



# SIX STEPS TO **SUSTAINABILITY**

A positive approach for brands

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AS FEATURED IN

**WARC**<sup>^</sup>  
BY ASCENTIAL

# A NOTE ON OUR METHOD<sup>1</sup>

## Human understanding

Modern neuroscience has proven that most decision making takes place below the level of conscious thought. These thought processes combine together the complex web of memories, emotions, motivations and contextual factors that shape our behaviours. We build this thinking into all aspects of our approach; our research design, our techniques and also our analysis. For this research, this meant that we were able to delve below the surface of what people say to understand the true drivers of human behaviour, measuring and analysing in detail each of the emotional, motivational and contextual factors that can be leveraged to help them act.

## Reaction Time (RT) testing<sup>2</sup>

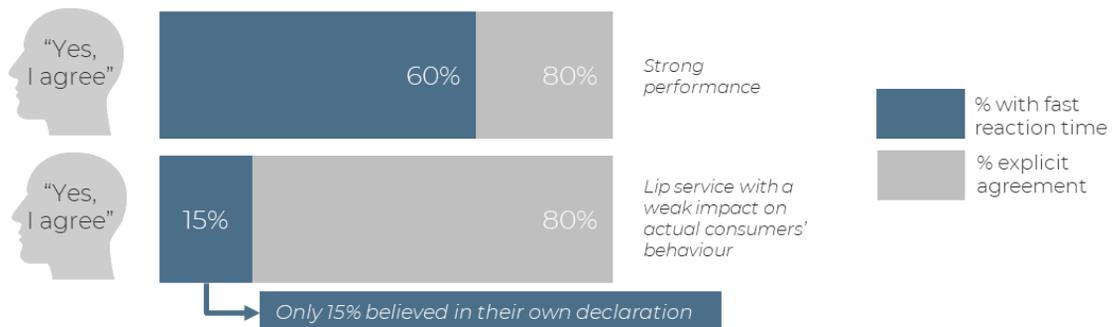
Our attitudes exist as a collection of memories represented in the brain by a network of associations: emotions, colours, shapes, images and sounds constructed, and reinforced or eroded, by exposure to advertising, life events, experiences, what people say and so on.

The stronger the link between these associations the faster we can access them. But people are not good at articulating their attitudes, so understanding the strength of mental associations is vital.

Our approach is based on the attitude accessibility paradigm<sup>3</sup> which shows the stronger an attitude is, the more accessible it is from memory and the more likely it is to guide behaviour.

When we ask respondents whether they agree with a statement, we can distinguish between those who are just paying lip service to the idea and those who are truly convinced by comparing reaction times. If there is a small gap between those who explicitly agree (all answering 'yes') and those who implicitly agree (those who do so with a fast reaction time) we can conclude that the statement is performing well – there is a high degree of conviction around the agreement, as in the top bar in Figure 1. In contrast, if there is a large gap, as in the lower bar, we know that the majority of people are just paying lip service to the idea and the statement is not likely to represent how people will actually behave.

Figure 1: Implicit vs. explicit agreement



<sup>1</sup> Walnut Unlimited conducted research using online interviews from the 20th of August to the 2nd of September 2021, using a UK nationally representative sample of n=1000

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.walnutunlimited.com/how-we-do-it/neuroscience-research/>

<sup>3</sup> Fazio & William, 1986; Dovidio & Fazio, 1991; Fazio, 2001

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## TIME FOR SOME **GOOD NEWS?**

If you've paid much attention to the news over the last couple of years, you may feel that it has been unusually bad. In early 2020, ongoing squabbles over Brexit dominated the news agenda, but these soon faded as the pandemic took hold. And now, just as it was starting to seem that COVID might be on the wane, we are faced with a new wave of infections and fights about vaccinations to fill us with even more doom and gloom.

In the darkest days of the pandemic there were some faint glimmers of light, one of which was the way the natural world seemed to be recovering during lockdown. There were fewer car and plane journeys to pollute the air and human activity was forcibly restricted, mountain goats wandered the deserted streets of Llandudno, and people took solace in nature

on their one permitted daily excursion for exercise. This was a message of hope and, although the degree to which the planet was really recovering is debatable, it resonated with a public desperate for some good news at last.

At the beginning of 2022, with the fallout from COP 26 still in the news, sustainability is at the top of the public agenda again. People are concerned over the future of our planet and the world we are leaving for the next generation. But is concern enough to drive change? We conducted some research with UK consumers to find out.

