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# The Incidental Effect

Exploring New Methods in Behaviour Change

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## Draft for consultation

This paper asks far more questions than it answers and over the next year, We Are What We Do is going to run a series of interviews, consultation events and pieces of research and testing to try and get a little closer. If you would like to add to these questions or take part in any of these events, please feel free to e-mail [nick.stanhope@wearewhatwedo.org](mailto:nick.stanhope@wearewhatwedo.org).

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1.

# Introduction

## The man with the megaphone

Whether or not you agree with his mission, Philip Howard is a very, very dedicated man. Everyday, he gets up, packs some leaflets, a sandwich, a flask of tea, his bible and a megaphone and travels to a carefully selected street corner, where he knows a large number of people will pass him by. For most of the 1990s and 2000s, that spot was on the corner of Oxford Street and Regent Street in London, just at the top of the stairs of Oxford Circus tube station, and those passers by numbered 250,000 a day. As anyone that has been through Oxford Circus knows, especially during rush hour and over the weekend, it is slow going. It can take as much as 10 minutes to get from the steps leading up from the ticket office to 20m from the entrance, when Philip's megaphone tailed off. Deliberately I'm sure, he positioned himself in a congested funnel, where shoppers and commuters had little else to do but shuffle and listen to him.

For a few years, Oxford Circus happened to be part of my daily commute, so ten times a week, plus the odd weekend shopping trip, I got my fix of Philip's evangelism. The first few times, I was taken aback by the aggressiveness of it. He had a technique that often fixed on individuals during their awkward passage from or into the tube station and a couple of times that person was me<sup>1</sup>. He was harder to tune out than other interferences in London, like charity muggers or utility salesmen. The megaphone was obviously a factor, but the content of his messages were very emotive and personal. After a while, I started to look at the faces of passers-by. After a few conversations with people, while queuing up or down the stairs about Philip's presence (there's something about being judged by a man with a megaphone that makes people want to talk to strangers), it became clear that his impact on individuals was substantial. Given the number of individuals concerned, his cumulative effect was enormous.

About 100 short conversations and a couple of notebooks worth of quotes later, as well as reviewing plenty of blog coverage on Philip, it was unequivocal that his message wasn't being ignored – his first intention, recognition and recall of Christian messages (most famously, "Don't be a sinner, be a winner!"), was a success. However, it was also unequivocal that the collateral effect of his presence was highly counter-productive. Almost every single comment was negative and people claimed to be put off not just by the specific messages that he was carrying but everything that

they could associate with it – Christianity, the church, religion. What was needed at that point was a survey that could more thoroughly analyse the effect on the attitudes of passers-by, both immediately and over time. However, Philip moved on to find another busy street corner, so we'll have to track him down before we can make full conclusions on his impact. What can be taken out of this is that while Philip's messages intended to inspire and convert, there was clearly a massive discrepancy between these intentions and the overall effect. Over a year of Philip standing at the top of those stairs, we can estimate that he had around 750,000 hours of attention from passers-by, making the potential behavioural impact of this discrepancy pretty dramatic.

Philip's is an extreme example, unscientifically analysed, and it is well known that the character of the messenger and the style of their communications is as important as their content and intentions. It is also well understood that this kind of aggressive Christian evangelism is well out of date as a communications tool for the church. However, Philip represents something that, to some degree, affects a lot of social marketing: that the worthiness of its ambitions distract from the potentially counter-productive collateral of its methods. As a result, these campaigns have the potential to do more harm than good.

Environmental campaigning offers many similar examples and with around fifty years of climate change messages behind us, we find ourselves with worryingly high levels of active disengagement and cynicism in the UK. Defra's 2009 survey on environmental attitudes and behaviours found that 1 in 4 adults regard even the simplest green behaviours, such as recycling, part of an "alternative lifestyle" – a big segment of active rejection that sits alongside an even bigger segment of passive rejection. On the one hand, 74% of adults in the UK understand the relationship between climate change and human behaviour<sup>2</sup> and on the other hand the 'Greenwash Guide' research found that 90% of people mistrust corporate and government messages around the environment<sup>3</sup>. This discrepancy alone leads to some doubts about the way that the environmental issue has been conveyed and campaigned.

In public health, unintended effects of awareness campaigns are a well-known phenomenon. The work of Martin White, Jean Adams and Peter Hayward has systematically examined these effects, concluding that interventions based on public health messaging tend to widen health inequalities,<sup>4</sup> because they often fail to engage or shift the

1. Philip Howard also had formal complaints made about this approach, including a 2006 court case in which Stanislaw Was accused him of shouting: "Your hair's going grey, your skin's sagging and that's because you're a sinner. You are going to burn in hell." Mr Howard admitted that he "probably" made the comments, but the case was eventually dismissed.

2. "Public Perceptions of Climate Change and Energy Futures in Britain; Summary findings of a survey conducted from January to March 2010" Alexa Spence, Dan Venables, Nick Pidgeon, Wouter Poortinga and Christina Demski (ESRC 2010)

3. [http://www.futerra.co.uk/downloads/Greenwash\\_Guide.pdf](http://www.futerra.co.uk/downloads/Greenwash_Guide.pdf)

4. "How and why do interventions that increase health overall widen inequalities within populations", Martin White, Jean Adams and Peter Heywood, Chapter 5, Social Inequality and Public Health, edited by S.J. Babones, (Policy Press, Bristol, 2009)

behaviours of the audiences with lower levels of education and income. It's also been found that the promotion of behaviours that people see as overtly healthy, such as taking vitamin supplements or doing exercise, increases their unhealthy behaviours, such as smoking and eating sugary foods, as part of a personalised system of offsets.<sup>5</sup>

Within specific campaigns and more broadly across decades of information and calls to action, the history of public campaigning is littered with examples of collateral outcomes that are counter-productive to the initial intentions. Have the flaws in the methods of environmental campaigners been to blame for the failure of pro-environmental behaviours to take hold amongst mass audiences? Of course not. In fact, the passion, foresight and commitment of these campaigners have helped the issue of anthropomorphic climate change gain a place at (or near) the top table of national and global politics. Similarly, public health campaigns regularly raise overall levels of national health. However, what traditional megaphone methods have also done is fail to bring pro-environmental behaviours into mainstream culture or reach those whose health related behaviours are most damaging and whose NHS bills are highest. The immediate, direct effect of social communications are regularly undermined, and sometimes outweighed, by the more profound incidental effects.

