

# Project Energy Code

Cracking the Green Code: Using a  
Values-Based Model to Improve  
Customer Communications and Marketing

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# **EcoAlign Project Energy Code**

## **Cracking the Green Code: Using a Values-Based Model to Improve Customer Communications and Marketing**

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## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

This paper has been written to help provoke insight and shift thinking regarding the causes and consequences of effective communications in the energy and environmental space. In it, I challenge the depth and sufficiency of existing marketing ideologies, and outline a clear, scientifically validated values-based messaging framework based upon the work of late developmental psychologist Clare W. Graves. This simple, resilient, and highly actionable framework can be easily applied to a variety of marketing and communication contexts, helping environmentally-minded professionals create messages that strategically overcome mental resistance and inspire sustainable behavior change. Several real world examples and applied research results are outlined, along with a list of concrete, short-term opportunities for professionals who wish to apply this framework within their own work-life sphere.

## **INTRODUCTION**

Concerned business leaders, politicians, activists, sociologists, psychologists and an ever-growing community of sustainability enthusiasts are cracking their proverbial heads open trying to figure out new ways to make green behaviors more enticing to the masses. Is it working? Not really.

On one hand (and this is the good news), a remarkably high percentage of the American public now claims to be deeply concerned about the health and sustainability of our planet. On the other hand (and this is the bad news), this widespread concern has not yet translated into mass adoption of environmentally responsible behaviors by the public at large.<sup>1</sup> Differences in

opinions as to how the gap should be bridged and what specific actions should be taken are ubiquitous, causing mental gridlock (and more than a little discouragement) among a growing mass of public, corporate and governmental stakeholders.

Why the disconnect? Why does such a large gap exist between people's stated beliefs and their daily activities with regard to the environment? An answer to this question would give marketers unprecedented leverage for designing programs to help transform environmental rhetoric into measurable environmental results on a massive scale. If the road to global warming is paved with our collective good intentions, then understanding the phenomenological and existential factors that frustrate our environmental idealism is a great first step for paving a better path.

In this paper I briefly outline a scientific, human-centered approach for diagnosing and correcting this frustrating "green gap" through strategic messaging and communication design. Drawing from decades of developmental and cognitive psychology research (and a healthy dose of common sense), this paper provides a grounded, scientific and imminently practical values-based framework through which environmentally-minded professionals of every stripe can motivate even the toughest of audiences to successfully pursue business agendas that balance financial, social, and environmental responsibility.

## FIRST THINGS FIRST: WHAT CAUSES CONSUMER BEHAVIOR?

Observable behavior is always just a symptom of something larger and unseen. Trying to understand someone's behavior by looking at their surrounding environment is like trying to understand the ocean by looking at a boat. One may find a few chaotic patterns amongst bobs and ripples perhaps, but that's about it. To get a deeper understanding of the causes of consumer choice making, we must be willing to dive to very bottom of the vast ocean of the human mind and become familiar with the hidden anchors that underlie human perception itself.

Fortunately, you can leave your scuba gear on the shore. Psychologists and political strategists have spent decades doing this for us.<sup>ii</sup> And what they've found is both simple and startling. **Although inherently dynamic and non-linear in nature, a person's daily behavioral choices are patterned by their core values—those fundamental beliefs, assumptions, and aspirations that they use to make sense of the world around them. A person's core values act as a gravitational**

**force of consciousness, literally shaping the way the world looks to them, and in turn how they look to the world vis-a-vis their day-to-day behaviors.**<sup>iii</sup>

To illustrate by way of analogy, imagine spinning a marble around a bathroom sink. At any given point it would be difficult to predict the marble's exact location, because its movements are somewhat chaotic and random, fluctuating wildly based upon even the most minute textural gradients in the sink surface. In fact, even the most learned physicist would have a terrible time devising an equation that would predict this marble's exact path. Yet, anyone with an ounce of common sense can easily predict where the marble will end up eventually—right down the drain.

This metaphorical drain shapes our marble's path in the same way that a person's core values shape their thoughts and behaviors. Understand a person's value systems and you will grasp the size, shape and contours of the mental sink around which the myriad "marbles" of their everyday thoughts are endlessly pulled as they strive make sense of the data their five senses send them. With such insight comes great power for creating communications that can transform feel-good notions into measurable behaviors. On the other hand, without this insight, we are left without an effective map with which to help our audiences escape the sun-drenched doldrums of ineffectual good intentions.