## People are ready for sustainable living...

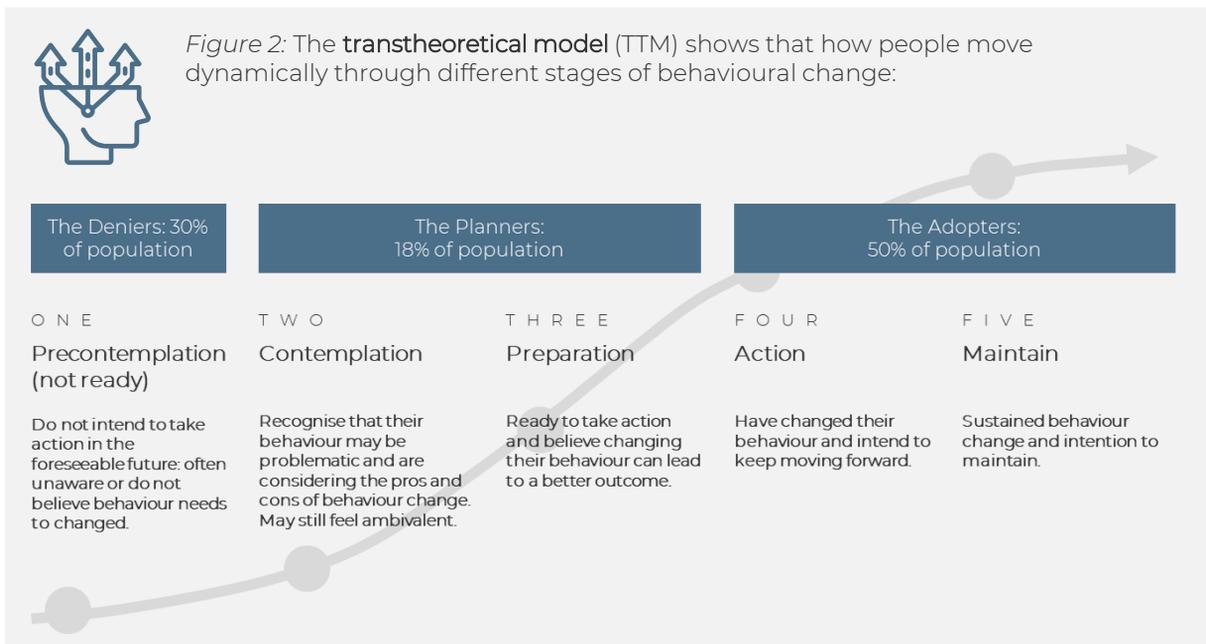
Our research suggests that there are good reasons to be hopeful. The majority of people in the UK are ready to make changes in their own lives around sustainability and to become active and influence others. Less than half of the people we surveyed (45%) thought it was the responsibility of 'others' to solve sustainability issues – and only 18% thought this with any conviction (fast reaction time) which implies that more than half of people feel a degree of personal responsibility.

We segmented<sup>4</sup> our survey respondents according to the transtheoretical model (TTM) developed by Prochaska and DiClemente<sup>5</sup>, which shows how people move through stages of behavioural change. Figure 2 reveals that two thirds of the population (68%) – the Adopters and the Planners - are already acting on living more sustainably, planning to do so, or thinking about it, and only 30% are in denial about what needs to be done.

This is good news. Humans need to feel hopeful and if we, as a society and as individuals, can tap into that need, and focus on the hopeful message that most people are ready to change, perhaps we can encourage more people to look beyond the self and work towards a better future for everyone.

## ...but need a nudge to act

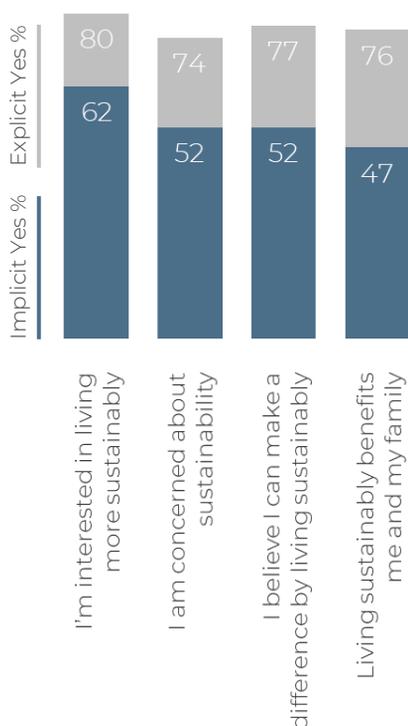
Figure 3 shows that people care about environmental issues, they want to make changes in their own lives and they believe that they can make a difference. The levels of conviction (implicit yes based on fast reaction times) are relatively high, so we can conclude that the majority of people are genuine in their concerns. However, more people show conviction (62%) with a fast response to the first statement – I am interested in living more sustainably – than the later statements, which indicates that perhaps there is some confusion around the benefits of sustainable living: how



4. We asked UK respondents 15 key statements around their behaviour and purchase decisions within the FMCG and Retail category to determine how sustainable people currently are. NB: Segments don't add up to 100% as some respondents were not classified  
 5. Prochaska, J., & DiClemente, C. (1983). Stages and processes of self-change of smoking: toward an integrative model of change. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, 51(3), 390–395

relevant is this, does it apply to me, does it really make a difference and does it really benefit me and my family?

