desperately seeking sustainability?

summary of NCC research into information and advice on sustainable lifestyles

by Paul Steedman

NCC National Consumer Council
Making all consumers matter

About the NCC

The National Consumer Council (NCC) makes a practical difference to the lives of consumers around the UK.

With changes in provision of services by government and companies, there is apparently more choice, and more talk about meeting consumers' needs. Yet, the rhetoric does not always match people's experience: markets can operate in ways that act against consumer interests; and consumers who are disadvantaged or vulnerable can be ignored.

The NCC uses its insight into consumer needs to advocate change. We conduct rigorous research and policy analysis to investigate key consumer issues, and use this to influence organisations and people that make change happen. We don't just respond to policy discussions, but shape future debate through our groundbreaking thinking.

An open and collaborative organisation, we seek to work with public service providers, businesses and regulators. We hold regular policy forums which provide us with a unique opportunity to exchange views and test our thinking.

Our relationship with the Department of Trade and Industry – our main funder – gives us a strong connection within government. But we are ready to challenge any organisation, public or private, that does not give consumers a fair deal.

We have linked organisations in Scotland and Wales, and a close relationship with colleagues in Northern Ireland. We play a leading role within European and worldwide consumer groups, ensuring that cross-border consumer issues are tackled and the consumer voice is heard within global institutions.

Please check our website at www.ncc.org.uk for our latest news.

We can often make our publications available in braille or large print, on audio tape or computer disk. Please contact us for details.

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About our sustainable consumption work

This report is part of ongoing work by the NCC to encourage policies that achieve the shift to sustainable consumption.

The NCC is currently working with the Sustainable Development Commission to host the UK's Sustainable Consumption Roundtable. Funded by Defra and the DTI, the roundtable brings together a small group of leading experts in consumer policy and sustainability to advise government on the action needed to create consumer choices that stay within environmental limits. It is due to report in early 2006. Other work has included:

- The 2005 NCC report, *16 pain-free ways to help save the planet*, which examined the contribution that schemes which create a positive incentive for consumers can make to achieving sustainable consumption. Using international case studies, it assessed the factors that help to make schemes such as Norway's recycling lottery a success.
- The 2004 NCC report, *Carrots not sticks*, which resulted from a seminar bringing together the Dutch organisers of the pilot reward card scheme – NU Spaar-pas Card – with representatives from local government, waste disposal, regional government, retailers, currency designers, the smart card industry and the electronic money industry, to discuss what might be possible in a UK context.
- The 2003 NCC research *Green choice: what choice?* which showed that consumers like the idea of incentives to encourage sustainable consumption – they favour carrots over sticks. At present there are more sticks used to discourage unsustainable behaviour than carrots to encourage it.

About the research

Our research findings centre on quantitative research planned and commissioned by the NCC. The research consisted of an omnibus survey of a nationally representative sample of 1,840 adults aged 15 or over, in Great Britain. The study was conducted by MORI from 17-22 March 2005.

The aim of the research was to find out about the extent to which people have come across information and advice on sustainable consumption issues, and whether they actively seek out further details.

We aimed to assess if particular consumer groups seek out information more than others; which topics people find out more about; where consumers look for such information; and what they do with it once they have it. We were also interested in what motivates consumers to find out more.

People do not use the term 'sustainable consumption' in their daily lives. We therefore tried to avoid such jargon and used a list of 18 'real world' issues that might be said to contribute to a more sustainable pattern of consumption (see box on page 3).

If you would like to see the questionnaire used in the research, go to: www.ncc.org.uk/responsibleconsumption/desperate_ques.pdf.

Definition of social grades

The grades detailed below are the social class definitions used by the Institute of Practitioners in Advertising, and are standard on all surveys carried out by MORI.

A	Upper middle class	Higher managerial, administrative or professional
B	Middle class	Intermediate managerial, administrative or professional
C1	Lower middle class	Supervisor or clerical and junior managerial, administrative or professional
C2	Skilled working class	Skilled manual workers
D	Working class	Semi-skilled and unskilled manual workers
E	Those at the lowest levels of subsistence	State pensioners, etc, with no other earnings

Key findings and recommendations

Our research with over 1,800 people finds that there is a welcome role for information and advice on sustainable lifestyles for 19 per cent of consumers – 8.6 million people across Great Britain. Our study shows that information and advice can support voluntary changes in consumer behaviour.

However, relatively few consumers actively seek out such information and advice. Providing information and advice cannot be a substitute for making sustainable choices easier and more attractive for consumers. Indeed, without that wider action, information and advice could be, at best, ineffective and, at worst, counter-productive.

Information and advice should be seen as one component of marketing to promote behaviour change. There is a well-developed body of international experience, the field of 'social marketing', that shows exactly how to do this.

Key findings

Relatively high awareness that information and advice exists

Large numbers of consumers have personally come across information on steps that they can take to consume more sustainably: 81 per cent have seen information on at least one subject, while 54 per cent are aware of information existing on five or more. But over a quarter of lower-income consumers and nearly a third of younger consumers have not come across any information.

Seeking out information and advice on sustainable consumption is a specialist concern

Only a relatively small number of consumers have actively sought out more information: 19 per cent on at least one topic, and only 8 per cent for five or more. This is in stark contrast to levels of information-seeking behaviour on other long-term issues: 75 per cent of consumers say they have sought at least some information on how to live more healthily; and 63 per cent on pensions and savings. At least 18 per cent of consumers are simply not interested in finding out more on sustainable consumption.

Seekers of information and advice are considerably more likely to be aged 35-44 and in professional or managerial occupations, and considerably less likely to be 15-24 or 65+ and less affluent. 'Seekers' are also more likely to come from the south of England (excluding London). They are much more likely to be motivated by their personal beliefs and by environmental campaign groups than 'non-seekers'. This profile places them among the most active of 'green' or 'ethical' consumers.

Consumers more commonly seek information on topics that:

are well-publicised with simple messages about consumer action; appear to deliver tangible, close-to-home benefits; and present fewer practical barriers to consumer action. The topics on which information is most frequently sought are those relating to saving energy, recycling and organic, free-range and fair trade foods. Despite moderate levels of awareness that information exists, relatively few people try to find out more about reducing their car use.

Seekers and non-seekers get (or would prefer to get) their information in different ways

Around half (49 per cent) of consumers who currently seek out more information use the internet to find what they are looking for, and 41 per cent prefer it over any other means. Far fewer consumers who have not sought information see this as their preferred route. This reflects the fact that non-seekers are less likely to have access to the internet than seekers, and are more keen to receive information passively through the media than to actively seek it. For non-seekers, leaflets would also be an important way of finding out more, and both groups indicate that labels or literature with products are key means of getting additional information.

NCC recommendations

Sustainable consumption must develop in a way that recognises the realities of consumers' lives. The NCC makes recommendations in three areas to help this happen: a general approach to policy; further research required to make the most of Environment Direct; and guidance for providers of information and advice, and specifically Environment Direct.

1. Policy approach

Realise the limitations of providing information and place it in the context of an integrated, 'social marketing' approach

Information alone, even when simple, accurate, well-presented and action-focused, will be insufficient to produce a shift towards more sustainable patterns of consumption.

Governments and businesses, as 'editors' of the choices available to consumers, must assume responsibility for making the range of choices available to consumers more sustainable, as well as leading by example.

The Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) should look to the evidence of social marketing in fields such as health to understand the role of information provision in realising its own model for promoting behaviour change: Exemplify, Enable, Engage and Encourage(1).