For example, let's assume that we want to create a campaign that motivates people to install compact fluorescent bulbs in their homes. At the behavioral level our goal is measurable and clear. The challenging question is this—How will we frame our communications so that they effectively play to the mental landscape of our various audiences? What messaging tactics and strategies will be most effective? Should we appeal to the "better angels" of our audience's nature, calling upon them to be of service to the planet and their fellow man? Should we apply the tried and true guilt-headlock, calling upon them to consider their children living in an overheated world with soot-blackened skies? Should we pound them in the pocketbook, showing them the money they waste every day by sticking to their old incandescent light bulb ways?

The correct answer to all of these questions is, of course, "it depends."

Audiences are comprised of groups of complex, multidimensional people operating from wildly different core values that drive both their daily decisions and their larger life aspirations. Communicators ignore this existential diversity at their own certain peril. Faced with such complexity—and lacking a well-tested scientific model of human values—most marketers

pushing green, energy efficiency, conservation and sustainability at large have thus far done their best to appeal to everyone, creating generic, washed-out messages that lack any real punch. Or, even worse, they've create messages that have unwittingly offend the very audiences they are seeking to inspire.

**Another Inconvenient Truth:** In his Oscar-winning film "An Inconvenient Truth," Al Gore did a terrific job of demonstrating the horrible hell that humans will create if we don't dramatically limit our global carbon emissions. Unfortunately he spent far less time creating an inspired, credible vision for our collective future. The result? His message reached only those uncommonly brave souls who were willing to stare despair in the eyes without blinking. For many of those without such a courageous disposition, Gore's film was often dismissed as an offensive piece of liberal propaganda. How can we design future attempts to raise environmental awareness so that they will successfully engage even those defensive, mentally resistant groups? A great first step would be to properly diagnose exactly what role or function such recalcitrant attitudes play within the psyche of the various species of environmental cynics that populate our country. This would give us insight for designing communications that engage everyone to see the sustainability movement as the unprecedented personal and collective opportunity that it truly is.

Great solutions come from great questions. Therefore, the first action item for creating large scale communication programs that solve real-world problems is to finally start asking the right questions, such as: What do our target audiences care about most? What are their core beliefs in life? What is their generic conception of a mature, responsible adult? What offends their basic sense of propriety? In the context of these existing assumptions, what meaningful purpose might energy efficiency reasonably serve? How might they have already grown cynical about environmentalism? How might we strategically engage this cynicism to create an immediate sense of trust? How might we contextualize our behavioral call

to action so that it occurs to target audiences as an exciting opportunity to further their own preexisting life goals and aspirations?

From inquiries of this type, we will finally begin to glimpse beneath the veneer of human perception, gaining fresh insight into the hidden causes of human behavior: the core values that people unconsciously use to simplify decision-making processes and organize endlessly complex perceptual data.

Let's face it: No one cares about a light bulb, really. What people care about is feeling good about themselves, enjoying life, and expressing themselves in ways that align with their core values and beliefs. Get them to see a light

bulb as an opportunity to experience these exalted feelings and your job is complete.

## THE “GREEN GAP” IS A MATTER OF CONTEXT

The green gap is actually created in the minds of frustrated idealists who naively expect that a person’s stated intentions should match up with their day-to-day behaviors. How many times have marketers experienced the frustration of discovering that what people said in focus groups wasn’t exactly accurate, or that polls were misleading? How many times must marketers continue to experience this frustration before they modify the madness behind their methods?

The simple fact of the matter is that the observable behavior of “stating one’s concern for the environment” is merely one specific behavioral expression that occurs within a specific mental/situational context. The observable behavior of “purchasing environmentally sound products and services” is a separate behavioral expression that exists within a completely different set of mental/situational contexts. The only reasonable way to link these two contextually different types of behavioral expression (beyond mandated legal requirements!) is through uncovering and tapping into the one underlying source that unites them—those core values that shape one’s everyday sense-making.