Figure 3: People care about sustainability



We also know that there can be a gap between what people say, and what they actually do, especially around living sustainably: the 'green gap'. People do want to make a difference but don't always follow through. There is so much information around about sustainability, some of it contradictory, and so many messages of doom and gloom that it can leave some of us stressed, anxious and unable to act – we're frozen with fear. It's easier to do nothing and stick to old, familiar habits. Behavioural science tells us that it is counterproductive to punish non-sustainable behaviours or to make us feel guilty when we

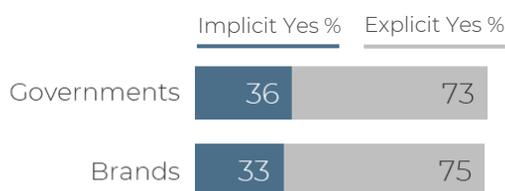
don't live up to our own intentions. Scaremongering can inhibit us from taking the desired action rather than encouraging us to change our behaviour. This is particularly true in circumstances when the negative information goes against our past beliefs and behaviour, creating a cognitive dissonance – a psychological discomfort which we seek to resolve by finding excuses. Humans tend to repress uncomfortable feelings, mask them or turn them into something else. We know that mass adoption of sustainable behaviours is needed to make a real difference. It's time for a different approach.

## Who is responsible for driving change?

Figure 4 shows that three quarters of people believe it is the responsibility of the government and brands to solve sustainability issues. This implies that people feel sustainability can't be solved by legislation alone, and acknowledges the relationship between government and brands and the degree of power and influence that the biggest brands wield.

Figure 4: Who is responsible for change?

### Whose role is it to solve sustainability issues?





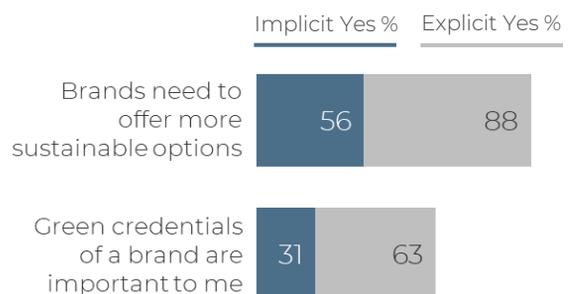
However, emotional conviction is low which implies a scepticism about the degree to which government is truly committed to change, an understanding that brands are as often the polluters as they are the problems solvers and a healthy cynicism for any greenwashing that may go on.

The good news for brands is that their customers are more attracted to brands with authentic sustainability promises. Figure 5 shows that around two thirds of consumers agree that ‘The green credentials of a brand are important to me’, although only 31% of people agreed with high emotional conviction. Those respondents in the sample who make sustainable choices regularly show significantly higher levels of emotional conviction, and key driver analysis found this statement to be the strongest driver of sustainable purchase decisions, suggesting that brands do play an important role in sustainable living.

People also want brands to offer them more options so they can live sustainably, and have more conviction around this statement than they do around how important it is for a brand to demonstrate green credentials. This too may

be due to cynicism about brands’ motives. There is an opportunity here for brands to do better, to support their customers in their green endeavours and to put proof around their own sustainability promises. If brands work with consumers to provide sustainable options and are transparent in their actions, we can make sustainable behaviour easier and more habitual.

Figure 5: People want brands to help them live sustainably



# TAKING A POSITIVE APPROACH TO SUSTAINABILITY

## STEP ONE

### Commit to a positive approach

How would it be if brands were to take a positive approach that moves away from doom and gloom and scaremongering and instead is driven by data, listens to and understands customers according to where they are in their sustainability journey, and uses behavioural science to analyse their needs and work with them, rather than against them.

Brands could choose to help people feel understood and support them in their efforts to live sustainably, even when life gets in the way. Neuroscience tells us that feeling understood is a core human need<sup>6</sup>. It activates neural regions previously associated with reward and social connection – a better place to build on for the behavioural change we are trying to unlock. Walnut UNLIMITED’s Human Needs Model shown in Figure 6 confirms that a positive approach would have impact: humans are driven by a mix of underlying motives that tap into aspects of self-expression, group affiliation, discovery and safety. By understanding the motives behind specific behaviour, we can tap into these areas to more effectively communicate and drive action or behaviour change.