Make it worth consumers' while

Consumers will seek information more readily if it delivers on their immediate priorities – including tangible, close-to-home benefits, convenience and fitting in with existing routines. Unless it is worth their while, only a handful of 'ethical' consumers will seek out information.

If the government wishes consumers to find out more for themselves, it will need to make additional policy interventions, so the trouble of seeking more information pays off for consumers. In addition, the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) and Defra must consider how consumers can be encouraged to develop the skills of 'sustainability literacy' so that they are empowered to make use of the information they find.

2. Research needed to get the most from Environment Direct

Assess existing information and advice initiatives before designing a new service

Before making assumptions about the shape of any new service, it is essential to assess the state of existing information and advice initiatives. It may be more cost-effective to add value to existing advice providers rather than set up something entirely new.

It was beyond the scope of this study to assess what information and advice is currently available to consumers. For example, who is providing it and how, whether it is of high quality, and how closely it delivers on the consumer priorities set out in this report.

Find out more about where and how consumers get information

Further research is needed to ascertain where consumers turn when looking for information on specific topics. We do not know whether information-seeking on one area leads to information-seeking on other areas. If it does, then there may be a strong case for an integrated approach to information and advice on sustainable living, rather than separating out different issues.

It is important to establish whether using the internet as a delivery mechanism excludes disadvantaged groups from finding the information they seek, or discourages them from seeking information in the first place. It is also key to establish why face-to-face and telephone advice on these topics appears to be unpopular, when it is highly favoured in areas such as financial services.

Investigate whether information-seekers are already committed to action

More research is required on the relationship between seeking information and taking action. Have consumers who seek information already decided to take action? Or do they seek information with an open mind, and then act as a result of what they find? This has implications for whether, and how, others can be persuaded to seek information, and for how the success of information provision should be evaluated.

Evaluate the power of 'individually-marketed' advice and community-level programmes for sustainable behaviour

A number of small-scale studies suggest that tailored advice, offered directly and unsolicited to consumers, with appropriate incentives, may be an effective way of encouraging uptake of information and achieving lasting behaviour change. Further research into the effectiveness of such schemes would be welcome, particularly in areas where consumers are resistant to seeking information for themselves, such as alternatives to the car.

Nearly half of consumers who seek more information say that they do so because of their personal beliefs. A number of community-level schemes have shown promise in helping consumers to reassess their beliefs and behaviour. The NCC would therefore welcome a thorough evaluation of the effectiveness of programmes such as those funded by the government's Environmental Action Fund, particularly in helping disadvantaged consumers to assess how they might consume more sustainably.

3. Environment Direct and other information providers

Deliver information and advice in a targeted way

To be most effective, providers of information and advice must use imaginative delivery mechanisms targeted at the needs of specific groups. They must also provide information or advice in formats and language appropriate to the audience, with clear, simple messages about what consumers can actually do – how, where and when.

Seek to draw in new consumers rather than just provide for existing ones

Environment Direct should seek to be ambitious about what it can achieve. An internet-based service providing lifestyle tips in an authoritative and well-prioritised manner will be of help to 'green' consumers who are already motivated to seek information. But by signposting other providers of information and tailored advice, and producing supporting leaflets for use in the retail environment, it could encourage consumers who have not previously sought information to do so.

More product information

There is a clear consumer demand for more information at the place and time of purchase, through product labelling and 'with-product' information. To support this, Environment Direct should incorporate publicly available information on the environmental performance of individual products, with some form of scoring or ranking system.

This has implications for the way that Environment Direct is set up. It needs to:

- be able to translate scientific complexity into everyday language;
- be willing to take risks to do so, while managing the risks by operating in a transparent and robust way;
- be sufficiently ambitious, so that the ratings and advice it sets out can exert market leverage and promote good practice among manufacturers and retailers; and
- have sufficient commercial insight, for example, in negotiating how and whether lead companies can use product endorsements in their marketing or labelling.

In short, while it should be seen as an integral part of what government does on sustainable consumption, Environment Direct could benefit from a degree of independence.

Terms used in our research

In our survey we avoided talking about 'sustainable consumption'. Instead, we asked consumers about a range of actions. These were:

Energy: how to reduce energy use in the home; how to reduce heating bills through measures like loft insulation; which domestic appliances (for example, fridges, freezers and washing machines) are most energy-efficient; which energy suppliers provide electricity generated from renewable energy.

Food: which food is locally grown; which types of fish are from sustainably managed fisheries; which food is organic; which food is free-range; which food is fairly or ethically traded.

Waste: how to cut down the amount of waste your household produces; how to recycle glass and paper; where to take home appliances for recycling (for example, computers and fridges).

Transport: which models of car are least polluting; how to reduce car usage by cutting down on journeys or by car-sharing; how to reduce car usage by using public transport, walking or cycling.

Other: which furniture or other wood products are from sustainably managed forests; which household products are environmentally-friendly (for example, for cleaning, DIY or gardening); how to choose ethical or environmentally-friendly bank accounts, savings or investments.

Throughout the research we used the terms 'information' and 'advice' together, without making distinctions between them. In this report, references to 'information' should be read as referring to both information and advice.

Policy context: consumers and sustainable consumption

Consumer lifestyles need to change if we are to create consumption patterns which are sustainable: patterns that contribute to personal wellbeing – but also to a strong, healthy, just society, living within environmental limits[2].

There is increasing momentum behind the agenda for sustainable consumption and production. In 2002, the World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg called for a ten-year framework of programmes. The UK government has responded with a statement of its approach, *Changing Patterns*, and a set of indicators to measure progress, as well as an overall sustainable development strategy, *Securing the Future*.

Until relatively recently, the majority of initiatives concentrated on sustainable production; now the focus is turning towards consumption and the role of consumers as individuals and households.

Consumer responsibilities

The NCC's work has focused on practical ways to make sustainable consumption a reality, through understanding consumers' lives. We have found that, while many consumers want to do their bit, they expect that business and government will take a leading role.

Consumers face a host of competing priorities and there are many practical, social and psychological barriers, particularly for low-income consumers, that make it difficult to consume more sustainably. Sustainable choices need to be easier choices. Business and government hold their share of responsibility – they shape the choices that consumers are able to make. Creative incentive schemes, such as our pioneering idea for a Recycling Lottery, can help encourage consumers[3].

Role of information

Recent research has comprehensively demonstrated that financial incentives and information alone are not sufficient to persuade or enable consumers to change their behaviour. It cannot be assumed that information leads to attitude shift, and that attitude shift leads to behaviour change[4].

Nonetheless, if consumers are to confidently take responsibility for some aspects of consuming differently, then they need ready access to high quality information on which they can base their decisions. On complex areas, where generic information is insufficient, or where consumer engagement is low, interactive *advice* services may be the most appropriate way to provide information. Advice services have the potential to tailor information to the individual consumer's circumstances, and to resolve difficulties that consumers may have with understanding or applying information. The person-to-person engagement possible through advice-giving may also prove more motivating than information delivered impersonally.

Sustainable consumption covers so many different topics that information relating to it abounds. The NCC recently estimated that it is possible to find as many as 500 'top tips' for a more sustainable lifestyle, from a wide range of sources. But do consumers actually see this information? Do they try and find out more – and why? Where do they look, and is what they find helpful? These questions are particularly timely because of the welcome commitment by government to develop a new service for consumers in this field, at present called Environment Direct.

Have you heard? Consumer encounters with sustainable consumption information

The large majority of consumers have, whether by accident or choice, come across at least some information on sustainable consumption.

