This online book details how to uncover the barriers that inhibit individuals from engaging in sustainable behaviors. Further, it provides a set of “tools” that social science research has demonstrated to be effective in fostering and maintaining behavior change. Each of these tools in and of its own right is capable of having a substantial impact upon the adoption of more sustainable behaviors. Collectively, they provide a powerful set of instruments with which to encourage and maintain behavior change. This online guide also details how to design and evaluate programs. The strategies detailed here, and the methods suggested in order to implement and evaluate them, form the basis of an emerging field that I refer to as “community-based social marketing.”

Community-based social marketing draws heavily on research in social psychology which indicates that initiatives to promote behavior change are often most effective when they are carried out at the community level and involve direct contact with people. The emergence of community-based social marketing over the last several years can be traced to a growing understanding that programs which rely heavily or exclusively on media advertising can be effective in creating public awareness and understanding of issues related to sustainability, but are limited in their ability to foster behavior change.

This guide will provide you with the information you need to incorporate community-based social marketing techniques into the programs you design. After reading this online book, you will have a new set of tools at your disposal which you can use to create effective community programs to foster sustainable behavior. This book is available for purchase from McKenzie-Mohr Associates.

We would like to acknowledge the contributions that many authors have made to the ideas that are expressed in this book. We have been particularly influenced by the writings of Gerald Gardner and Paul Stern, Stuart Oskamp, Deborah Winter and Eliot Aronson. We would also like to acknowledge the contributions that other authors have made to our thinking. A partial listing of these individuals includes: Shawn Burn, Robert Cialdini, Mark Costanzo, John Darley, James Dyal, Scott Geller, Marti Hope Gonzales, William Kempton, Wesley Schultz, Clive Seligman, Neil Wolman, and Ray de Young. You can find references to their work in the references section of the book as well as by conducting a search of the articles database. You may also find of interest two excellent books. For an indepth introduction to environmental psychology, see Gerald Gardner and Paul Stern’s book, “Environmental Problems and Human Behavior” published by Allyn and Bacon. For a fascinating introduction to social marketing and its application to social change, see Alan Andreasen’s “Marketing Social Change.”
The morning that I began to write this chapter, my four year-old daughter and I had breakfast together. She often uses breakfast as a time to plan what we will do together when I return from work. At four, she has already mastered many of the finer points of persuasion. She understands that to persuade me she must first secure my attention. Further, she realizes that she must compete with her sister, my wife, the radio, the morning newspaper and my own preoccupations, if she is going to obtain a commitment to do one of her favorite things when I return from work.

She usually secures my attention by asking that I sit with her at the children's table in our kitchen. This table has only two chairs, is secluded in a corner and, given its small size, places us very close together. Further, the table is too small an area upon which to open the morning paper. From her perspective, the setting is perfect.

Once I am sitting at the table and she has my full attention, the real persuasion occurs. In the summer, my daughter has three activities that she prefers above all others: going for a hike at a nearby beaver pond, having a picnic and swim at the wading pool, or going to the playground down the street (which just happens to be very close to the best place to get ice cream in Fredericton).

She rarely begins by suggesting all three options. Instead, she begins with the most preferred and least likely, going to the beaver pond. She understands that we will only go to the beaver pond once or twice a week, so on any particular day she has little chance of persuading me to go there with her. Nonetheless, she always starts with the beaver pond. When I begin to explain why we can’t go to the beaver pond (we were there yesterday), she cuts me off by saying: “I’ve got a deal for you. We won’t go to the beaver pond, but we can go to the wading pool and have a picnic.” On that particular evening, we have a friend coming for dinner and so the picnic is ruled out. Finally, she strategically turns to her third option: going to the playground down the street. Unconsciously she understands that she has the upper hand as she has already conceded the beaver pond and the wading pool. As a skilled negotiator, she knows that it is my turn to make a concession. Once she realizes that I am beginning to say yes, she closes the deal by suggesting that after the playground we can get some of the ice cream that I like (she makes no mention of her having any). As soon as I agree, she immediately says: “It’s a deal, then?” As I acknowledge that “it’s a deal,” she gets up from the table to tell her sister that we are going to the playground after supper (making my commitment public), and then for ice cream, while I am left to ponder how once again I have been out maneuvered by a four year-old who is only going to become more skilled with age.