## STEP TWO

### Understand your customer segments

The next step is to understand the different customer journey segments so you can work with them. Figure 7 shows an overview of

Figure 6: Our Human Needs Model

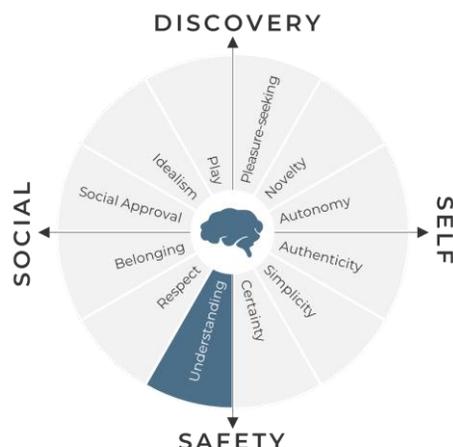
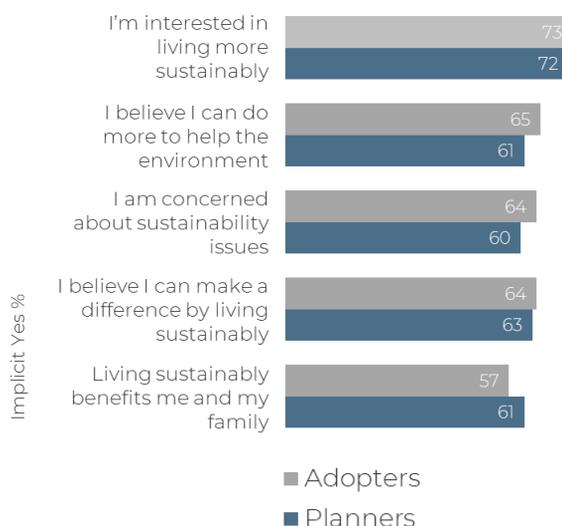


Figure 7: Similar levels of implicit concern amongst Adopters and Planners



6. [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/259486826\\_The\\_neural\\_bases\\_of\\_feeling\\_understood\\_and\\_not\\_understood](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/259486826_The_neural_bases_of_feeling_understood_and_not_understood)

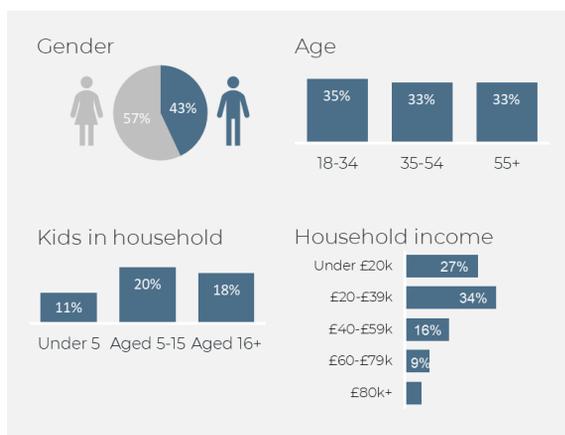
similarities and differences in segments' attitudes to sustainable living.

The Adopters and the Planners have similar levels of implicit belief and concern around sustainability – so what is holding the Planners back from taking more action? And what can be done to bring the Deniers on board? Brands need to understand the profile of the three different groups, and then take appropriate actions to fit with the different stages of the journey that their customers have reached.

### The Adopters: Often younger, often female

The Adopters represent 50% of the population. They are more likely to be female, to have younger children, earn a little more than the average and lean more to the left politically.

Figure 8: The Adopters



### The Planners: Slightly older, with older children

The Planners are a smaller segment – only 18% of the population. They are similar to the

Adopters, but more even in gender, and they skew a little older and so their children are a little older too. They are also left-leaning but their household income is around average for the UK, which is a little lower than that of the Adopters.

Figure 9: The Planners

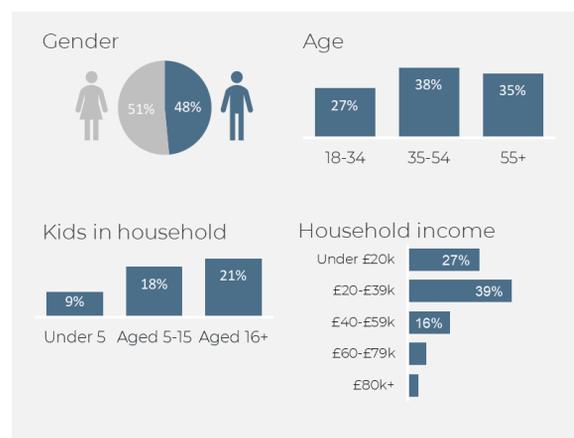
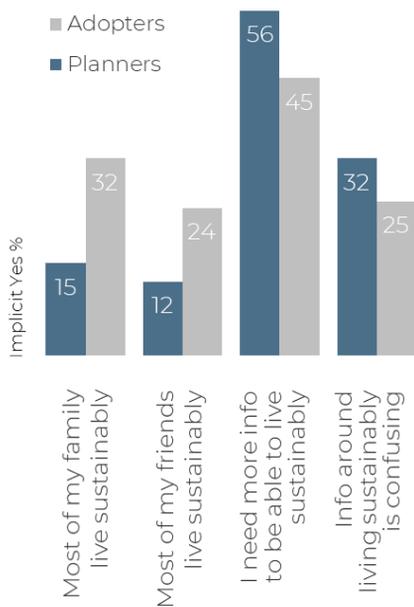


Figure 10 shows two key difference between the Adopters and Planners. First, Adopters are significantly more likely to have friends and family who are also making sustainable choices. This serves to normalise sustainable living. Behavioural science tells us that when we pick up social cues such as these, it can prompt us to compare ourselves to others, and to make changes in order to fit in. Belonging is one of the most basic of human needs; we are social creatures and need to feel we belong to our group of friends and family and to feel accepted and loved by others. We learn how to think and behave like others in order to fit in and to avoid social rejection, which has been shown to activate the same areas of the brain as physical pain.