Eighty-one per cent of consumers were aware of, or had experienced, information and advice on at least one of the 18 areas we asked about, and 54 per cent had seen information on five or more issues. However, 16 per cent of consumers had not come across information or advice on any of the 18 topics we tested.

Information does not automatically lead to behaviour change. Our survey suggests that consumers have a reasonably broad experience of relevant information. However, one recent study on household behaviour concluded that, while a number of specific sustainable behaviours (such as recycling paper and glass) have become more common, very few people are '*systematically* undertaking an integrated range of sustainable behaviours' – perhaps as low as seven per cent of the population[5].

Awareness of information was significantly higher on some issues. Around two-thirds of consumers (69 per cent) are aware of advice and information on at least one issue relating to energy or waste (69 per cent and 63 per cent respectively). This compares with around two in five (44 per cent) who have come across advice and information on at least one aspect of more sustainable transport. Of the individual topics tested, the highest score is for information on how to reduce energy in the home (57 per cent). Among the least well known were: which furniture or other wood products are from sustainably managed forests (16 per cent); and how to choose ethical or environmentally-friendly bank accounts, savings and investments (11 per cent).

Age and social group

Some consumer groups have come across more information and advice than others. While there is little difference between men and women, there are large differences by age and social class[6]:

Age	Have come across information (%)
15-24	35
25-44	60
45-64	65
65+	43
Social grade	**Have come across information (%)**
DE	37
C1C2	53
AB	73

For younger consumers this may simply reflect their household roles and their relatively lower spending power. They are less likely to be taking decisions on many of the topics we asked about; the utility bills, for example, may be paid by a more senior member of the household and so energy-saving is less of an immediate concern.

The NCC's report *Green choice: what choice?*[7] found that, for many lower-income consumers, simply getting by is a major concern. Many sustainable consumption issues may be seen as remote by less affluent consumers, who tend to have a more local perspective on environmental concerns. Other barriers to action, such as perceived high costs for environmentally-friendly products, may make seeking information seem a waste of time for lower-income consumers.

A lack of information

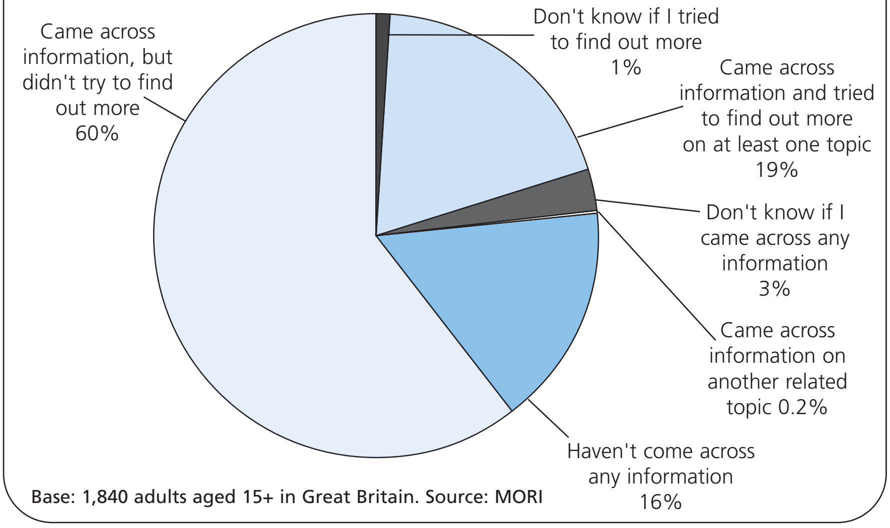
Consumers may report not coming across information and advice for two reasons: either they have never seen such information, or they fail to recall it. The first can be addressed by providing information through imaginative delivery mechanisms targeted at the needs of specific groups. The second can be tackled in a number of ways:

- by producing information or advice in formats and language appropriate to the audience, with clear, simple messages about what consumers can actually do;
- by removing barriers that produce competing priorities for consumers; and
- by enacting policy measures to make information more valuable to consumers – perhaps through incentives.

In search of sustainability: finding out more

Consumers who actively seek further information on an issue are likely to be more engaged with it than those who merely come across information. The time and effort involved suggests that 'seekers' are more likely to try to understand the information – and maybe change their behaviour – though whether they are able to do so depends on a host of other barriers.

Have you come across information? Did you try to find out more?



Base: 1,840 adults aged 15+ in Great Britain. Source: MORI

The number of consumers seeking more information is relatively low: one fifth (19 per cent) of consumers have tried to find more information or advice, on at least one topic. Only eight per cent of consumers have tried to find out more on five or more of the topics covered.

Health, savings and sustainability

There is a stark contrast with information and advice-seeking behaviour in other areas. Pensions and savings, and healthy living, share with sustainability a delay between taking action and seeing any benefits, and yet:

- 75 per cent of consumers say they have sought at least some information on how to live more healthily (46 per cent saying a great deal or a fair amount); and
- 63 per cent of consumers say they have sought at least some information on pensions and savings (29 per cent saying a great deal or a fair amount).

This mirrors the priorities of the public over the long term; leaving aside a brief reverse in 1989, health and pensions have consistently been rated by the public as higher priorities for government than the environment(8). Perhaps more telling, there is also evidence that, while the environment may be seen by consumers as an area where government should take the lead, it is not one that people spontaneously name as having a major impact on their quality of life. In 2001, Defra found that, when asked 'the two or three things which you would say most affect your…quality of life', 48 per cent of people answered 'money', 34 per cent said 'health' and only eleven per cent listed 'environment'(9).

Personal benefits

While environmental and sustainability issues are similar to pensions and savings, and health – in that they relate to the medium to long-term and involve taking action now for later benefits – they differ in crucial ways.

The benefits of healthy living are directly felt by the individual in question. In contrast, the benefits sustainable consumption are shared by society at large, possibly several generations in the future – they may remain frustratingly intangible to the individual consumer.

On top of this, consumers face many other barriers to acting more sustainably, which lead to disempowerment and disengagement. These include poor understanding of the issues, competing priorities and habit.

The ‘seekers’: consumers who look for more information

Certain consumer groups are particularly likely to seek out more information.

Consumers are more likely to seek information on topics they see as having tangible, close-to-home benefits, fewer barriers to action and where the key messages are focused on simple actions.

Consumer profile

Those who actively look for information on the sustainable consumption topics tested are more likely to be:

- aged 35-54 (25 per cent of this age group, compared with 10 per cent of those aged 15-24 and 12 per cent of those age 65+); and
- professional and managerial groups (30 per cent of ABs, compared with 13 per cent of C2s and eleven per cent of DEs).

Seekers are also slightly more likely to come from the south of Great Britain (excluding London).

Popular topics

None of the topics in our survey inspire a great deal of passion among consumers. Nonetheless, there are significant differences in the ‘popularity’ of particular subjects. The topics on which information is sought by the greatest number of consumers are:

- reducing energy use in the home (nine per cent of consumers);
- how to recycle paper and glass (eight per cent);
- which food is free-range, ethically or fairly traded, or organic (seven per cent each);
- how to reduce heating bills through measures like insulation (seven per cent); and
- how to cut down the amount of waste your household produces (seven per cent).

At the other end of the scale, with three per cent, are issues including:

- which types of fish are from sustainably-managed fisheries;
- how to reduce car use by cutting down on journeys or by car-sharing, using public transport, walking or cycling;
- choosing ethical or environmentally-friendly bank accounts or investments; and
- which furniture or other wood products are from sustainably-managed forests.

(See chart overpage for full data.)