Much of human communication involves persuasion. Whether done by a four year-old or a marketing firm, the aims are the same: to influence our attitudes and/or our behavior. The transition to a sustainable future will require that the vast majority of people be persuaded to adopt different lifestyles. How can we most effectively persuade people to adopt lifestyles
supportive of sustainability? The purpose of this chapter is to outline some of the critical aspects of effective persuasion.

Use Captivating Information

All persuasion begins with capturing attention. Without attention, persuasion is impossible. In a review of pamphlets and flyers produced by governmental agencies and utilities on energy conservation, Paul Stern and Elliot Aronson found that most of the reviewed materials did not meet this most basic requirement. The material reviewed was inconspicuous, boring or both.

How do we capture the attention of those we wish to persuade? While ideally we would like to sit them down at a very small corner table, where we know we have their undivided attention, we have to resort to other means. One of the most effective ways to ensure attention is to present information that is vivid, concrete and personalized.

There are a variety of ways in which information can be made vivid, concrete and personal. For example, in a home energy audit a home assessor might utilize the householder’s utility bills in describing money that is being lost by not retrofitting. Further, the assessor can provide information about similar people who have installed resource-conserving devices or describe “super-conservers” who have been exceptionally effective in reducing resource consumption.

The power of vividly presented information has been demonstrated in a unique experiment carried out in California. Marti Hope Gonzales and her colleagues trained nine of Pacific Gas and Electric’s home assessors to present information in a manner that was psychologically compelling (they were also trained to seek a commitment; see Chapter 3). Normally, assessors provide feedback to the householder regarding energy efficiency by noting the absence of insulation in a basement or attic, cracks around windows or doors, etc. However, in this study the assessors were trained to present this same information vividly. Below is an example of what the assessors were trained to say:

“You know, if you were to add up all the cracks around and under these doors here, you’d have the equivalent of a hole the size of a football in your living room wall. Think for a moment about all the heat that would escape from a hole that size. That’s why I recommend you install weatherstripping . . . . And your attic totally lacks insulation. We professionals call that a naked attic. It’s as if your home is facing winter not just without an overcoat, but without any clothing at all. (p. 1052)

Writing on the importance of presenting information vividly in home assessments, the authors state:

“Psychologically, a crack is seen as minor, but a hole the size of a football feels disastrous. The fact that they encompass the same area is of interest to an engineer; but in the mind of the average homeowner, the football will loom larger than the cracks under the door. Similarly, insulation is something with which most people lack experience, but the idea of a
naked attic in the winter is something that forces attention and increases the probability of action (p. 1052)."

Similarly, in describing the amount of waste produced annually by Californians, Shawn Burn at the California Polytechnic State University depicts the waste as "enough to fill a two-lane highway, ten feet deep from Oregon to the Mexican border." Clearly, her depiction is much more vivid than simply saying that Californians each produce 1,300 lbs. of waste annually.

Why is vivid information effective? Vivid information increases the likelihood that a message will be attended to initially, a process called encoding, as well as recalled later. That is, information that is vivid is likely to stand out against all the other information that is competing for our attention. Further, because it is vivid, we are more likely to remember the information at a later time. This last point is critical, since if the information is only remembered fleetingly, it is not likely to have any long-lasting impact upon our attitudes or behavior.