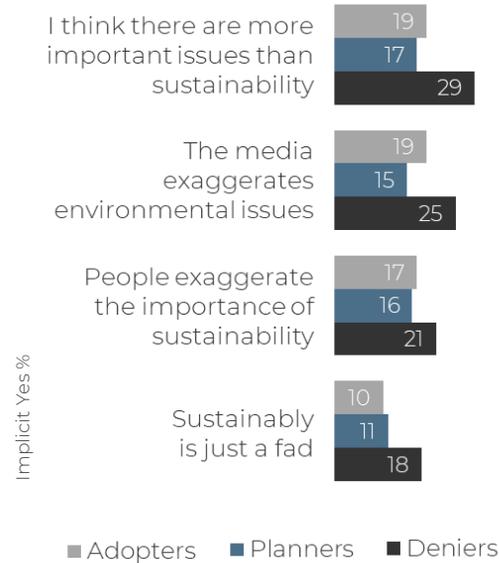
Second, the Planners are more likely to feel that they need more information to live sustainably and that the information already available is confusing. This goes some way to

explaining why members of this group intend to adopt more sustainable behaviours but have not done so yet. A lack of information and confusion over what to do and where to start can leave people prone to inaction.

Figure 10: Adopters have more social influences; Planners need more information



sustainability if they are to change, so a sensitive approach will be needed that focuses education around topics close to their concerns and worries.



**The Deniers:  
Often older males with established habits**

For any society, change takes time. The Deniers need convincing to live more sustainably. Members of this group are far more likely to believe that the importance of sustainability is being exaggerated and that we should be focusing on more important issues. Just giving them more information may not work, as it would with the Planners, as the challenge is to first get them engaged with the issue. This group does need to learn more about

Figure 11 shows that this group differs demographically as well as attitudinally. They are more likely to be male, to have voted for Brexit, and skew older. Their average income is lower too. We need to listen to their concerns and be sensitive in how we help them to understand the reality of climate change and its implications.

Figure 11: The Deniers

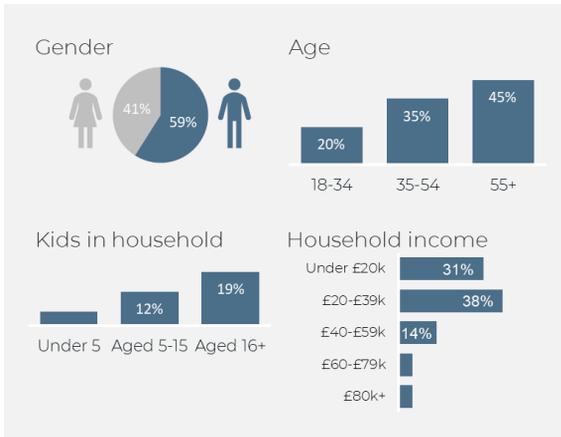
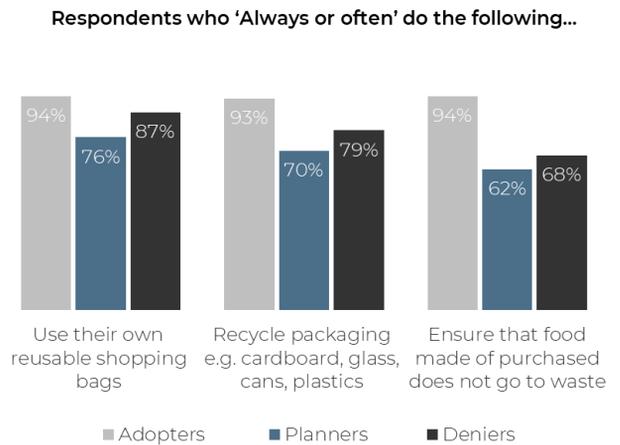


Figure 12: Deniers do exhibit some sustainable behaviours



## Can the Deniers change? A success story

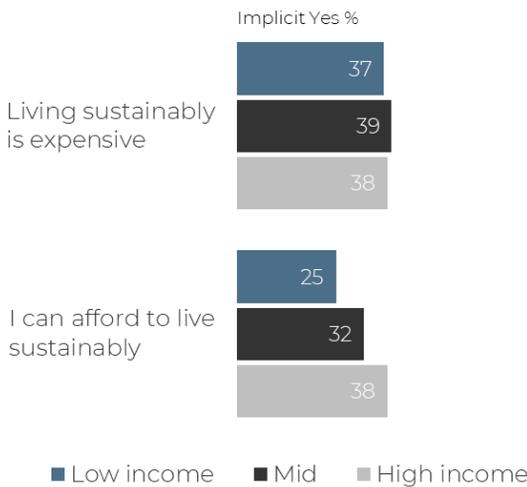
It is worth asking whether we believe the Deniers attitudes are entrenched and whether they will ever change. We can't know for sure, but by looking at some behaviours that have successfully been changed – even among this group – we can learn about what has been effective to date, and it gives us some hope that everyone can eventually be brought along on the sustainability journey.