## Skype me

Skype was launched in 2003 by Niklas Zennström from Sweden and Janus Friis from Denmark. By 2006 it had become the dominant 'Voice Over IP' service, with 100 million users around the world. By 2008, Skype was sold to Microsoft for \$8.5 billion and by September 2011 it had 663 million users. Unequivocally, an amazing commercial success story.

Skype was developed and marketed as a communications tool that would generate substantial profits and it has clearly done that. Incidentally, Skype is a powerful environmental product. Along with other video conferencing tools, it offers a viable alternative to business travel, a trend that has accelerated in the recent economic recession. In a 2010 survey, almost half of SMEs in the UK reported plans to increase their use of video conferencing and 59% expected to reduce their business travel as a result. Given that business flights account for around 10% of air travel and air travel accounts for 6.3% of all the UK's carbon emissions, this represents a significant contribution to efforts to reduce our impact on climate change. In the USA, over 440 million business flights are taken a year and similar (if so far, less well analysed) reports are emerging there on the effect of

video conferencing on business travel. If any environmental campaign had had this kind of reported impact on behaviours, we would have heard all about it. In Skype's 5,400 word Wikipedia entry, the words "environment" or "carbon" are not used once.

Skype was not created with an environmental mission in mind, but it has ended up playing a hugely positive role in affecting environmental behaviours. The product also contains other positive incidental effects – it increases communication across families and friends, simply and cheaply; it has allowed community organisations, social entrepreneurs and start-ups, with none of the original travel budgets to cut, to share ideas and collaborate in new ways; it has enabled classrooms to beam themselves into other classrooms around the world, providing a remarkable window into the lives of other children. None of these effects feature within Skype's marketing and, as the business continues to grow and make money for its new owners, it seems doubtful that they make any appearances at shareholder meetings. These benefits are incidental in almost every way.

## Looking for the incidentals

What is clear from an initial analysis of social marketing across a wide range of behavioural issues is that these campaigns look in the wrong place for the real potential to shift mass behaviour positively: within overtly social communications, rather than within the incidental facets of useful and desirable products.

Firstly, by integrating the catalysts for behaviour change within these incidental facets, rather than within the top layers of communications, we can substantially reduce the risk of those communications, and therefore the new behaviours, being rejected. As this paper explores, behaviour change communications face inherent challenges, which can be reduced or totally avoided. Sometimes, it really is best to say nothing at all.

Secondly, behaviour change provoked by incidental forces within consumer products<sup>6</sup> is often more profound. While Philip Howard's messages were a temporary nuisance and while the latest "save the planet" campaign covers a billboard for a week, Skype is being used and enjoyed by millions of people everyday. Messages are, by their nature, transitory, superficial, external influences on individuals, while products can be more sustained, valued, internalised influences.

5. "Vitamin pills can lead you to take health risks", by Ben Goldacre, Guardian 2011; "Health Warning: Exercise makes you fat", Ben Goldacre, 2009, Guardian.

6. "Products", here and throughout the paper, is used to describe any consumer offering – products, tools, services and experiences.

Finally, behaviours within a successful product are also sustainable and transferable. One of the main risks of traditional campaigning is that the content of the messages becomes “infected” by the campaign vehicle or its methods. These negative associations are not only enduring but can also be transferred to anything that resembles that vehicle. The way that so many environmental behaviours are immediately pigeonholed and dismissed as “hippy-ish” is a prominent example. However, when new behaviours become incidental to a product experience that is useful, enjoyable and credible, the popular associations with those behaviours change. These new associations have the potential to be transferred onto similar behaviours.

At the heart of this paper is a practical process, which aims to deliberately increase the number and deepens the impact of the incidental benefits of products - that are designed and marketed for a mass consumer audience and can contain natural incentives for new behaviours.

This process has two main applications:

1. Fostering a form of socially-minded creativity, which puts positive social motivations at the top of the brief, but has them deeply ingrained by the time they reach the consumer experience - incidental to far more compelling incentives. Through this new breed of creativity, there is the potential to fill the world with more and more of these types of products – that people buy and use in their millions and which compete alongside, even outperform, products born from solely commercial aspirations, indistinguishable in their intentions, but profoundly positive in their effect.
2. Helping organisations allow the positive incidental benefits of their products and services to flourish. Companies often fail to realise the potential of their core business activity to affect their consumers behaviour in relation to social issues, rather than just commercially. Instead, there is a tendency to create a separate silo of CR programmes, which offer easy PR opportunities but only an ounce of the potential social outcomes. Business has the tools of mass behaviour change at its disposal and we intend for our approach to help unlock that.

Ultimately, forces and influences that appear naturally within people’s lives are substantially more powerful and sustainable than openly contrived, external interventions. In modern consumer society, the source of many of these natural influences is within consumer products and, by creating or uncovering more products that contain positive incidental effects, we can have more powerful and sustainable influences on human behaviour.

2.

# Lessons

## Lessons from social psychology and sociology

That messaging should play a less prominent role in efforts to affect mass behaviour has become an accepted part of modern social marketing<sup>7</sup>. Although old habits cling to life, the limits of a purely rational, information-based approach has been articulated well and often over the last few years. Founded upon the pioneering work of social psychologists like Amos Tversky and Daniel Kahneman and physiologists such as Benjamin Libet, recent books like *Predictably Irrational*, *The Tipping Point*, *The Paradox of Choice* and many other successful titles have popularised a way of explaining human behaviour that has been an instinctive part of consumer marketing for fifty years: our decisions are affected more often and more profoundly by subconscious, emotional influences than by conscious, rational forces. However, where consumer marketing has used our brain's soft underbelly to sell toilet paper and insurance policies with pictures of naked people, others have sought more progressive applications. Most recently, Cass Sunstein and Richard Thaler's *Nudge* has taken us all a step further by applying it to the integration of positive behavioural prompts and defaults within existing services and experiences.

