaring people.

Companies supply and pick up the containers, because commercial oil can't be dumped into landfills. Flynn, a manager for the city, came up with the idea for a bear-proof container. He learned of a company in Denver that converts the oil into a cleaner fuel for automobiles, "and the next thing you know I had a recycling business on the side," picking up the oil so it can be converted into fuel. His own Ford pickup has been modified to run on the recycled fuel.

When Flynn and his wife, Lisa, built their first house three years ago, they used recycled wood and framed with huge foam panels that cut the need for heat. That and other green features increased costs by \$50,000 to \$60,000 — roughly 8% more than a similar house without such materials, he says. "We have a very large mortgage, and we don't have a lot of extra money, but I don't want to be a drain on this society. It makes me feel good to live this way."

Surprisingly, money doesn't matter nearly as much as many think in deciding whether to buy a gas hog or fuel-efficient car, according to new research. "Most people don't buy cars based on fuel economy," says Tom Turrentine, director of the Institute of Transportation Studies

at the University of California-Davis. "Again and again, we hear 'I buy cars I really like.' "

As for buying a hybrid car, money matters, "but buyers often are much more motivated by making a statement about their values and beliefs. They feel it shows they're ethical people, that we need to get together as a community to solve this," says Rusty Heffner of Booz Allen Hamilton, a consulting firm in McLean, Va.

Tom Creasman, 61, of Cincinnati says he likes the \$3,000 he saves — compared with previous cars he has owned — by driving 25,000 miles a year in his Prius.

"But it's equally important that it fits with our lifestyle," he says. The family has drought-resistant landscaping, eats organic and is considering adding solar heat panels. "I've always been a backpacker, kind of leave-no-footprint-oriented. We try not to live our lives like pigs at the trough."

Persuading people such as Creasman to lighten their carbon footprint is easier than persuading others, says Bill Guns, CEO of SRI Consulting Business Intelligence, a consumer behavior research firm. Since 1990, SRI has used a method called the VALS System that separates Americans into categories based on what motivates them to make choices.

About 20% will be driven by facts and ideals to change behaviors that contribute to global warming, he says. Most are already convinced of problems linked to climate change.

But another, highly influential 25% are middle-of-the-road, achievement-oriented people, many of them 30 to 50 years old. "They never have enough time or money," he says.

Wonky research gives them a desired pretext to toss global warming concerns in the "ignore" box, he says. They're drawn to appeals that promise more success or financial security.

The youth factor

And one thing matters greatly to many of them: their children.

"Kids are particularly effective in getting changes into these 'achiever' households," for example by demanding a greener household, Guns says.

Any pitch that suggests their children will suffer harm from global warming would hit this group hard, and their choices often spread to the rest of the population, he says.

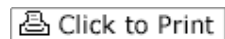
To achieve widespread greener behavior and big policy changes, "we need to get this group on board," Guns says.

Changes in how people live and use energy are inevitable, "because nature bats last," McKenzie-Mohr says.

"We'll be forced into it, whether we do it proactively or retroactively, and I hope it's not retroactive because then we'll always be in a crisis mode. If we do it proactively, we're more likely to do it wisely."

Find this article at:

http://www.usatoday.com/life/lifestyle/2008-03-23-green-behavior_N.htm



[SAVE THIS](#) | [EMAIL THIS](#) | [Close](#)

Check the box to include the list of links referenced in the article.