Figure 12 shows that the majority of all groups – including the Deniers - say that they use their own reusable shopping bags, recycle regularly and reduce food waste. We know that people aren't always truthful especially when talking about their own behaviour, but we think it's fair to say that with a combination of government intervention and brands increasingly using recyclable packaging, providing 'bags for life' and campaigning around waste, there has been some success.

This suggests that there are some areas in which the Deniers are happy to live more sustainably. In fact, they may not see it as that. As an older and lower income group, it may be that they practice these behaviours out of need – it is expensive to waste food – or out of more traditional, old fashioned values around thrift, and 'make do and mend'.

This is borne out by looking at attitudes to the perceived expense of sustainable living by income group, as in Figure 13. The perception of sustainability being expensive is fairly similar regardless of income but it's the affordability which differs greatly.

Figure 13: Perceptions of cost are broadly similar but affordability depends on income



STEP THREE  
**Take a multi-layered approach**

Looking at the different profiles of the three groups, and their beliefs, concerns and attitudes, it's clear that brands need to take a multi-layered approach that draws on behavioural science to ensure that their sustainability strategy has something to appeal to all groups and doesn't alienate loyal customers. We recommend that brands develop a sustainability strategy that focuses on how to **support** the Adopters, **inform** the Planners and **engage** the Deniers.

**Support the Adopters**

Adopters are already making many sustainable choices of their own accord,

particularly in retail and FMCG categories. They don't need further information about the benefits, and they certainly don't need doom-filled messages about the risks to the planet. What they do need in order to make further sustainable choices and to extend this behaviour into other categories is new and exciting sustainable options for them to choose, and authentic information about brands' commitment to the environment.

Examples of messaging that will resonate with customers at this stage of the journey include visions of the future, such as Sky Zero's ads to inform customers about their net zero carbon commitment, and exciting new ways to be more sustainable, such as Ikea's buy back scheme. In Denmark, the supermarket brand Coop has created an app that will appeal to Adopters; it enables shoppers to track and reduce the carbon footprint of each shop, and gives them more sustainable suggestions for the next shop.

**Inform the Planners**

There is a huge opportunity to help this group with information – but it needs to be done sensitively. Again, there is no place for scaremongering; this group is ready to act but wants help, guidance and reassurance. Information about the options that are available and how they can make a difference will help this group – especially if it is light touch, and recognises how difficult it can be to make changes.

Examples of messaging that will resonate with this group are:

- The ad for Quorn which features meat lovers, such as a caveman and a venus fly trap, making a switch to meat-free food. It is done with humour and offers an alternative that they may not be aware of.
- Sainsbury's 'Try your halfest' campaign which says if you can't fully give up meat, then go half-and-half and add lentils chick peas to bulk out your meat-based food.

See reference list for links to mentioned adverts, campaigns or articles



## Engage the Deniers

Brands don't need to spend time trying to understand why these customers are stuck in their beliefs. Instead, it would be more effective to try and meet them where they are, get close to their concerns and make change seem inclusive and manageable. Brand should consider emphasising the benefits, focusing on traditional values, and showing how living sustainably is part of being a good citizen and member of your community.

A good example for this group is the ad by Co-op which shows an older person making a small effort to recycle, being part of a community and finding joy in the process.

We do know that bringing people together in a non-judgemental and supportive fashion, to learn from experts, such as in the Climate Assembly, can help people to understand the issues and engage with the subject. However, it is important to emphasise that the reasons that people in this group are not open to more sustainable living are likely to be complex and deep-rooted, and that we will need more research if we are to understand them in more detail.

## STEP FOUR

### Work with positive role models

Our research shows that 77% of respondents explicitly agreed that trusted public figures providing information and direction is important, yet only 18% had strong emotional conviction.

We have seen the positive impact David Attenborough had on reducing single use plastics following his BBC series, Blue Planet II: the combination of a trusted public figure, capturing the emotional appeal behind saving our oceans and brands stepping up with sustainable options such as offering paper straws and encouraging people to use their own reusable cups led to a 53% reduction in single use plastic in the 12 months following the show. Other examples include Leeds striker, Patrick Bamford, who promotes sustainability and hopes to show that if we all take little steps, we can make a difference and, most notably, Greta Thunberg who has inspired people across the world.

This suggests that there are opportunities with brands to work with positive role models to help draw people into their messaging around sustainability and engage them with the topic. Studies have shown that character-driven stories and emotionally-fuelled narratives not only elicit a physiological response, they also inspire behaviour change<sup>7</sup>.