Different people, different issues

Women were considerably more likely than men to seek information on food and waste issues, as well as on environmentally-friendly household products. Men were more likely than women to seek information on which models of car are least polluting. These gender differences reflect the prevalent roles of men and women in the household.

There is some indication that younger consumers (aged 15-24) may be more concerned with sustainable transport questions than other age groups, but further research is required to confirm this. If true, this may be more about younger consumers’ limited spending power and restricted ability to own a car than a demonstration of environmental concern.

Common factors

In general, consumers are more likely to seek information on those topics which large numbers of people report having come across information on.

Consumers are more likely to seek further information on issues where taking action has not only an environmental dividend, but also appears to deliver tangible, close-to-home benefits. Reducing energy use, for example, clearly has a direct pay-off for the consumer in terms of lower energy bills. The direct benefits to the consumer of sustainably-sourced fish are rather less clear[10].

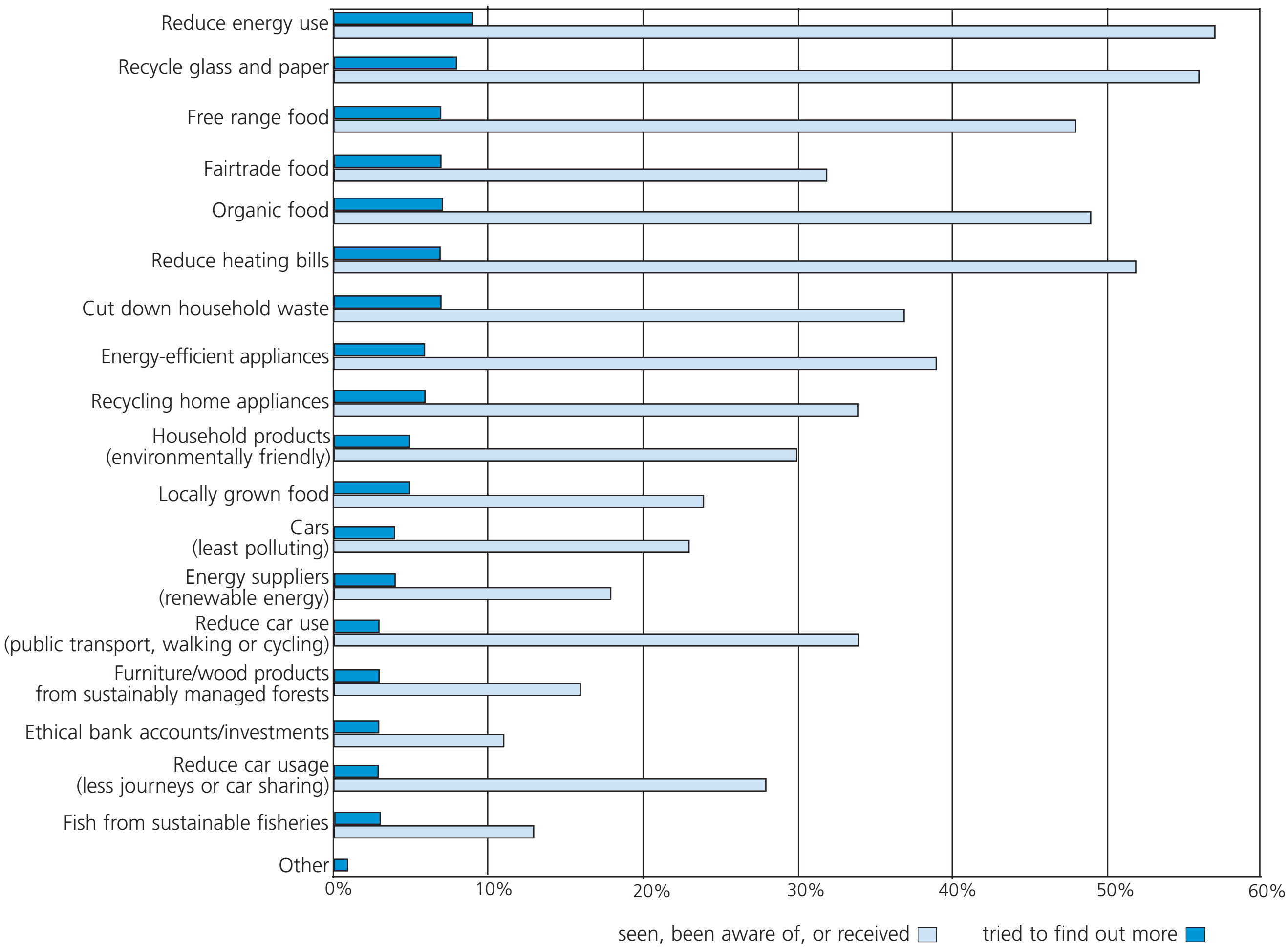
Consumers are also more likely to seek information on topics where key messages are focused on simple actions that they can take and there are fewer barriers to action. For example, the definition of ‘ethical finance’ remains contested even among experts. What should the consumer do? In contrast, if bring-banks or kerbside collections are in place, messages about how to recycle are quite straightforward and widely agreed, and actions are easy to take.

Exceptions to the rules

The relationship between existing awareness of information and active seeking of further information does not always hold. Consumers are especially resistant to seeking further information on reducing their car use, even though they have come across relatively high levels of information on this issue. This matches closely with recent findings that car use is an issue where people are simply not prepared to change their behaviour, for a number of complex reasons[11].

In contrast, consumers are more likely to seek out information on fair trade products than the number of people who report having come across information would suggest. Fair trade products do not deliver a clear, tangible benefit to the consumer. However, this discrepancy can be explained by the fact that high quality products, strong marketing, easily-identified labels, wide availability, a simple message and a price premium of only a few pence have combined to create an aspirational, lifestyle 'brand' which provides the consumer with a 'feel-good factor'.

Which, if any, of these kinds of advice or information have you seen, been aware of, or received? On which, if any, of these areas did you try to find out more?



Base: 1,840 adults aged 15+ in Great Britain. Source: MORI

Motivations: what prompts consumers to seek more information?