One of the reasons why the *Nudge* thesis is so compelling is that it equips those who want to make people's lives healthier, happier and longer with a rich vein of potential to do so. They also assert that exploiting this potential is a legitimate ambition of institutions in the private and public sectors<sup>8</sup>, stirring not a little debate about the risks and limits of this "liberal paternalism"<sup>9</sup>. It's worth bearing in mind, within this debate, that consumer brands have been effective "choice architects" for a very long time, designing every inch and every second of our consumer experiences and applying the science of profit maximisation at every point. For more socially progressive forces to start to work more prominently at this sub-conscious level is, for many, the ultimate no-brainer.

The other major influence on this paper, from within sociology, examines the relationship between levels of social capital and civic engagement in communities. Robert Putnam's pioneering work on social capital, most famously articulated in his study on the Italian-American town of Roseto, Pennsylvania<sup>10</sup> and then *Bowling Alone*<sup>11</sup>, establishes that high levels of social capital in communities, as marked by associational life, trust and shared behavioural norms, correlate strongly with the capacity of that community

to mitigate negative personal and communal outcomes and propagate positive ones. In other words, flourishing community life fosters all the positive behaviours that we spend so much time talking about.

The combination of these two theses is very powerful. From behavioural economics, we see that individual behaviours can often be shifted more effectively with subconscious prompts and nudges and that the most powerful sources of these influences are social. From the work of sociologists such as Putnam and David Halpern, we see that the most pervasive source of progressive, communal behaviours are within communities that reinforce constructive, progressive social norms. Therefore, within a process that helps people create or exploit incidental outcomes, there is a combination of short-term and long-term outcomes, measured by immediate changes in behaviours and sustained growth in social capital.

## Lessons from good corporate responsibility

Although this paper is focussed on the incidental behavioural effects of products, good corporate sustainability has been highlighting other forms of business collateral as the most important and powerful priorities of corporate responsibility strategies for some time. This resource based collateral covers areas such as the environmental footprint of production and distribution, the ethical implications of supply chains and the social effects of human resource policy.

Either coming from within the company or from outside counsel, this attention to the collateral effects of day-to-day business activities, has, in some cases, become more of a priority than community, charitable or environmental programmes tacked onto the side of these activities and which attempt to offset them. We hope that this trend continues, not least because it encourages businesses to examine all of the incidental effects of their work, both on resources and on consumer behaviours.

7. Dating back to Marchall McLuhan's 1964 iconic phrase "the medium is the message" from his book "Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man", 1964.

8. "Nudge: Improving Decisions About Health, Wealth, and Happiness", Richard H Thaler and Cass R Sunstein (Penguin, 2009), p7

9. Ibid, p6

10. "Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Modern Italy", Robert Putnam, Robert Leonardi and Raffaella Nanetti (1993)

11. "Bowling Alone Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community", Robert Putnam (Simon & Schuster, 2000)



3.

# Motivations for new approaches

## Why asking people to do the “right thing” is so hard

An interesting strand of recent work in behavioural economics analyses the circumstances that produce rational, logical decisions and those which inspire downright stupid, counter productive ones. Dan Ariely’s study on the affect of sexual arousal on male decisions is particularly good on the latter types of decisions, with normally sensibly-minded participants showing a predilection for choices that would put them in jail amongst the blur of arousal<sup>12</sup>. Levitt and Dubner’s study on price sensitivity is equally revealing, if a little less dramatic, and shows how easily we are confused by different types of information and incentive, quick to abandon all the logical principles we had been applying to our finances a moment before<sup>13</sup>.

Regarding the decisions that lead to some of the personal, social and environmental issues that affect society most, this work helps us understand that they are often the decisions we find it hardest to take rationally: the immediate emotional rewards of eating another nice cake or the ease of jumping into a car again to take a trip round the corner are much more powerful than the intangible, long-term rewards of avoiding them. Ultimately, the organisations and institutions that take responsibility for telling people not to eat this second cake or get into the car are up against their instincts. This is compounded by the way that these instincts are lauded and encouraged by consumer marketing. Consumers are likely to find slogan’s like “The best way to wash down a burger is with another burger”<sup>14</sup> on nine out of ten billboards and on the tenth would be the lone voice on healthy eating. And if nine billboards are telling them what they want to hear, then not only is it easy to ignore the tenth, but there they’re also more likely to resent and reject it.

Within this environment, constructive behavioural messages face an inherent credibility crisis. For those that find themselves arbiters of society’s moral compass and then demand that we readjust our decisions, establishing and maintaining credibility is a major problem. This problem, in turn, dramatically undermines their efforts to help people take more responsibility for the consequences of their behaviour. As a result, we remain stumped by social problems that hold back or threaten the future of our society, but which could be transformed by relatively minor shifts in everyday behaviours.

One response is to try and better understand the nature of credibility and the reason why these “forces of good” so rarely accumulate very much within the cultural mainstream of our society. That society has become more apathetic and ignorant is an easy, lazy conclusion and produces easy, lazy answers: shout more loudly about rights and responsibilities,

vilify the next generation and buy more ad space for guilt-inducing messages.

A harder conclusion is that, when it comes to channelling the behaviour of millions of people living in a shared society in order to produce sustainable benefits for the whole of that society and our environment, just using that that tenth billboard to compete, or the bottom right hand corner of some of the other nine, isn’t enough.

## The problem with passion

So what’s wrong with just being passionate and honest? All this talk of cognitive irrationality is very well, but when the issues that need addressing are hugely important and the behaviours that affect them often irresponsible, why should governments, NGOs and campaigners be covering their intentions in disguises, rather than shouting them from the hills?

Most organisations that are working to affect our behaviour around a particular issue, such as increasing exercise to reduce obesity, are defined by their convictions. Many of these organisations are born out of strong social beliefs, perceived injustices or a desire to address a particular need. Even when the motivation for action is more practical, like reducing the national health budget, the individuals that step up to work on solutions are normally socially conscious and passionate.

Given how inspiring these motivations are, it does not seem right to question them. However, while passion and conviction are absolutely vital to this work, if they are not filtered and channelled in the right way, they can have a counter-productive effect on methods and outcomes. Philip Howard gets up everyday, filled with passion, but in terms of meeting his objectives, he would be better off staying in bed.

Firstly, convictions can make social marketing less scientific and more instinctive, sometimes with positive results, but sometimes not. Take the relationship between obesity and under-exercise as an example. This is a good, worthy cause taken up many times by many different evangelists and organisations. Most importantly, it feels right and arms campaigns with something apparently unequivocal to articulate their convictions. However, it is based on some assumptions that are often left unquestioned.