However, the lack of emotional conviction around this statement in our research suggests that it might be hard to get this right; consumers can be sceptical, and there is a risk of being seen as inauthentic, or jumping on a bandwagon. We believe that brands need to see this as a long-term partnership, rather than a short-term tactical campaign. Finding the right public figure with a good fit to your brand and your sustainability objectives is crucial – and being transparent about the relationship will also build credibility and trust with your customers.

It is also worth noting that this is an approach that will be more effective for the Adopters and the Planners (24% and 18% implicit yes respectively) versus the Deniers (7%). However, finding a role model that fits with Deniers, values and beliefs could be a positive step in building trust around sustainability messages.

STEP FIVE

**Be open about the costs**

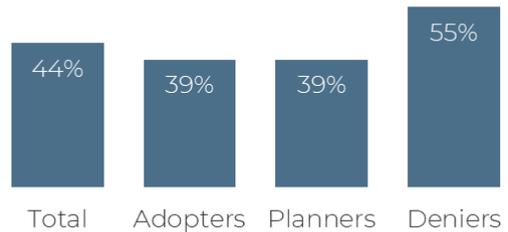
Our research shows that, overall, 44% of respondents believe that sustainable products are just a way for brands to make more money. Figure 13 shows that this attitude is widely held and not just driven by the Deniers (although they are more likely to agree than the other segments).

It will be really important for brands that adopt a positive approach to sustainability to address this cynicism head on. Brands need to be transparent about any added costs to the price of a sustainable product and be clearer on how buying on a sustainable purchase will make a difference. What might help, in cases where this is relevant, is to highlight the long-term

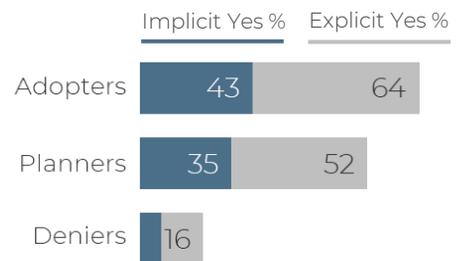
cost savings for an initial higher outlay – for example buying a one-off case to hold sustainable deodorant, or buying the bottles to use for refillable cleaning products. Furthermore, creating the right choice architecture and framing the sustainable options to highlight their benefits can encourage more consumers to see their added value.

Figure 14 Although Adopters are cynical about brands' motives, they are still prepared to pay more

**Respondents who agree or agree strongly that 'sustainable products are just a way for brands to make more money'**



**I am willing to pay more for sustainable products**



The cynicism is countered by a willingness amongst the Adopters and, to a degree, the Planners to pay more for sustainable products.

7. <https://www.mediapartners.com/blog/post/the-science-of-storytelling-how-storytelling-shapes-our-behavior>

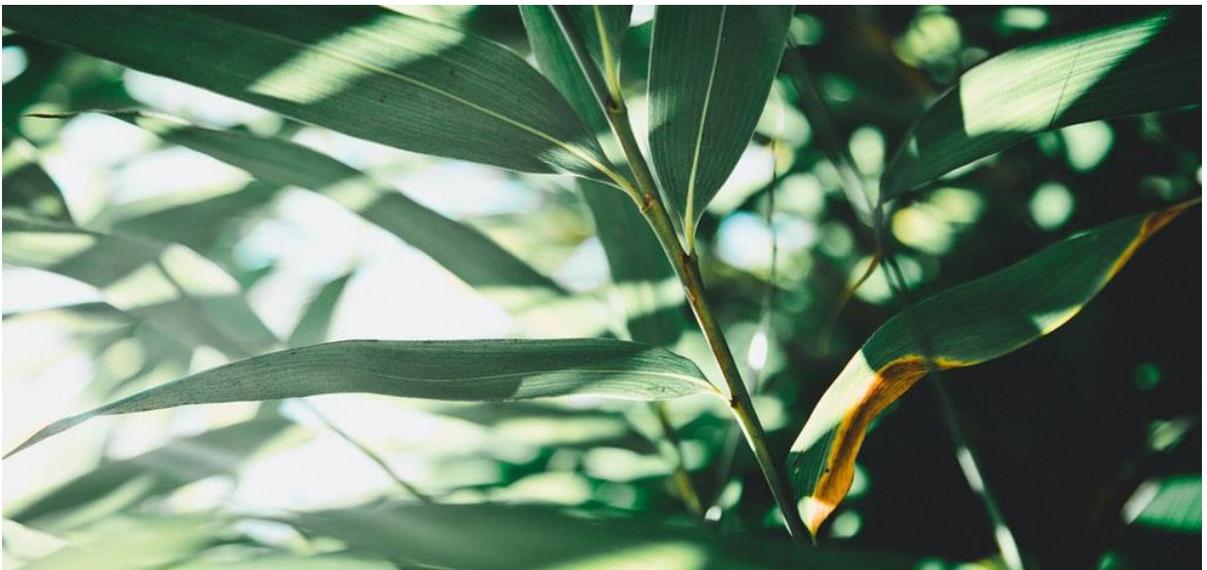
Figure 14 shows that two thirds (64%) of Adopters are willing to pay more, and that there is a reasonably high level of emotional conviction around this statement. Brands can leverage this good will by being transparent not only about the costs of the product, and where additional costs are coming from, but also by being clear about the entire supply chain: how the products are sourced, who is employed and what the employment conditions are like, and so on.