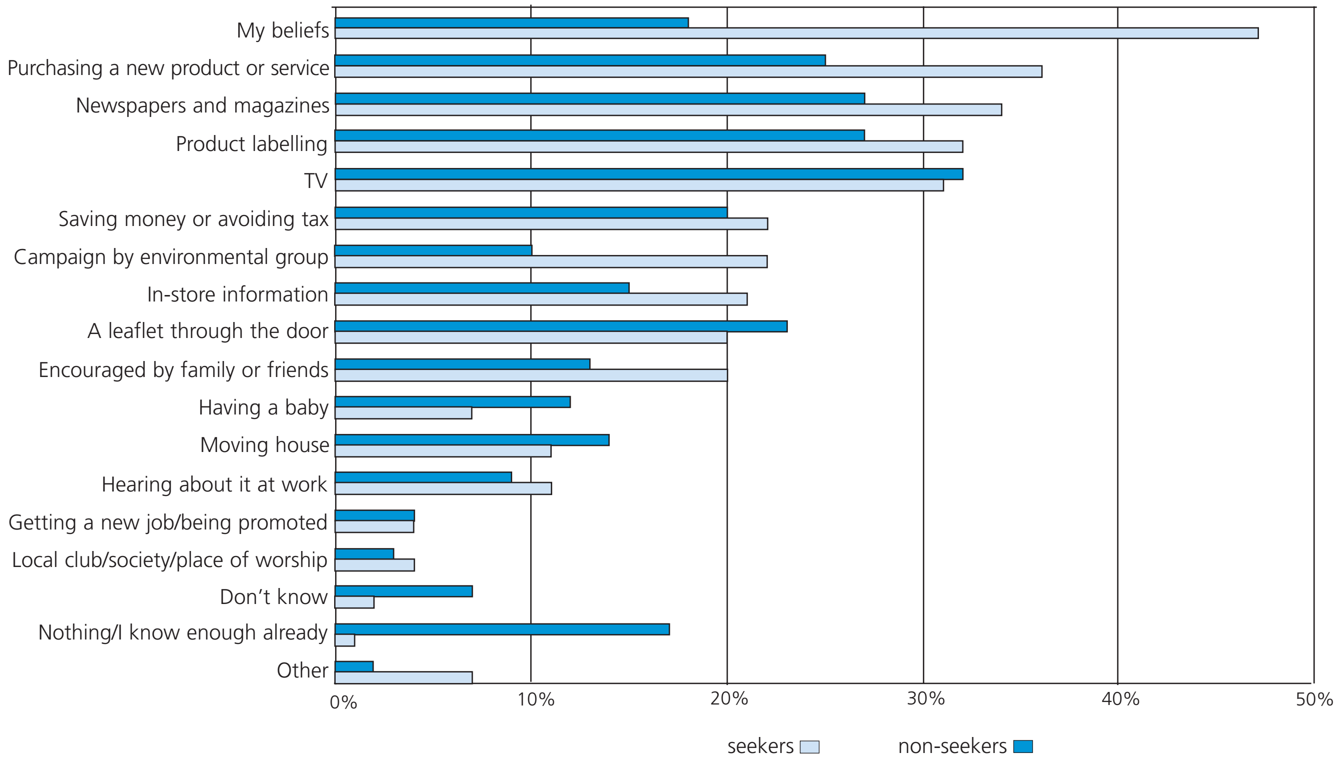
Of the people who had sought further information, just less than half state that their personal beliefs prompted them to do so. This is very striking; combined with their demographic profile, it suggests that 'hardcore' ethical consumers – such as the 'Global Watchdogs' identified by the Co-operative Bank[12] – make up a substantial number of our seekers. This profile places information-seekers among the most active of green or ethical consumers. These attitudes are particularly prevalent among more affluent consumers, with 55 per cent of ABC1s saying that their personal beliefs were what prompted them to seek more information, compared with 33 per cent for C2DEs.

For seekers, a campaign by an environmental group was just as important a motivation as saving money or avoiding tax, prompting 22 per cent to seek more information. This is a much more significant factor for better-off consumers: a campaign was the trigger for 26 per cent of ABC1s, against 13 per cent of C2DEs.

Nonetheless, more prosaic reasons (possibly in conjunction with personal beliefs) are important prompts for a large number of current information-seekers. A new purchase is a key driver (36 per cent of seekers), as are product labelling (32 per cent) and items in the media (34 per cent for print media, 31 per cent for TV). More information delivered at or around the time of purchase could be an effective way of prompting more consumers to seek information.

Consumers generally do little to shop around before making buying decisions and many purchases are made as part of habitual routines[13]. Information in shops, or with products, must either represent a new shortcut to quick and easy decision-making (as a brand name does), or must be delivered in a way that can help to break regular routines.

What, if anything, might persuade you to seek advice or look for information on these things?
What, if anything, prompted you to seek advice or look for information on these things?



Base: Seekers – 351 adults aged 15+ who have tried to find out more information. Non-seekers – 1,128 adults aged 15+ who have come across information, but have not tried to find out more. Source: MORI

Not looking

Sixty per cent of consumers have come across some information or advice, but have not gone on to seek further information (in addition to the 16 per cent of consumers, who have not heard any information at all). Of those 60 per cent, 30 per cent (18 per cent of all consumers) say that they 'couldn't be bothered' or 'aren't interested'. For this group in particular, measures beyond providing information will be necessary to change behaviour.

In addition, 57 per cent of the 'non-seekers' (34 per cent of all consumers) claim that they either did not need any more information or that they knew enough already. In some cases consumers may quite genuinely have sufficient accurate information, but previous studies show that people tend to report that they know more than they really do(14).

When asked if there was anything that might persuade them to seek information, 17 per cent of non-seekers (10 per cent of all consumers) effectively said 'no': they were simply not interested or already knew enough. This group is older than the general population, with 36 per cent of the group made up of people aged 65+, compared with 19 per cent of the British population. This may be a generational effect, given the rise of the environment as a political concern over the past 30 years. In some cases, it may reflect high levels of knowledge among this group – or there may be particular barriers in their way(15).

Persuading factors

Non-seekers are significantly less likely to be motivated by their personal beliefs or by an environmental group campaign than seekers. Nonetheless, significant numbers of non-seekers say that items in the newspaper (27 per cent of non-seekers) or on television (32 per cent) might persuade them to look for more information, as might product labels (27 per cent) and the decision to buy a new product or service (25 per cent). However, without the extra ethical motivation of personal beliefs, it is unclear how effective additional media stories or product-based policy interventions would be.

Changing beliefs?

As well as building on the factors that non-seekers say might persuade them to find out more, the government should consider how it might help consumers to re-evaluate their personal beliefs. High-profile awareness-raising campaigns, unsupported by other measures, have proved ineffective(16). It has been suggested that community-level programmes(17) may represent a powerful force for change, as beliefs and behaviours can be assessed and revised in a group environment. The NCC would welcome a thorough evaluation of programmes, such as those funded by the government's Environmental Action Fund – and, in particular, their effectiveness in helping disadvantaged consumers assess how they might consume more sustainably.