Sincerity is not enough. Good intentions are not enough. Seasoned marketing expertise is not enough. *Insight* is the key. To consistently and reliably inspire willingness for behavioral change in others, we first have insight into the hidden drivers that underlie their current behavioral norms. Once we have this sort of knowledge we will finally be in a position to call them to action in a way that works within the context of their existing motivational flows, without the need for overt forcing, cajoling or persuasion.

What’s more, through such a lens it becomes possible to finally see that all human behavior—even that which inadvertently contributes to global warming and the melting of ice caps—is fundamentally aspirational and well-intended. Our real challenge as leaders and communicators is not to change people, but rather to create programs that embrace this underlying truth, and successfully call upon those universals of human experience to inspire consumers to express their positive intentions through behaviors that match the feel-good environmental rhetoric they so earnestly voice.

At the end of the day, the “green gap” is a mirage. It will disappear as soon we start asking the right questions, and start designing programs that call upon our audiences to access their core aspirations, within a behavioral context that they find personally relevant.

This lofty task becomes much simpler when we apply the wisdom gleaned from decades of developmental psychology research. It turns out that, despite the sometimes overwhelming complexity of thoughts and opinions that reside in the minds of our audiences, there are but a few basic core value profiles or “thinking types” operating in the world today. These value types have been thoroughly discovered, tested and refined through years of disciplined data collection and research. As communicators who aspire to transform environmental rhetoric into reality, this groundbreaking research provides a framework that offers unprecedented—and highly practical—insight into the minds of our various audiences.

## **INTRODUCING DR. CLARE W. GRAVES (THE ALBERT EINSTEIN OF ADULT VALUE DEVELOPMENT)**

The most thorough and pragmatic values-based framework available to environmentally conscious marketers was discovered—ironically enough—by a deceased research psychologist with arguably poor marketing skills. Through more than 40 years of data collection and experimental observation Dr. Clare W. Graves (1914-1986) outlined a fundamentally unique and practical values-based map of the always-unfolding human psyche.<sup>iv</sup> For decades this map has been used behind the scenes to help world leaders such as Nelson Mandela, Tony Blair and Bill Clinton solve problems ranging from apartheid to free-trade, but only now—with the mass emergence of the sustainability movement—does it finally seem to be getting the mainstream traction it deserves.<sup>v</sup>

Graves was a brilliantly innovative researcher, with insights far beyond the comprehension of his more cut-and-dry contemporaries. He viewed the psychology of the mature human being as “an unfolding, emergent, oscillating, spiraling process marked by progressive subordination of older, lower order behavior systems to newer, higher-order behavior systems as man’s existential problems change”.<sup>vi</sup> Driven by disciplined data collection and observation rather than top-down ideology, Graves discovered exactly eight different levels of thinking (or value-systems) operating in the world today, with existential roots tracing back to the origin of human culture itself. To understand these eight thinking types is to grasp the eight fundamental anchors that underlie all human perception.

These eight levels of thinking are:<sup>vii</sup>

- Level 1: Autistic Thinking (before 40,000 BC)
- Level 2: Magical/Tribal Thinking (after 40,000 BC)
- Level 3: Heroic Thinking (~8000 BC)
- Level 4: Absolutistic Thinking (~4000–2000 BC)
- Level 5: Individualist Thinking (~1300–1400 AD)
- Level 6: Humanistic Thinking (~1900 AD)
- Level 7: Systemic Thinking (~1950 AD)
- Level 8: Holistic Thinking (currently emerging)

Although all eight thinking levels exist still around the globe today, research and experience suggests that about 90 percent of today’s “mainstream” American audiences organize sensory information within the general thinking parameters set by level 4 (Absolutistic Thinking) through level 7 (Systemic Thinking). In other words, the vast majority of Americans seem to make sense of the world according to these four thinking/value types.