makes skiwear. Similarly, there is little point asking people to pay more for products because they are made out of recycled materials if it turns out that the people doing the recycling work in sweatshops in dangerous conditions. Transparency is key in terms of your motives for the initiative, the information you give to your customers and the information you seek from your suppliers.

#### STEP SIX

### **Check for greenwashing at every stage**

This is the most important step. Whatever sustainability initiatives and messaging you decide on must come across as authentic. This means not only listening to and understanding customers, but checking at every stage that what you are doing is coherent with your brand and is backed up by your organisation's wider approach to sustainability. Creating a campaign about cleaning up the oceans would be a better fit for company that makes swimwear, for example, than for one that



## CONCLUSION

A POSITIVE SUSTAINABILITY  
CHECKLIST FOR BRANDS

It is time for brands to take a new approach to sustainability. Doom and gloom and scaremongering will only serve to entrench people in their existing behaviours. The good news we have all been waiting for is that people are ready to change and they are looking to brands to help them. The future is bright if we work together and brands should embrace this opportunity now.

The goal for brands should be to understand where and how to play in order to help people close the green gap, to move them from wanting to live sustainably to actually doing so and to help them shift their mind sets from being consumers towards being citizens.

This qualitative step forward means understanding customers in depth, in terms of where they are on their journey towards sustainable living and then working with them in ways that fit each segment. This will entail making more sustainable choices appealing, exciting and easy to choose; improving information and educating people on the benefits of sustainable living, in a light-touch way and understanding not only the emotional barriers and frictions, but also the physical barriers across all sectors, geographies, incomes, and genders.

Brands need to consider the human impact of every decision over for the long-term – and help consumers to do the same. Following our six-step checklist is a great way to start.

## ONE

Take a **good news, hope-filled positive approach to sustainability** and recognise that doom and gloom or shaming people is counterproductive.

## TWO

**Listen to and understand** your customers – and recognise where they are on the journey. Use **implicit data and behavioural science** to get an in-depth understanding of how to work with each segment. Blend methodologies to unlock this human complexity.

## THREE

Take a different approach for each segment: **support, inform and engage.**

**Support** Adopters by providing lots of green opportunities – this group will lap them up.

**Inform** Planners by giving them more information, tips and hacks and helping to cut through the confusion.

**Engage** Deniers with a positive approach, but connect with them around their values first – and expect to make small, slow gains.

## FOUR

Work with **public figures** but choose carefully and make sure you have secured positive long-term arrangements.

## FIVE

Be **transparent about costs**; some are happy to pay more if they know where the costs are coming from, others need to hear that living sustainably doesn't have to be expensive and can even save money.

## SIX

Check carefully for **greenwashing** at every step – authenticity, brand fit and transparency should be your watchwords.

Getting brand strategy and communication right involves a careful blend of art and science. Throw sustainability into the mix and you will need to ensure that deep human understanding is at the heart of any step you make.

At Walnut we help brands to reset, to rethink their strategies and to reposition their brand and communications. We understand that sustainability is a complex subject; by recognising this, we get closer to the answers you need. Bringing this positive change within your organisation as well as throughout your supply chain becomes our priority. We can help you unpick your current brand positioning and work with you to move towards more sustainable choices.

With research, strategy, and creativity, Walnut will guide you at every stage of developing and refining your brand strategies and putting them into practice, whilst ensuring consistency at all of your consumer touchpoints.

We help you to prioritise, refocus on action and help you identify the role to play and the best position to occupy. How do we do this? We work with you to identify the behavioural change required, build an action plan and apply iterative design techniques to evaluate the plan. We can help you answer these questions and more:

- Do you know which strategy will have the most impact among your target audiences?
- Are you framing your sustainable options in the right way and providing the right choice architecture to encourage uptake?
- Would social proof or a message conveying reciprocation be most effective in driving consumers to choose your more sustainable products?
- Are you providing the right motivations for customers to want to trial the sustainable options that you offer?
- Will these motivations be enough to drive long-term behaviour change?

- How can you support the Adaptors to continue the 'good' behaviours and bring others along the sustainable journey?

We believe that brands have a massive role to play in tackling the challenges in society; sustainability is one of the most pressing. We are hopeful that we can make this world a little bit better and brands have a huge and positive role to play. Are you in?

Research and analysis carried out by Dr. Cristina de Balanzo, Tijen Enver, Nick Saxby and Andreea Tarasescu.

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