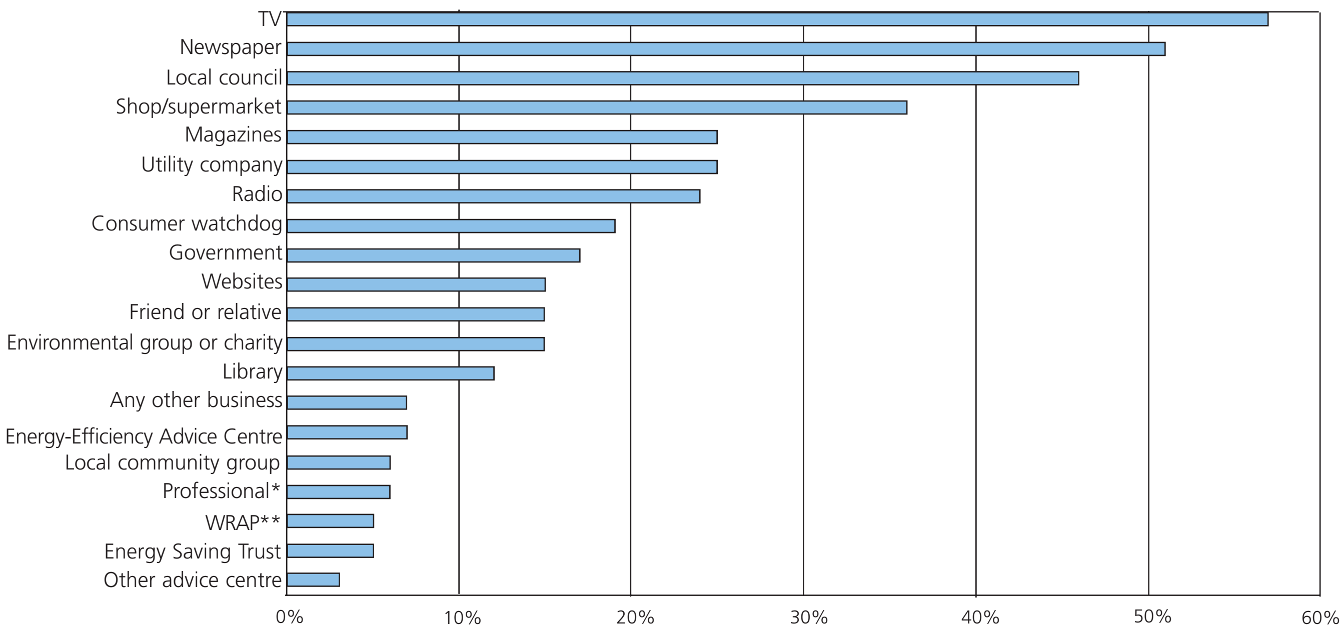
Individually-marketed advice

Another policy option that may encourage non-seekers to engage with information is 'individually-marketed advice'. A number of schemes have been piloted to test the power of personalised advice on alternatives to car use. Such schemes actively recruit consumers, sometimes with additional incentives, rather than waiting for consumers to seek advice. Some also enable consumers to speak to a dedicated team of advisers for information and support, effectively providing 'personal trainers' for behaviour change. The pilots have shown promising results in terms of reduced car use (five to 16 per cent)(18). Pilots have tended to target consumers sympathetic to the cause. The NCC would be keen to see how effective such schemes are for consumers who typically do not seek out information on these topics. Are they are able to break through the belief that 'I already know enough'?

Where do consumers find out about sustainable consumption?

When asked where they had passively come across information and advice on sustainable consumption topics, television and newspapers were the most common answers. Local authorities and shops or supermarkets were also key sources. In contrast, the more technical or expert bodies set up by the government to provide information and advice, such as the Energy Savings Trust (EST) and its Energy Efficiency Advice Centres register relatively poorly.

From where have you personally come across information or advice?



*Examples include: doctor, health visitor, estate agent and financial adviser; **Waste and Resources Action Programme

Base: 1,495 adults aged 15+ who have seen, been aware of, or received advice or information. Respondents could pick as many answers as they wished.
Source: MORI

Professional and managerial groups are not only more likely to have come across information and advice in general, but they are more likely to report having received it from a number of sources:

- Consumer watchdogs (25 per cent for ABs vs 14 per cent for DEs);
- Shops/supermarkets (46 per cent vs 28 per cent);
- Utility companies (31 per cent vs 21 per cent);
- Environmental groups or charities (22 per cent vs 10 per cent).

Younger consumers are much less likely to have come across information from their local council, perhaps because they are less likely to own or rent a property and therefore less likely to have formal dealings with the council over taxation or waste.

Looking for more

Consumers actively seeking more information, as opposed to simply coming across it, use rather different sources. Local councils and shops or supermarkets remain very important, but the internet emerges as the clear leader, mentioned by nearly half of all consumers who sought more information. This may (to some extent) mask the true scores for the Energy Savings Trust, environmental groups, and so on, since people may have been unable to recall exactly whose websites they visited.

The traditional source of more information, the library, also scores much more highly for those wanting to find out more.

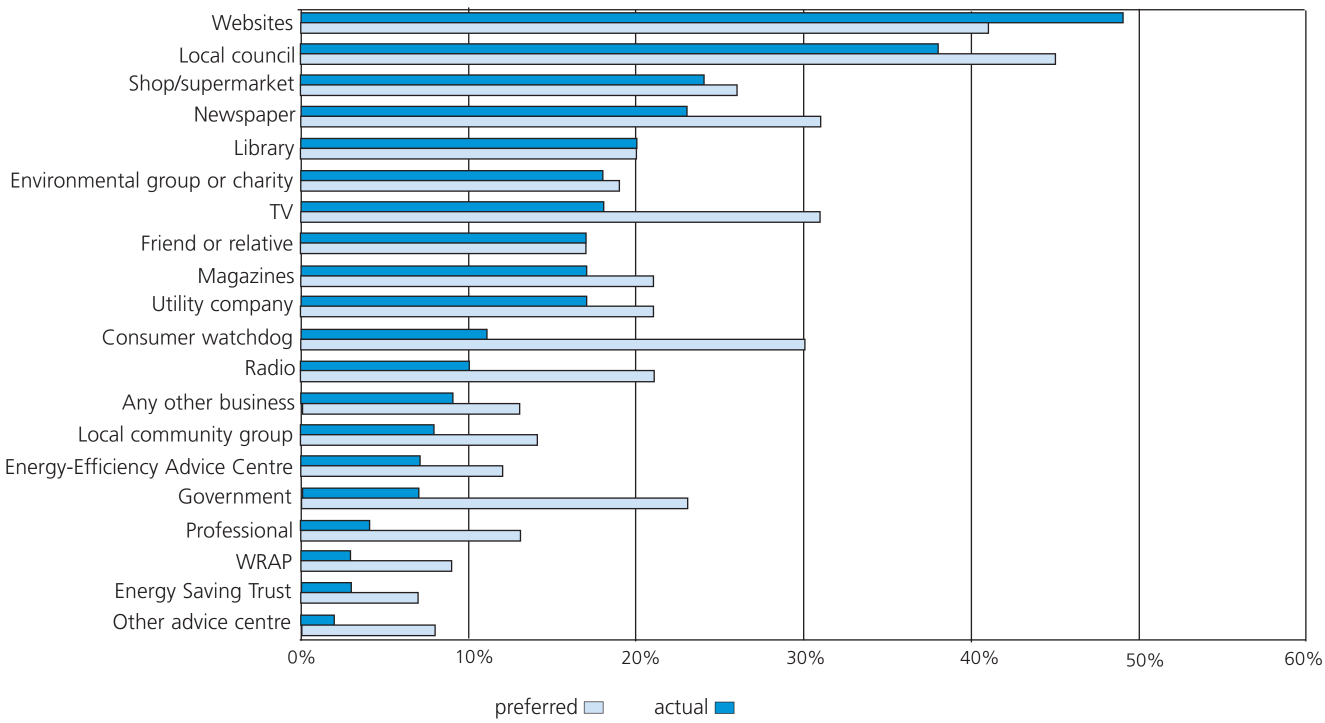
Although large numbers of people said that they sought more information in newspapers and on television, it seems unlikely that they actively turned to these sources to find out more on the very specific topics investigated here.

What consumers want

Consumers say they would prefer to get their information from places slightly different than where they actually went. Looking beyond the traditional media outlets – where consumers are unlikely to actively seek information – the pattern suggests that seekers are looking for more authoritative guidance. They would like to get more from authorities which are seen as trusted and impartial (such as consumer watchdogs), or are seen to be responsible for action in these areas (central and local government). This suggests a healthy appetite for a service such as Environment Direct, which might benefit from co-branding with an independent organisation trusted by the public.

Supermarkets and other shops, and utility companies, score highly as preferred sources, indicating that consumers welcome the opportunity to find out more information as part of their everyday routines. A small but significant number of consumers would welcome more information and advice than they currently receive from professionals in other fields such as healthcare or property, and from community groups. Government must consider how these channels for delivering information – shops, professionals and community groups – can be supported and integrated into the Environment Direct service.

Where did you go for advice or look for information?
Who would you prefer to get advice and information from on these issues in the future?