<b>Table 1: Four of Graves’ Existential Levels of Thinking</b>			
Level 4	Level 5	Level 6	Level 7
Absolutistic Thinking	Individualist Thinking	Humanistic Thinking	Systemic Thinking
20% of U.S.	30% of U.S.	30% of U.S.	10-15% of U.S.
Sacrifice self now to receive future reward	Express self for what self desires, but in a calculated fashion so as to avoid bringing down the wrath of important others	Sacrifice self now in order to gain acceptance now	Express self for what self desires and others need, but never at the expense of others, and in a manner that all life can continue to exist
Life is a test	Life is a game, World is a machine	Humans are a family	Life is a system
Call to duty	Call to action	Call to imagine, Call to compassion	Call to innovate, Call to service

Understanding these distinct developmental value-profiles gives marketers, politicians and business leaders a clear unobstructed lens through which to intuit the hidden mental processes that their customers unconsciously employ to make sense of their environmentally-oriented products and services. These four key value-systems are outlined in greater detail below, along with some preliminary suggestions for key “hot-button” words and

metaphors that marketer would be wise to consider when creating messages for customers of each type.<sup>viii</sup>

**Insights into Flight:** Have you ever traveled on Southwest Airlines? Did you like it? When asked this question, I've always found that people invariably respond strongly one way or another—positively, negatively, or with passionate ambivalence. As my studies of Clare W. Graves research deepened, I began to observe a very similar reaction in the way everyday people respond to others who think from Graves Level 6 humanistic value system—strong affection, annoyance or passionate ambivalence. The resemblance is uncanny! Eventually this mystery was solved when I discovered that Southwest CEO Howard Putnam actually had consulted with Gravesian practitioners to design the Southwest Brand in accordance with Level 6 values (equality, honesty and relatedness). From disarming marketing campaigns, to egalitarian seating policies, to the “no hidden fee” pricing policies, Southwest Airlines has been strategically designed to appeal to the Level 6 Humanistic Thinker in everyone. In a vast marketplace of airlines that have unconsciously branded themselves to appeal to Level 5 individualists, this was a bold design choice that has given Southwest Airlines a sustainable competitive advantage.

These four profiles, properly grasped and utilized, allow communicators to see the critical meaning-making leverage points in the psychology of their various target audiences. Targeted messaging campaigns that derive from this values-based framework generate extraordinary results compared to those of traditional “one-size-fits-all” campaigns.<sup>ix</sup> Why? Because the core values that Graves has so elegantly distilled, literally act as filters that determine whether or not a given message will be perceived as personally meaningful and relevant to our target audiences.<sup>x</sup>

By employing knowledge of our target audiences’ value profiles we can design and frame messages that speak to their needs, using metaphors, images and words that will have the highest possible emotional and behavioral impact. The same knowledge can lead to the development and testing of successful offerings that will be aligned with your customers’ value systems. The potential for applying this framework to better understand and motivate demographically diverse customer segments is immense.

#### **Existential Level 4: Absolutistic Thinking**

**Date of Origin:** Approximately 2000–4000 BC.

**Life Theme:** “Sacrifice self now to receive future reward.”<sup>xi</sup>

**Core Values:** Discipline, authority, purpose.

**Goal:** To find peace and meaning in this world by denying impulses and upholding moral laws.

**Found In:** Organized religions, the "moral majority," most rural areas of the US, George W. Bush, monks, rabbis, accountants, fundamentalists of any stripe.

**Brief Description:** Absolutistic thinking is marked by a strong belief in absolute authority, clear moral principles, and an unyielding need for ideological certainty. Absolutistic thinkers are security minded, resistant to change and family oriented. In healthier forms, they demonstrate an impressive ability to delay gratification in the pursuit of dutiful long-term goals. In the US, these thinkers make up about 20 percent of the population, and are most commonly found in rural areas, away from bustling cultural centers.

**Key words:** Right, wrong, responsibility, accountability, family, safety, security, danger, simple, reliability, (too much) change, tradition, duty, morality.

**Perception-shaping metaphor:** Life is a test.

**Key messaging tactic:** Call to duty.

**Insights about Energy Consumers:** EcoAlign recently conducted focus group research exploring how the Gravesian value profiles surface in the minds of typical utility customers. Participants of widely divergent demographic and sociological backgrounds were shown a series of fictional video vignettes intended to portray a typical "day in the life of" (DILo) of several demographically diverse utility consumers in the year 2015. Upon viewing each video, participants were asked to express their candid opinions about the value and credibility of each vignette. The results were striking. Not only did participant attitudes conform closely with what would be expected given Graves' value research, but demographic profiles proved an extremely accurate predictor of Gravesian thinking type. Such findings are highly promising for utility providers who hope to attain insight into the psychological landscape of their various service territories—such geographical "value-maps" will likely be critical for fashioning effective enrollment programs and other marketing initiatives as the new "smart grid" energy infrastructure unfolds. (Roberts, J. M., "DILo Focus Groups: A Values-Based Assessment of Utility Customer Responses." Available from EcoAlign, <http://www.ecoalign.com>.)