There are many reasons why we should all be more active, but the correlation between exercise and obesity is not strong: studies have been showing for some time that,

12. “Predictable Irrationality” Dan Ariely (Harper Collins, 2009)

13. “Freakonomics; A rogue economist explores the hidden side of everything” (Harper, 2009)

14. Carl’s Jnr fast food restaurants, 2010 slogan, USA

particularly amongst children, reduced exercise is a symptom of weight gain more than the other way round<sup>15</sup>. Behind these conclusions is the logic that the energy expended through manageable amounts of exercise cannot compete with the energy density of the calorie rich, high carbohydrate foods that we are surrounded by – just one bacon sandwich with white bread, for example, is the equivalent to one hour of football in terms of calories. But the idea that fat people are fat because they are lazy, feels right.

Perhaps the most high profile and controversial example of this tension is around third world poverty and development aid. Much of this is based on the risky assumption that development aid is an effective way of helping third world countries escape cycles of poverty. 60 years and \$1 trillion later, many are arguing that this approach may be engraining the behaviours, particularly at a government level, that condemn these countries to these cycles<sup>16</sup>.

This paper isn't the place to cover all the arguments on this vastly complex issue, but it's a clear example of a question that hasn't been asked enough: how big is the discrepancy between the good intentions and the actual effects on behaviours?

Secondly, these passions and ideals can make those leading behavioural campaigns wishy-washy and over optimistic and lead to the assumption that people, in their hearts, are actually "like them" and can be united around the issues that society faces.

Amongst the roots of all these social problems there is a complex web of influences - big socio-economic shifts, long-standing cultural heritage, the effects of government and corporate policy and the daily behaviours of millions of people – all interdependent and interacting in an almost infinite number of ways. The way that these problems affect individuals, communities and society is also complex. The relationship between those responsible for them and those affected by them is never clear.

Within modern society, this disconnect between cause and effect has become more prominent as production and distribution has become globalised and as local associational life has disintegrated<sup>17</sup>. Almost everything we do has a million tiny layers of impact beyond our view, touching people we'll never meet and places we'll never see all over the world. To get on with our own lives, we have to disregard this complexity: we have to see buying a can of coke as a way to quench our thirst and throwing it away as giving us back a free hand.

A regular feature of social and environmental behaviour change campaigns is the belief that consumers can all

engage with this complexity and be united by these issues - either by being inspired to see the greater good and take collective responsibility or, more pragmatically, because everyone has to pay some kind of price for them, whether through taxation, reduced security or lost opportunities. However, disengagement with the effects of our everyday behaviour is not a short-term symptom of ignorance or apathy, it's an inevitable consequence of the chasm between tangible causes and effects in modern society. So, rallying cries around social problems, in reality, rarely bring people closer together and we don't feel "all in it together".

Thirdly, when these convictions are not filtered and channelled in the right way, they come across as righteous and judgemental. There is an inherent judgement in behaviour change messages that gives those delivery campaigns a tough starting point: the campaigns have to be directed at someone that isn't doing what they should be, by someone that thinks they know better.

Most social and environmental campaigns use a combination of four main ingredients: guilt, inspiration/motivation, information and support. The Change4Life campaign is an example of rigorous adherence to these tenants and a typical poster would include all four – guilt: "Hands up who wants our kids to live longer" (or "keep your hand down if you want to be a bad parent") b) inspiration/motivation: "So we'd better get moving!" (with one to five exclamation marks), c) information: "9 out of 10 of our kids will grow up to have dangerous amounts of fat in their bodies" d) support: "To join us and find out more, why not start by moving your mouse and searching...". In these campaigns, the copy is well written, the plasticine men well groomed and the colour palettes eye-catching. However, they all contain a judgement of how we're all bringing up our children, how we're doing our shopping, how we're spending our leisure time and, as justified as many of these criticisms are, we just don't like being judged by the government.

The Change4Life campaign has been accounting for quite a few of those tenth billboards recently, as well as appearing on the bottom right hand corner of a few of the other nine. Despite its traditional features and limitations, it still plays an important role. It's vital that this voice exists within this landscape and, although it will gain little ground on the much more dominant forces that define our eating and living habits, this voice should never disappear. This also applies to all of the other social marketing campaigns that occasionally interrupt, or feature within, commercially motivated marketing.

However, for every public, message-based appearance of these campaigns, there should be a hundred appearances that no-one ever knows about. Nudge provides us with a

15. "Fatness leads to inactivity, but inactivity does not lead to fatness: a longitudinal study in children", Metcalf, B.S, Hosking, J, Jerrery, A.N, Voss, L.D, Henley, W and Wilkin, T.J. (Archives of Disease in Childhood, 2010)

16. "Dead Aid: Why Aid Is Not Working and How There Is Another Way for Africa", Dambisa Moyo (Penguin, 2010)

17. "Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community", Robert Putnam (Simon & Schuster, 2000)

means to populate existing services with these behind-the-scenes appearances and this approach aims to foster another, complementary method, which generates new products and tools that, while being enjoyed and used for their function and desirability, facilitate deliberately designed, incidental behaviours.

4.

Working  
towards  
a new  
approach

## Entertaining incidentals

The first and best place to look for evidence of the success of this kind of creative approach is in entertainment, where positive behavioural prompts have always been working their magic from within the narrative, far more effectively than when they nestle on top or, even worse, take centre stage.

Malcolm Gladwell's *Blink* looks at the impact of *The Day After Tomorrow* on levels of awareness on the east coast of the USA of climate change, as compared to the effect of concurrent environmental campaigns<sup>18</sup>. The former provoked a major spike, whereas the latter barely registers a murmur from mainstream audiences. Perhaps this is more to do with how dramatic, scientifically ropery environmental messages are always going to get through better than more balanced information that demand personal responsibility to be taken. However, despite questions about the ultimate value of *The Day After Tomorrow's* impact on public awareness<sup>19</sup>, it is still a helpful example. One of these two types of environmental communication was something that a very large number of people wanted to see and enjoyed - *The Day After Tomorrow* took \$544,272,402 at the box office. Therefore, the appetitive and openness of this audience to new information was substantially heightened. *The Day After Tomorrow* neither judged nor tested its audiences, it just entertained them and, from within this entertainment, were basic messages about anthropomorphic climate change that got through to people.

