



Make Behavior Change Easier

Climate change communicators often end their presentations encouraging audiences to make changes in their behavior that will help mitigate the effects of climate change. This section addresses how policymakers, business leaders, and environmental organizations can make such behavior changes easier by taking advantage of **default effects** (the human tendency to stick with the option that is selected automatically instead of choosing an alternate option), including making environmentally responsible behaviors the default option as often as possible.

UNDERSTANDING DEFAULT EFFECTS ON DECISION MAKING

It is important to consider default effects when people make decisions over time. For example, when people have a choice between Option A, with benefits and costs in the present, and Option B, whose benefits and/or costs might not be realized until some point in the future, the default option can affect their preferences. Particularly when making decisions about consumption (to purchase something, to receive a reward, to make a sacrifice), people tend to be more patient when the default option is to wait versus when the default option is to receive something now.⁶⁴

HOW TO OPTIMIZE THE DEFAULT OPTION

When presenting a choice with multiple options, it is important to pay attention to the default option. If option A is the default and a person wants A, it is already chosen. But if a person wants B, he or she will have to make an effort to switch from A to B. Because the default option requires no action, it is always easier, and so people tend to accept it whether or not they would have chosen it if it were not the default option. By making socially beneficial choices the default option, policymakers can positively influence individual decisions concerning natural resources like air or water.⁶⁵ Page 38 shows an example of this principle in action.

One German study showed that changing defaults could promote green sources of energy. The study also found that the way information is presented, specifically for the default option, can strongly affect people's choice of electricity, and that they tend to use the kind of electricity that is offered to them as the default. In the first laboratory experiment, more participants chose the green utility when it was the default than when the "grey" utility was the default. In the second laboratory experiment, participants displayed an attachment to their default, asking for more money to give up green electricity than the amount they would have paid for it.⁶⁶

EXAMPLE

How Rutgers University Saved 1,280 Trees in One Academic Year



Erich Nagler

After deciding that the university computer labs were wasting too much paper, Rutgers University simply made double-sided printing the default option on its lab printers. This tiny act saved 7,391,065 sheets of paper in the first semester, or roughly 620 trees for the semester, and 1,280 trees for the academic year. Students, who frequently have no preference, must now manually select the option to print on only one side of the page. The option to conserve is made that much easier by becoming the default option.⁶⁷

PROVIDE NEAR-TERM INCENTIVES

Giving people an immediate incentive, if possible, also makes behavior change easier. For instance, the prospect of saving money over the next 20 years by weatherizing one's home may make economic sense, but may not effectively motivate action. In contrast, giving an immediate incentive can serve as an effective driver. For example, when presenting to a church, school, or community center group, climate change communicators can publicize the names of those who sign up for weatherization, thus providing an immediate social incentive to supplement the delayed economic incentive.

By using an economic incentive, the Japanese government significantly increased the demand for green vehicles. The government provided "scrap incentives," either tax breaks or rebates, for consumers to scrap their old cars and buy ecological vehicles. The average consumer may discount the long-term savings of driving a hybrid, but will readily appreciate such immediately tangible (in this case, financial) benefits.⁶⁸