



Sugar Coating Conservation

A spoonful of smart design helps the medicine of conservation go down

What's more important than global warming and clean water? Apparently, a lot of things.

According to a Pew Research poll conducted across the U.S. in 2009, global warming ranked dead last on the list of Americans' top 20 priorities, with only 30% of participants identifying it as a "top priority." The broader topic of "energy" didn't even make the top five concerns. People care most about the things that affect them and their loved ones directly—things like the economy and jobs.

To get into the mainstream, energy conservation needs to expand beyond topics like efficiency and a call for action beyond simply giving things up. This PATTERN presents a few examples where good design has tapped into mainstream motivations and desires with positive results.

TAKE ACTION – *designing for Sugar Coating Conservation*

1.

Game the system

Harness the metaphors of gaming and competition to activate people to conserve. Work becomes play when you're having fun.

2.

Make it fashionable

Create desire for conservation by weaving it into offerings that leverage traditional motivators like brands, the media, and celebrities.

3.

Entertain and engage

Deliver engaging content that attracts customers and let conservation exist in the background.

4.

Simplify and simplify

Embrace simplicity and straightforward solutions that lower the barriers to conservation.

5.

Empower people

Let people define their own issues. Help them focus on what matters to *them* by inviting individual interpretation and highlighting connections.

Smart solutions

When a remote Alaskan avalanche brought down a power line in April 2008, electricity prices spiked 400%, and brought about a dramatic behavior change among many area residents.

Instead of grumbling, the Johnsons saw a camping opportunity. Mrs. Johnson took the baby to stay with her in-laws while her husband set up camp in the house. He shut off most of the power and used an oil stove for heating and cooking. He bought a block of ice to keep food cold, insulated the water heater, and shut it off every other day to save electricity. Mr. Johnson did such a good job insulating the heater that the water stayed relatively warm for three days.

Meanwhile, the Wilson family installed a handy “whole house switch” by the front door, so they could shut down the entire house on their way out.

What simple solutions might make it easy for people to conserve energy?



Personal conservation

In 2007, Walmart launched a program that encouraged employees to take on voluntary, personal conservation challenges. The company recognized that people approach conservation from different points of view. Some see it as a way to make the planet safe for their children, while others think about forests and polar bears. Employees were given rough guidelines, but allowed to define sustainability for themselves.

Videos of participants were shown in break rooms, allowing people to share their stories and making it easier for others to take on their own challenges.

Jamal decided to walk to work instead of driving, despite having to traverse a notorious Los Angeles area. He became a local celeb—the guy who treks through a tough neighborhood for sustainability.

With big corporations like Walmart, the bar is especially high for them to show that their sustainability efforts are more than clever marketing efforts. According to Walmart, 3 million pounds of plastic have been recycled, employees have lost a combined 184,000 pounds, and 20,000 employees quit smoking.

How might we get people personally involved with conservation by letting them decide what matters most?

Positive energy

The Massachusetts-based BrainShift Foundation recruited towns to compete in a contest called “Energy Smackdown.” Ten families from Cambridge, Medford, and Arlington formed teams and competed against one another in conservation categories like waste, heating fuel, electricity, and food.

Patty Nolan, who lives in Cambridge with her husband and two children, agreed to participate for pure-hearted reasons. Even though her family considered themselves “environmentally conscious,” she knew they could do more.

Her selfless motivations shifted after eight months of trash weigh-ins and comparative meter readings. “At the beginning, the competition wasn’t what interested me,” she said, “but then when we lost a challenge to Arlington by one pound of carbon, I realized I wanted to win.”

BrainShift President Daniel Kelley wasn’t surprised: “As Americans, we are good at entertainment and competition. It’s why on *American Idol* they get 40 million voters.”

How might we make a game out of other aspects of conservation?



Fashionable ethics

When asked about their interest in ethical fashion or conscious consumption, many British teenagers simply aren’t interested. “Environmentalism is for geeks,” said Steven. But British megastore Topshop reframed second-hand garments as “vintage,” set them in the context of popular brands, and succeeded in getting teens to buy ethical clothing.

Cool biz, hot style

In summer 2005, then Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi asked business leaders to let office workers remove ties and jackets and work in half-sleeve shirts from June to September. Doing so would lessen Japan’s environmental impact of corporate air-conditioning systems. The prime minister and his cabinet led by example, shedding layers to launch the first Cool Biz campaign.

The program sparked a massive menswear trend in Japan. The fashion industry profited by selling “Cool Biz Dress,” and designers turned what could have been an onerous government mandate into an opportunity for people to express themselves and redefine “cool.”

Kiva and the ‘Warm Glow’

According to economist James Andreoni’s view of philanthropy, people don’t just donate money to save the whales. They donate to feel the “warm glow” that comes from being the kind of person who’s helping to save the whales.

Kiva, the world’s first person-to-person micro-lending website, harnessed this thinking to create a revolution in philanthropy. It empowers individuals to lend directly to unique entrepreneurs around the globe, creating personal connections that enhance the “warm glow.” The model has been extremely successful — moving more than \$28 million to entrepreneurs who might not have attracted for-profit lenders.

Full-throttle environmentalism

Tesla’s electric cars scream speed, not conservation. But the soon-to-be-released Model S costs just \$4 to recharge, seats seven people, and has a range of up to 300 miles. With a price under \$50,000 (after government tax credits) the Model S could compete with more mundane automobiles for total cost of ownership. *Automobile Magazine*’s Rex Roy was impressed: “The roadster’s throttle response bends the mind... If this is the future of cars, enthusiasts have nothing to worry about.”

PATTERNS are a collection of shared thoughts, insights, and observations gathered through our work and the world around us. We invite you to join the conversation, so we can raise the bar and develop richer design thinking experiences collectively.

Be a pattern spotter: Now that you’ve been exposed to a few different examples, don’t be surprised if you start seeing *Sugar Coating Conservation* patterns all around. Keep your eyes open and let us know what you find, especially if it’s the next new pattern.

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