A more subtle example with more to learn from is *Toy Story 3*. First and foremost, the film was almost universally loved. Rolling Stone said that *Toy Story 3* "hits every button from laughter to tears and lifts you up on waves of visual dazzlement" and the Guardian calls it "an effortlessly superior family movie". I've seen it four times and only one of those was under the pretence of taking some friends' children to the cinema. It's funny, sad, engrossing and heart warming – everything you want from the end of a long week.

*Toy Story 3* is also packed with very positive, constructive examples of everyday human behaviour and messages of environmental value. Not in a traditional Disney way either, when audiences often get smacked over the head about beauty being on the inside and if you wish hard enough your dreams will come true. These are all real, normal, good everyday things: Andy, now as a 17 year old, is supportive of his little sister and his mum, contributes to his community and doesn't come across as a dork in doing either; our toy-shaped heroes join the journey of household waste as it heads off to the dump, bringing to life the complex and vast processes at work, without a righteous environmental peep out of anyone; we see, over and over, the importance of passing things on rather than throwing things away (although

Disney does rather undermine this by selling an awful lot of new Buzz Lightyears) and there are many, many more.

Overall, we are left with a piece of entertainment that does not make any overt, contrived efforts to affect our behaviour positively and yet it does, infinitely more effectively than something that shouts righteously about these kinds of behaviours rather than integrating them seamlessly into an appealing narrative – millions more people watch and, when they do, much more lands.

A lot can be learnt from this approach within entertainment and this kind of intelligent, socially-minded creativity will hopefully become more prevalent. If half of every effort to integrate a product into entertainment was made to integrate a positive, everyday behaviour, people, and children in particular, would be walking out of cinemas and getting off sofas with more positive behavioural standards and norms, rather than just a latent appetite for more Cheese Strings and an Audi test drive. Unfortunately, a rather depressing new trend is emerging within marketing that no doubt draws cleverly on the incidental effects of entertainment, but ultimately aims to take product placement step further – right into the narrative. A soon to be launched US TV series about a young professional footballer in Mexico City, *El Diez*, will see consumer brands woven into the storyline, on top of the standard advertising spots during breaks. This trend, called branded entertainment or branded integration, can only mean bad things for the viewer. And more *Sex and the City* sequels.

Entertainment has a vital role in covering our walls with constructive examples of everyday behaviours. Whether or not it has the capacity or the appetite to play this role in anything other than isolated examples is another question.

## Things to do, not just things to look at

While these lessons from entertainment in the value of non-focal social messages are important, they only give us half the picture. When it comes to directly affecting everyday behaviours, the power of tangible outputs – products, tools and services - to facilitate behavioural shifts, rather than just exemplify them, is more compelling and one of the sources of evidence for this is in *We Are What We Do's* work.

This work began in 2004 with the launch of *Change the World for a Fiver*. The book, featuring 50 simple ideas for positive everyday behaviours, has sold over a million copies

18. "Blink: The Power of Thinking Without Thinking", Malcolm Gladwell (Penguin, 2006)

19. Marshall Shepherd, a research meteorologist at the NASA Goddard Space Flight Center said "I'm heartened that there's a movie addressing real climate issues. But as for the science of the movie, I'd give it a D minus or an F."



around the world. It was sold on the high street, passed on to friends and colleagues, bought as Christmas presents for more friends and colleagues, and used in thousands of schools around the UK and Australia in particular. What proved popular was the simplicity of the ideas and the non-righteous tone of voice and it was clear, after our initial success, that there were lots of places that we could put these quirky, stylish behavioural messages with a good reception – posters, calendars, short animated clips, two more books and several websites.

The work was packaging traditionally complex, righteous issues as light entertainment and, through this, generating new interest in them. But was it generating new behaviours?

The approach was designed to go through a series of linear steps: people would enjoy the materials, for all sorts of reasons – a quirky tone of voice, striking stats and facts, pictures of cartoon characters having sex in the bath – they would be prompted into a simple action – turning off the tap when they next brushed their teeth or giving blood that afternoon – and, by finding this idea amongst a world of other ideas, they would take on more and gradually join up the dots into a conscious realisation of the power of their everyday behaviour. They would then apply this new lens to everything they did, thinking and acting differently.

This did happen, all the way through, amongst the members of the active community and an increase in awareness of social and environmental issues and a good recall of the individual actions within our wider audience was evident. However, there was also very low correlation between that awareness and sustained changes in new behaviours. In fact, the drop-off rate was enormous. This trend didn't just show up in this research. Michael Norton, following up his successful *365 Ways to Change the World*, found exactly the same drop-off rates in his testing on council estates in London.

While We Are What We Do's work remains rooted in a strong correlation between the everyday behaviours of millions of people and the social and environmental issues that define our quality of life and our sustainability, it has accumulated serious doubts about the role of message-based materials, even popular, entertaining ones, to affect these behaviours in any tangible, sustainable way. So, it has shifted the balance away from communications and towards practical facilitation – things to do, rather than things to read and watch.

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## The difference between perceptions and associations

One of the major attractions of awareness campaigns is that they appear to offer longer-term benefits than direct

facilitation of new behaviours. For example, once someone understands the relationship between recycling and climate change then this new understanding can be applied again and again, to many different decisions in different settings. More broadly, if someone starts to see all of their behaviours and actions differently, via a shift in perception, then this can be applied to all of their decisions and behaviours, affecting a wide range of issues. The idea of filling the world with inspired, socially aware individuals taking responsibility for their everyday actions and contributing positively to issues not only sounds hugely worthwhile, it also sounds like good value for money – inspire once, save again and again.

This paper explores the limitations of communications to foster new behaviours and draws on the work of social psychologists and behavioural economists to do that, as well as examples from social marketing. This would seem to suggest that, by using products that facilitate new behaviours at an incidental level, each behaviour on each occasion has to be affected individually and independently. However, much of the power of the incidental effect lies in the sustained power of positive associations and positive reinforcement.

Very simply, and drawing on the near universally accepted work of the behaviourist B.F. Skinner, when positive associations become attached to certain behaviours, these behaviours become more likely and more regular. So, by embedding new behaviours within products that people find useful and desirable, these behaviours become associated with the positive emotions triggered when using and enjoying these products.