Suggestions for Presenting Information Vividly
- Research that has investigated public understanding of resource use demonstrates that the public has a poor understanding of household resource consumption. (5, 6) Householders grossly overestimate the resources used by visible devices such as lighting and greatly underestimate less visible resource consumption (e.g., water heaters and furnaces). Indeed, in one study homeowners were found to believe that lighting and hot water heaters consumed an equivalent amount of energy. This lack of understanding is reasonable, given the dearth of information that utility bills provide regarding home resource use. This void of information has been compared to going grocery shopping and discovering that none of the items that you wish to purchase have price tags. (7) All that you receive when you go through the checkout is a total for the items purchased. You are left on your own to estimate the cost of each item. To overcome this lack of information and the public’s bias toward visible sources of energy use, create a graph that shows the percentage of home energy use by item. Rather than using bars for the graph, instead replace each bar with a picture of the item itself (furnace, water heater, major appliances, lighting, etc.). By presenting information in this vivid format, you enable householders to clearly see where they should be putting most of their efforts to reduce energy use.
- To vividly portray the amount of waste generated by a community, consider using a well-known local landmark. For example, the amount of waste Toronto generates could be described relative to the SkyDome.
- Use brightly colored door-hangers rather than flyers or bill inserts. Flyers and bill inserts are frequently ignored. Door hangers that are well designed have a higher likelihood of being noticed.
- To bring attention to the amount of water that is used for lawn watering, prepare a chart like the one described above for energy use that depicts the amount of water consumed for lawn watering, showering, cooking, etc. Lawn watering will dwarf the other items.
- Life magazine recently vividly portrayed our consumptive lifestyles by taking all the possessions of an American family and placing them on the front lawn of their house. Next to this picture was a picture of a family from the Third World, once again with all of their possessions placed in front of their home. The contrast in lifestyles and the attendant
impacts upon the environment were blatant. In our society, differences in consumption between the wealthy and the poor can be similarly displayed.

Once you have found a way to gain the attention of your intended audience, you next need to consider who your audience is.

Know Your Audience

Before you craft the content of your message, and decide when and how you will present it, you need to know the attitudes, beliefs and behavior of your intended audience. In reality, rarely do you have just one audience. The messages that you develop will need to be tailored to the different segments of your community that you wish to reach. For example, a program to decrease the purchase of household hazardous waste (HHW) and increase the incidence of household hazardous waste being taken to a depot for disposal might target several different audiences. Preliminary research would need to determine if those who purchase HHW differ based upon the type of product (e.g., household cleaner versus motor oil). Further, you would need to know who would be most likely to collect HHW in the household and who would be most likely to take it to the depot.

Clearly, what is seemingly a relatively straightforward program has the potential to have multiple audiences for whom messages will need to be developed. To develop an effective program, therefore, you need to gather as much information as possible about the target audiences to determine how best you can communicate your messages to them. Gathering this type of information is frequently done through the use of surveys and focus groups (see Chapter 2).

A further reason for knowing your audience is provided by the following example. Imagine that you wish to advocate that people adopt simpler, less consumptive lifestyles. You need to know both how receptive people are to such a message as well as how many people would presently describe themselves as living such a lifestyle. A phone survey can be used to gather this information. Phone surveys and focus groups will also allow you to gauge the level of support for a variety of more and less extreme messages regarding less consumptive lifestyles. In doing this preliminary research, you are trying to find a message that has moderate support. Note that if you have the resources to target your message to different sectors of the community, you will need to determine the level of support within each of these sectors (e.g., the elderly, single parents, etc.). Why concern yourself with finding a message that has general support? Obviously, you don’t want a message that is fully supported, or you will simply be communicating what people already believe. However, you do not want to present a message that is too far removed from the beliefs of your audience. If your message is too extreme, your audience will actually become less, rather than more, supportive after hearing your message. In summary, then, you want to tailor your message so that it is slightly more extreme than the beliefs of your audience. Messages that are just slightly more extreme are likely to be embraced. Over time, it is possible to move people’s attitudes and beliefs a great deal. However, you will need to have the patience and resources to do this one small step at a time.