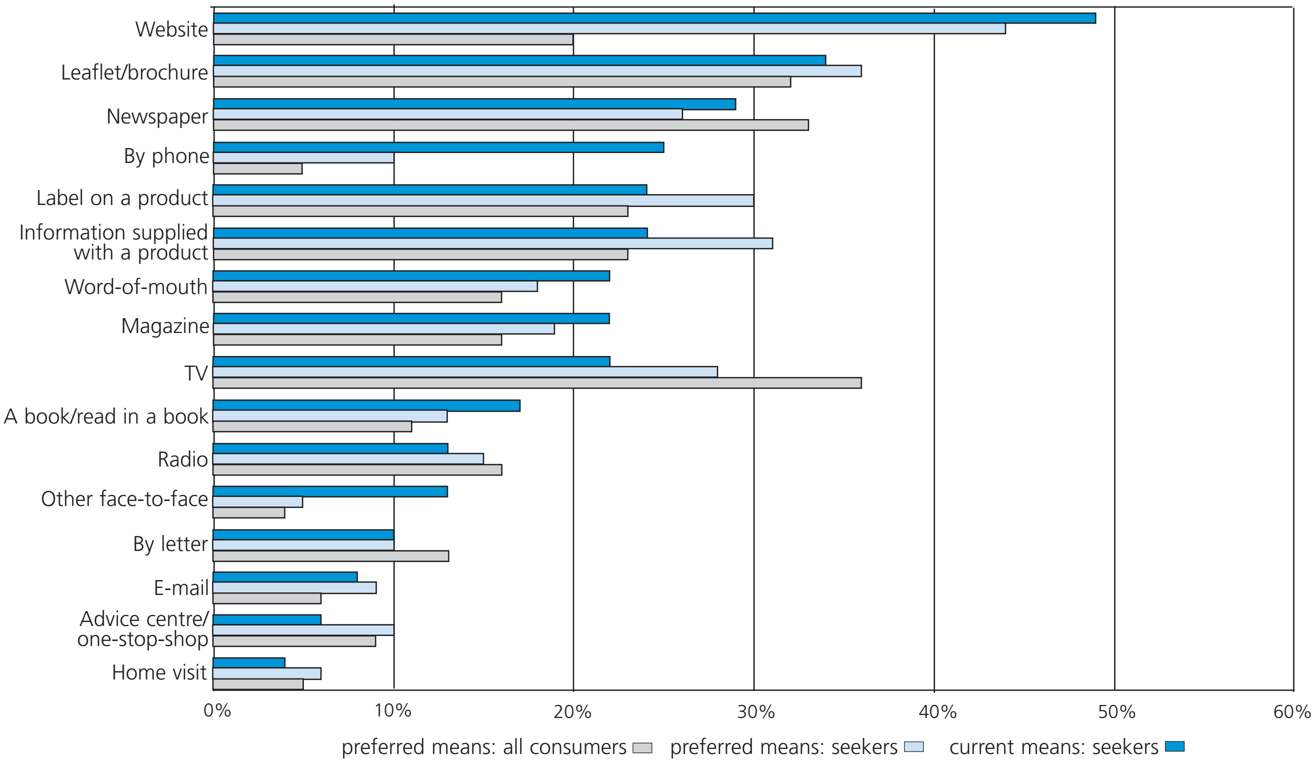


Base: 1,495 adults aged 15+ who have seen, been aware of, or received advice or information. Respondents could pick as many answers as they wished.
Source: MORI

How do consumers find out about sustainable consumption?

In terms of *how* the information is delivered, leaflets and brochures were well-used by information-seekers (34 per cent) alongside the internet (49 per cent). Consumers claim that they sought much of their information through media sources (newspapers 29 per cent, magazines and television 22 per cent each). Advice is sourced by 25 per cent of seekers over the telephone. The importance of product information is also clear with 24 per cent of consumers mentioning both product labels and information supplied with the product; this is a particularly common route for women seeking more information.

How did you access information and advice?
How, if at all, would you prefer to get information and advice on these issues?



Base: All consumers –1,840 adults aged 15+ in Great Britain. Seekers – 351 adults aged 15+ who have tried to find out more information. Source: MORI

Less internet, fewer calls

There are clear contrasts between how seekers currently receive information and how they would prefer to do so. For example, the internet is slightly less popular as a preferred means of accessing information, when compared with current use – although it is still clearly the most favoured option.

There is, however, a major gender divide: while 57 per cent of male seekers and 42 per cent of female seekers use the internet at present, it is preferred by twice as many men than women (61 per cent and 30 per cent, respectively). Among all consumers (both those who have sought more information and those who have not) the internet is listed as a preferred means of getting information on sustainable consumption topics by only 20 per cent, and only 13 per cent of women, and eleven per cent of DEs. This is, in part, a reflection of the penetration of internet access in the UK: 59 per cent of the public currently have access at home, work or elsewhere[19].

Although, at present, a quarter of those seeking information do so by telephone, this is not a very popular choice. Only five per cent of all consumers would choose this as a preferred means of accessing information.

More product information

Among consumers who already seek information, there is a clear demand for more product labelling and 'with-product' information. This is particularly true among women in this group: 38 per cent list information supplied with a product; and 34 per cent suggest labels on products as their preferred means of getting more information (compared with 22 per cent and 24 per cent respectively for men).

Among all consumers, both types of product-based information are the preferred option for 23 per cent, with no major differences between men and women. These methods of getting information are also much more popular with higher-income than lower-income consumers.

Time to consider

In general, consumers expressed the strongest preference for methods (such as television and newspapers) best suited to providing information of a general nature than to providing guidance on specific actions that they could take. This shows that, for most consumers, in the face of competing priorities and numerous barriers, taking action on sustainable consumption is not an urgent task. Additional incentives are required if this belief is to be challenged.

Consumers largely appear to favour methods of accessing information that give them space to make their own unhurried decisions, without appearing ignorant in the face of 'experts'. Traditional media, product information, letters and leaflets or brochures are all considerably more popular delivery mechanisms for information than telephone, e-mail or face-to-face methods, although the latter do show some scope for growth.

Further research

It was beyond the scope of this study to explore where and how consumers do (and would prefer to) get information and advice on each individual topic. Further research, exploring where consumers turn when looking for particular types of information, and any problems they face, would be welcome. In particular, the NCC would be interested to establish whether the importance of the internet as a source of information excludes disadvantaged groups from finding information that they seek. This is particularly relevant when considering how Environment Direct might provide information.

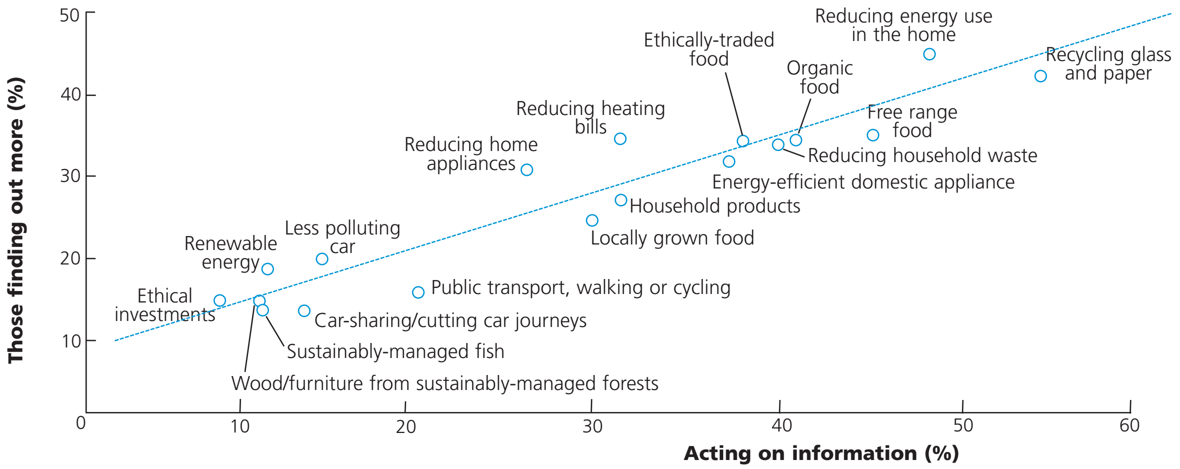
Given that, in other fields, consumers are very positive about face-to-face and telephone conversations – 73 per cent said that these would be their preferred methods of getting information about financial products in one study[20] – further research is needed to discover why they are apparently less popular in this context.