We Are What We Do's *I'm Not a Plastic Bag* project in 2007 provided a good example of this. By itself, the 80,000 bags sold around the world were never going to facilitate a significant number of new behaviours around plastic bags usage. By traditional awareness standards, the project also looked like a short-term, superficial hit: every metric that was used to measure consumers' engagement with the environmental mission of the project showed that the vast majority did not engage in any meaningful way. People stood in queues for six hours outside Sainsbury's to buy the bag and every media outlet in the world covered it because it became a must-have fashion accessory. The bag could just have easily been part of the latest haute-couture designer collection at Topshop. However, the way that it was sold and the way that it was discussed in the media – and the fact that it said *I'm Not a Plastic Bag* on the side – meant that people associated using it with environmental behaviours, even if it was used more often for mobile phones and purses than potatoes and carrots. The ongoing tracking of media coverage between 2007-09 and ongoing analysis of consumer behaviours in partnership with Sainsbury's, showed that this associational effect was sustained. In 2006, the idea of carrying your own tote bag to the supermarket was regarded as a niche, alternative behaviour. By 2009, it had different associations, caught up with mainstream popular culture, celebrities and high street credibility.

5.

Applying the  
incidental  
effect



## Harnessing the incidental effect to create new products

The first way that this approach can be applied is through a creative process that sees the behaviour change aims move from the primary features of public communications to the secondary or totally hidden features of a new product. This process is made up of three main phases:

- i) Analysing the issues and behaviours
- ii) Developing products that contain natural behavioural incentives
- iii) Marketing these products with a competitive advantage

At the heart of this method is the premise is that if the aim is to reduce irresponsible behaviours and increase positive social, environmental and health behaviours, then creating something that people want to use, rather than something that people don't want to hear, will significantly boost the potential to reach more people, directly affect their behaviours and sustain new habits.

### i) Analysing the issues and identifying the behaviours

The first stage of developing new products that will have new behaviours embedded within them resembles the first stage of developing a communications campaign that will aim to raise awareness: a detailed analysis of the problem in hand and the behaviours that affect it. However, armed with a better understanding of the powerful underlying forces at work, this analysis is able to become more sophisticated and help to overcome some of the traditional limitations of behaviour change campaigns.

Obesity, despite its impact on the health and tax bills of millions of people, is still often analysed with little attention to these underlying forces. An initial analysis of behaviours leads to obvious conclusions: people are not making the right choices in their lives. Within this analysis, a series of poor decisions can be easily identified – buying high fat products in the supermarket, eating high carbohydrate snacks throughout the day, choosing high sugar drinks from the machine, eating calorie-rich take-away food, not taking enough regular exercise and choosing driving over walking or cycling. These conclusions, based predominantly on good science, can then be translated into information, motivation and support to help people make better decisions. According to this world view, people do not really understand the implications of their decisions or what the healthier alternatives are, so, as well as targeted information

to increase this understanding, they are also offered a series of alternatives.

Public availability of this information and access to these alternatives has an important role to play. However, these messages are also very limited in their potential to genuinely tackle the problem in hand. Ultimately, the production, distribution and marketing of food in our society has undergone a transformation. Superficially, these changes seem to have dramatically increased and improved the choices available to the consumer. However, although the number of decisions we can make about what we consume has increased, along with the net availability of healthy foods, the traditional campaigner's idea of choice does not really exist, practically or culturally. The underlying forces in mainstream culture are lined up to make everyday life unhealthy.

Woodgrange and Upton Roads are fairly typical inner city streets, if with higher levels of deprivation and lower levels of income than average, located as they are in the London Borough of Newham in the east of London. Within a few hundred metres of these streets are 14 schools attended by 7,000 students and, with Forest Gate train station at the north end of Woodgrange Road and many bus routes running up and down it, they are walked by thousands of young people everyday, often with a few pounds in their pocket and a craving for something tasty and filling, for breakfast, break-time, dinner or tea. Along this route, there are 16 fast food outlets, all of which sell high fat, high salt, high sugar, high carbohydrate food for very little money. Also on these roads are 17 newsagents, stocking almost exclusively unhealthy snacks and sweets.

Many of these outlets do have healthy options, such as salads and fruit stands, and there are some other outlets on the streets selling predominantly healthy foods. So, on paper, there are choices available for these students to make and it could follow that by both raising awareness of these alternatives and trying to boost their availability and visibility, healthier behaviours can be encouraged. However, there are several major problems with this.

Firstly, these alternatives are exactly that – alternative. As we have established, social prompts provide the most powerful behavioural influences and our choice of food is no different. The dominant cultural norm on the Woodgrange and Upton Roads, as it is in most other similar communities, is deep-fried chicken, burgers, chips, crisps, sweets and fizzy drinks. This is what friends and peers buy, this is what much loved brands sell, this is what celebrities endorse. The alternatives, as bought by no peers, sold by no favourite brands and endorsed by a government health campaign rather than athletic looking footballers, are not really a choice at all.

Secondly, by prompting people to look for healthy options, we open them up to many different interpretations of "healthy", most of which are defined and promoted by food

brands with a lot more ad spend than public awareness campaigns. During our research on this issue in the east of London, we asked some students to go out and find the items that they would buy if they were “trying to avoid putting on weight”, from the newsagents on Woodgrange and Upton roads. They returned with a flapjack (15g sugar per 100g; 26g fat per 100g), a Nutri-grain bar (32g sugar per 100g), a low fat yogurt (17.9g sugar per 100g) and a fruit smoothie (14.6g sugar per 100g). All seemingly good choices and all with “healthy” credentials on the packaging and within the advertising, but all have very similar effects on weight gain<sup>20</sup> as items that would have been chosen without this criteria, like crisps and biscuits. Even more confusingly for the consumer, fruit, while being a vital part of any healthy daily diet, contains fructose sugars, which have a slightly larger effect on blood sugar levels than the same quantities of glucose, used in most processed snack foods.<sup>21</sup>

Traditionally, those responsible for improving issues such as obesity have regarded it as a symptom of individual choices, when in fact it is a by-product of our society’s source code: “from television advertising to the pricing of food, our society works in a way that discourages people from adopting healthy habits.<sup>22</sup>” If we want to affect the issue then we can’t just nag the end users – we have to get in there and put things within that source code. So, the conclusion of a comprehensive behavioural analysis that recognises the defining role of underlying social forces, would identify a series of everyday behaviours and set out to make them a natural part of mainstream cultural norms, rather than an alternative.

## ii.) Developing products that contain natural behavioural incentives

While many social issues have their roots in profound social changes and realities, this does not mean that they, or the behaviours that sustain them, are inevitable. In fact, modern consumer culture has proved that our behaviours are extremely malleable. At this moment, there are people sitting at home, wearing 3D glasses, watching a new 3D TV that replaced their very slightly older HD TV, which replaced their very slightly older flatscreen TV, which replaced their very slightly older widescreen TV. Within a year, many will be buying Super Hi-Vis 3D TVs. What millions of people spend their money on has proved almost completely up for grabs. Just eight years ago, Facebook was just a twinkle in Mark Zuckerberg’s eye. Now, over 800 million people spend over 7 hours a month on the social network. Something invented and launched barely a blink ago, now fills almost 6 billion

hours of human activity a month. What millions of people spend their time doing has also proved almost completely up for grabs. The aim of the incidental effect is to harness the extraordinary power of products in today’s world.

Setting out to develop the next piece of ubiquitous TV technology or establish the most popular, most profitable social network in the world is not within reach of many, however, developing a product that people find enjoyable, useful or both, certainly is. This usefulness and desirability provides the top layer of the product, which is reflected in the marketing, which in turn defines the product in the eyes of the consumer and which generates credibility. Positive new behaviours can then be built into the consumer experience at a secondary level. This process varies enormously from issue to issue and from behaviour to behaviour and this paper is not meant to be a guide to good product design, which is done very well in other places<sup>23</sup>, but the development of a product with incidental behavioural features can apply a series of common principles:

Starting with a blank sheet – if the aim is to create the most effective vehicle for new behaviours, then that means that nothing can be discounted and any kind of product that people will find useful and/or enjoyable is on the table: retail products, digital tools, services, outlets, live experiences etc.

Addressing a need – at the heart of this approach is a profound belief that relying on inspiration and idealism represents too high a risk given the importance of the issues that we have to affect. In a product that clearly and effectively addresses a need, this risk is substantially reduced. Ultimately, the incidental effect accompanies genuine usefulness and desirability and the more useful and desirable the product is, the more incidental potential it contains.

Mass potential – affecting the behaviours of those small, niche audiences that are on the look out for ways to be greener and more ethical is not what this approach is designed for. Products need to be scalable, so that the behaviours within them can be too. A caveat to this would be a product that effectively addresses the need of a narrow audience, which can, in turn, affect the behaviours of a mass audience (such as a high quality information service for journalists).

Marketable by use, not by good – as Alex Bogusi and John Winsor illustrate in the very useful *Baked In*, good product design builds in the features that will market it. Just because this process also “bakes in” behavioural prompts that will not appear within the primary marketing, doesn’t mean that it shouldn’t be using this intelligent approach to its main, consumer-facing facets.

20. All of these products would be considered “high in sugar” the Food Standards Agency; detailed analysis of the relationship between sugar intake and weight gain in “Why We Get Fat: And What to Do About It”, Gary Taubes (Knopf, 2010)

21. Ibid

22. Professor Martin Wiseman, chief medical advisor for World Cancer Research Fund, quoted in the Metro Newspaper, 7th September, 2011

23. There are few better places to look than the Design Council for this best practice: <http://www.designcouncil.org.uk/publications/>

Responsible and ethical development – as has been looked at, there are many layers to the collateral impact of a product, across its environmental footprint, the ethics of its supply chain, its employment practices, its role within the community and many more. Aiming for a positive or neutral impact in all of these areas is essential for products that also contain incidental behaviours, otherwise there is a risk of offsetting the good collateral with the bad. As the next section explores, some of these standards may become “bonus” features of the product’s marketing.

100-year ambitions – unlikely as that life cycle is, building in financial sustainability and growth potential is vital, because the most effective behavioural influences are those that have become a natural, regular part of millions of people’s everyday lives – part of the furniture.

We Are What We Do’s own Historypin project is a digital product that has been designed as an enjoyable, useful way to share and explore historical content. Everything that defines it to a large and growing community of users is based on this enjoyment and the product is marketed as a communally-built time machine. Built into Historypin are a series of behaviours and new associations that thrive on the back of this excitement – if you want to take part, then you inevitably have to reach out to someone older in your life, not through obligation, but through genuine interest; if you are lead to explore and contribute to scenes, sights and stories from within the history of your area, then you are inevitably lead to develop a deeper connection with that place and its people; the existence of rich local historical content online provides an inevitable pull for older people to come online, reducing the negative perceptions of the internet that feed digital exclusion.

### iii) Marketing these products

If the product development process has been a success and the product contains new behaviours then the marketing of that product can be completely focussed on accumulating mainstream credibility by demonstrating its usefulness and desirability. At this stage, marketing agencies come into their own – they are the ultimate credibility generators. However, despite rooting these marketing efforts in how the product addresses individual needs, rather than idealism, this does not mean that the positive collateral that lies within cannot give it a competitive advantage amongst an audience of more engaged stakeholders: partners, the media and a community of fans.

Firstly, every new product needs partners and resources, from investors to team members to agencies, and the social mission of that product can help establish different terms, rates and relationships. As the extraordinary growth of social

entrepreneurship over the last twenty years has shown, the combination of a good business idea and a strong social mission is more appealing to many stakeholders, particularly socially-minded venture capitalists, than traditional charitable solutions, which rely purely on traditional philanthropy.

Secondly, when it comes to marketing products with lower ad spend than standard commercial offerings, the media plays a vital role. At first look, the landscape does not look especially hospitable. While the media has become increasingly dominated by commercial forces, from owners with purely financial motivations to PR agencies that wield more and more influence on behalf of their paying clients, it also tends to stick to a traditional style of support for a traditional style of social campaign. However, this wouldn’t do the modern journalist justice and, in fact, the appetite for new solutions to age-old problems is strong. If you speak to journalists, and not just those within the overtly liberal media, they are also as sick of both the undiluted commerciality that now defines much of their work and the “save the Africans” stuff that gets churned out around Christmas. Projects that combine mainstream consumer appeal with an intelligent social mission can have a different kind of conversation that many journalists, personally and professionally, find a breath of fresh air.