The results of seeking information: behaviour change?

Consumers who seek out more information apparently tend to take action as a result. Somewhat confusingly, on some topics a greater proportion of consumers claim to have acted on the information than actually sought it in the first place. Many of these consumers may be reporting existing behaviour that did not directly result from seeking more information. In addition, consumers are well known for claiming to undertake a greater number of sustainable behaviours than they actually do in practice.

Despite the uncertainty, there is apparently a strong positive correlation between the level of interest in a particular topic and the likelihood of taking action. Once consumers go looking, the information they find does appear to help them take steps to change their behaviour.

Seeking information vs. taking action



Base: 351 adults aged 15+ who have tried to find out more information. Source: MORI

More research is required before any more concrete conclusions can be reached on the relationship between seeking information and taking action. In particular, have consumers who seek information already decided to take action? Or do they seek information with an open mind, and then act as a result of what they find?

Consumers agree that the information they find is helpful: 94 per cent of consumers who sought more information said that they found the information or advice they received useful. But did the information help consumers to take action or reach a new understanding of an issue? Was it accurate, high quality advice?

Further research into the accuracy of the advice received from different sources and how it helps or hinders consumers in taking action would be welcome.

Gender differences

The differences between men and women in the topics they seek information on are reflected in the action they take. Women take more action on food issues, buying locally-grown, free range, organic or fairly traded foods more frequently than men. They are also more likely to cut down household waste, recycle and choose environmentally-friendly products. By contrast, men claim to be more likely to purchase a less-polluting car.

Car use remains a problem

Unlike other topics, the proportion of consumers who seek more information on reducing car use does not translate into a similar proportion taking action. While relatively few consumers seek more information on cutting their car use, even fewer than might be expected actually cut down their driving. Given that car use continues to grow, there is a strong case for making this the focus of an intensive behaviour change programme.

How to support consumers using information and advice

Information and advice should be seen as one component of marketing to promote behaviour change, alongside a range of other policy interventions. There is a well-developed body of international experience, the field of 'social marketing', that shows exactly how to do this. The NCC defines social marketing as 'a systematic process using marketing techniques and approaches to achieve behavioural goals.'

Social marketing recognises that there is often strong competition for rival behaviours, and that marketing interventions can be carefully designed and targeted to fit into daily life, to increase benefits and to decrease barriers in ways that achieve behaviour change. It takes a consumer perspective and builds from an understanding of the perceptions, beliefs and behaviours that consumers start with.

Supporting consumers

Consumers need support to help them make sense of and use information on sustainable consumption effectively. The government should consider what 'sustainability literacy'[21] might mean for consumers and how sustainability skills can be developed. The government must also consider the role of tailored advice and 'personal trainers' in supporting consumers, particularly on apparently intractable subjects such as car use.

Environment Direct

The government's commitment to a new Environment Direct service for consumers is welcome. It answers the consumer demand to get more authoritative sustainable consumption information from government. Further consumer research and existing evidence from the field of social marketing should guide the format that Environment Direct takes. Careful signposting from – or even co-branding with – other trusted sources is likely to be welcomed by consumers. Links to existing services, such as Consumer Direct, would be valuable.

Existing seekers

The fifth of the population who already seek more information may readily want to access Environment Direct's services. A web-based resource, focusing on these issues would make an important (if modest) beginning, although it risks being just another website among many.

New 'customers'

The NCC believes that Environment Direct could draw in consumers who have not previously sought out information on these issues. But for these consumers a web-based service is considerably less attractive.

The retail environment presents important opportunities to persuade people to find out more. At its simplest, this may mean placing Environment Direct leaflets on relevant topics (perhaps co-branded with the retailer) in-store, or in supermarket literature.

Maximum use should be made of the scope to tell consumers who seek information in one particular area, about information available in another.

Product-level information

If Environment Direct is to fulfil its potential, the NCC believes it is crucial that it incorporates information on the environmental performance of individual products, with some form of scoring or ranking system. In going beyond general lifestyle tips, it would make the service unique. This is likely to be of interest to existing information-seekers, and would provide necessary clarity about manufacturers' claims on sustainability. In addition, it may appeal to a new audience, particularly where high environmental performance is linked to cost savings.

Perhaps even more importantly, it could spur market transformations by encouraging manufacturers to compete on environmental performance and providing an easy means for retail buyers to specify environmentally-sound products.

It would provide a strong incentive for manufacturers and retailers who gained high scores to incorporate details of their environmental performance in their marketing and product labelling. This would close the loop back to the consumers who currently do not seek more information.

References and notes

1. Defra's model for behaviour change is set out in the government's sustainable development strategy, *Securing the future*: 'enable, encourage and engage people and communities in the move toward sustainability; recognising that government needs to lead by example.'

2. This is the goal of sustainable development, as defined in the UK government's recent strategy, *Securing the future*.

3. National Consumer Council (NCC), *16 pain-free ways to help save the planet*, 2005.

4. Sustainable Development Research Network (SDRN), Jackson, T., *Motivating sustainable consumption*, 2005.

5. Brook Lyndhurst, *Bad habits and hard choices: in search of sustainable lifestyles*, 2004; MORI have produced similar findings: www.mori.com/pubinfo/mco/green-behaviour.shtml.

6. Based on mentions of five or more topics.

7. NCC, *Green choice: what choice?* 2003.

8. See www.mori.com/polls/trends /issues.shtm.

9. See www.defra.gov.uk/environment /statistics/pubatt/download/xls /pa01tb02.xls.

10. More on the NCC's assessment of the impact of competing consumer priorities on sustainable consumption can be found in NCC, *Green choice: what choice?* 2003 and NCC, *16 pain-free ways to help save the planet*, 2005.

11. Brook Lyndhurst, *Bad habits and hard choices: in search of sustainable lifestyles*, 2004.

12. See www.co-operativebank.co.uk; see NCC, *Consumers and the environment: can consumers save the planet?* 1997, for a contrasting consumer segmentation.

13. NCC, *Consumers and the environment: can consumers save the planet?* 1997.

14. NCC, *Green choice: what choice?* 2003.

15. Such barriers might, for example include restricted access to the internet.

16. Futerra, *Rules of the game*, 2005; House of Commons Environment Audit Committee, *Learning the sustainability lesson: tenth report of session 2002-03*, 2003.

17. Examples of such programmes are Global Action Plan's EcoTeams, or the Quaker Living Witness Programme; for more on this see Jackson, T, *Motivating sustainable consumption*, 2005.

18. See, for example, www.sei.se/ intelligenttravel/ExecSumm.pdf.

19. eMORI Technology Tracker www.mori.com/emori/tracker.shtml.

20. FSA, *Better informed consumers: assessing the implications for consumer education of research*, 2000.

21. 'Sustainability literacy' is emerging as a term, to describe the capacity of individuals to obtain, interpret, understand and use information about sustainable development. The DfES 'wants to see sustainability literacy become a core competency for professionals in the work place', www.sustainable-development.gov.uk /delivery/key-contributions/.

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