Finally, although this approach asserts that usefulness and desirability are the primary pull for a mass audience of consumers and therefore the primary facets of marketing efforts, there are those that will engage directly with the social mission and there are many others that will engage with it secondarily – as the product becomes a useful, enjoyable part of their lives. Both of these audiences are likely to provide a pool of ambassadors and “mavens”, as Malcolm Gladwell describes them in *Tipping Point*<sup>24</sup>. The key to attracting issue-aware consumers and building this community of socially-motivated ambassadors has been intelligent design, which uses a series of subtle signals that the right consumers find at the right moment. This is exactly how major brands use ethical marks on their products: rather than letting them define their product (and drastically reduce their potential audience), they use them as low key badges that stick out for ethically sensitive shoppers: Fairtrade, FSC, Freedom Foods and charity donations, for example. Products with an incidental behavioural mission can harness similar audiences in similar ways, probably alongside these ethical credentials that have also been built in.

Innocent Smoothies is an example of a brand that has created a special place in the market by leading with what the consumer wants most from a drink, a tasty, credible product, and complementing this with a series of clear healthy, ethical and environmental signals that appeal strongly to certain audiences and provide an attractive

24. “The Tipping Point: How Little Things Can Make a Big Difference”, Malcolm Gladwell (Abacus 2001)

backdrop for many more. A mainstream appeal has incentivised new behaviours that help people get a good chunk of their 5-a-day and generated new associations with fruit that can inform other decisions and habits. Where Innocent's social mission sat within the pecking order of its founding objectives is hard to tell, but it is clear that it has been built into the brand's DNA and it has played an important role in their development of a passionate community.

## Harnessing the incidental effect within existing products

The second way in which this method can be applied is by realising the latent social benefits of existing products. In fact, some of the best examples of corporate responsibility over the last decade have come from brands that have employed their products as positive social influences, rather than invented programmes and set up partnerships that attempt to offset the impact of their day-to-day business. When companies use their core assets to deliver their social objectives, it comes across as a natural, logical extension of their activities, it adds meaning and motivation to the everyday work of employees and it provides much stronger opportunities to communicate the positive impact of the brand.

This method of harnessing the incidental effect of consumer products invites brands to analyse the existing behavioural impact of their products and, where there are opportunities to do so, allow the positive incidental effects to flourish.

The Nintendo Wii, since its launch in 2006, has been an extraordinary commercial success, selling 90 million units around the world and dominating the games console market between 2006 and 2010. The Wii's development centred upon exploring new forms of player interaction and the original concept mirrored the touch screen technology of the Nintendo DS, before being dropped because it felt too similar to the handheld product. All the information available on the development of the Wii, including extensive interviews with Nintendo's game designer, Shigeru Miyamoto, suggests that this was an iterative process, drawing on previous technology and looking to make small steps forward that would improve playability and marketability. There is nothing in there about how the technology might make players more active and healthy. Even when it started to become obvious that this was an interesting incidental benefit, Nintendo were a little nervous. In November 2006, the Wall Street Journal reported that use of the Wii was making users feel a little

sore – similar to how they felt after a gym session. Nintendo's response certainly didn't celebrate this role: "If people are finding themselves sore, they may need to exercise more. It was not meant to be a Jenny Craig supplement.<sup>25</sup>" However, this incidental benefit became unequivocal. Most compelling was a report published by the Mayo Clinic in late 2006, which provided evidence that the Wii, and other active video game platforms, could have a significant positive effect on calorie expenditure and overall levels of daily activity, particularly for children<sup>26</sup>. Soon, Nintendo were harnessing and exploiting these incidental benefits. A whole series of new games and pieces of equipment followed, such as the Wii Fit, as well as lots of marketing that highlighted the health benefits of the product targeting certain audiences. Two months after her original reaction to the Wall Street Journal article, Perrin Kaplan, the same Nintendo spokesperson, was getting on board: "One of our hopes was that people would find a way to enjoy the Wii sitting on the couch or getting up and moving their body around. This huge fitness craze was more than we had anticipated."

The success of Proctor & Gamble's Turn to 30 product and campaign was founded on the long-standing credibility of Ariel and the way that this credibility could be harnessed to effect new pro-environmental behaviours with very little effort. Consumers could trust that Ariel's new lower temperature washing powder still met their main needs: clean clothes. The advances in the P&G labs that enabled 30 degree washing were a bonus to these long-established credentials, offering reductions in household energy bills and carbon footprints. With solid foundations in meeting consumer needs, P&G could focus the campaign on this environmental benefit and claim a significant influence on behaviours as a result<sup>27</sup>, as well as winning considerable ground as a responsible company against their rivals: 88 percent of consumers who changed their behaviour to wash clothes at 30 degrees associated the message with Ariel, whether or not they bought Ariel products.

That companies will find at least some negative outcomes when they start to examine the collateral impact of their activities is inevitable and the foundation of good corporate responsibility is the neutralisation of these – across environmental, ethical and human criteria. Uncovering and harnessing the latent behavioural collateral of their products is an exciting second step and potentially carries a wealth of social and business benefits.

Ultimately, business has many of the tools to affect the behaviours of mass audiences in positive ways and help overcome some of the major social problems that society faces. Negative incidental effects can be reduced and positive ones harnessed and added within almost every

25. Nintendo spokeswoman Perrin Kaplan, Wall Street Journal, September 2006

26. Energy Expenditure of Sedentary Screen Time Compared With Active Screen Time for Children, Dr. Lorrain Larringham-Foster et al, Paediatrics Vol. 118 No. 6 December 1, 2006

27. The Turn to 30 campaign claimed to contribute to an increase in consumers washing at 30 degrees from 2% in 2002 to 17% in 2007, a 41% saving in energy in a total of 1 million households and 60,000 tonnes of CO2 saved (Business in the Community case study)

kind of consumer product. The question, of course, is where the motivation comes to do this. Traditional corporate responsibility programmes normally tick the right boxes, internally and externally, to demonstrate a willingness to play a positive role in society. Moreover, analysing the collateral effects of a business can be a painful process and doing something about these effects can be expensive. However, some big brands, like Pepsico and Unilever, are making big statements about their role in the world and making big commitments to this kind of analysis. The more brands that follow this lead and the more products that reflect this approach, the more chance there is that generating positive incidental effects becomes the norm.