## Existential Level 5: Individualistic Thinking

**Date of Origin:** Approximately 1300–1400 AD

**Life Theme:** "Express self for what self-desires, but in a calculated fashion so as to avoid bringing down the wrath of important others."

**Core Values:** Accomplishing, power, profit.

**Goal:** To achieve success and affluence in this life by strategically manipulating desired outcomes.

**Found In:** Business professional stereotype, scientists, Wall Street, China's economic boom, free-market economics, engineers, politician archetype, lobbyists and lawyers, Donald Trump.

**Brief Description:** Individualistic thinking is typically marked by a strong desire to achieve and a pronounced sensitivity to social power dynamics. Individualistic thinkers are often clever, industrious "realists" with little patience for the more "touchy-feely" realm of human emotions. They are often energetic and goal-oriented, viewing the world almost exclusively through the lens of pragmatic (financial and social) self interest. In the US, individualistic thinkers make up about 30 percent of the population and can be found almost everywhere (especially in business districts of large metropolitan centers).

**Key words:** Efficiency, cost, limits, waste, results, control, conservation, unrealistic, consumer solutions, expensive, no-hassle, no-nonsense, payback.

**Perception-shaping metaphor:** Life is a game/World is a machine.

**Key messaging tactic:** Call to action.

## Existential Level 6: Humanistic Thinking

**Date of Origin:** Approximately 1900 AD.

**Life Theme:** "Sacrifice self now in order to gain acceptance now."

**Core Values:** Equality, honesty, relatedness.

**Goal:** To find happiness in this life—in this moment—by relating deeply to other humans.

**Found In:** Humanistic therapy, civil rights legislation, sensitivity training, socialistic societies, "liberal media bias," ACLU, progressive politics, 1960's U.S. hippie era.

**Brief Description:** Humanistic thinking is marked by a strong belief in the inherent value (and equality) of all human beings. Fierce advocates for equality, humanistic thinkers are often community oriented and idealistic, with a notable capacity to see the world from many different perspectives. Given their sometimes romantic notions about the world, humanistic thinkers are often frustrated by the lack of transparency in modern organizations, and tend to be suspicious of capitalism in general. Ideology aside, green thinkers are often just easy going folks looking to connect socially with others with similar values. In the US, humanistic thinkers make up about 30 percent of the population. They can be found everywhere, but tend to populate most densely in so called "blue" states near large cities.

**Key words:** Community, should, care, consciousness, service, education, manipulation, trust, authenticity, victim, gimmick, underprivileged, feelings, awareness, humanity

**Perception-shaping metaphor:** Humans are a family.

**Key messaging tactic:** Call to imagine/Call to compassion.

## Existential Level 7: Systemic Thinking

**Date of Origin:** Approximately 1950 CE (now emerging en mass)

**Life Theme:** "Express self for what self desires and others need, but never at the expense of others, and in a manner that all life can continue to exist."

**Core Values:** Integrity, competence, sustainability.

**Goal:** To restore vitality and balance to a world torn asunder.

**Found In:** Sustainability movement leaders, Richard Branson, President Barack Obama, rise of the "cultural creatives," quantum theory, innovative technologies, integral psychology.

**Brief Description:** Systemic thinking is marked by strong creative problem-solving skills and an impressive ability to think from an interdisciplinary perspective. Systemic thinkers are essentially open-minded, non-ideological, pragmatists. They seem to effortlessly discover innovative, workable solutions to complex problems, and can quite often communicate well with people of all backgrounds in the name of common goals. In the U.S., these thinkers make up about 10 to 15 percent of the population and can be found everywhere (although a majority may prefer culturally diverse cities areas with ample business and cultural opportunities).

**Key words:** Innovate, systems, win-win, transform, responsive, investment, vision, feedback, resilient, scale, results, insight, opportunity, insight.

**Perception-shaping metaphor:** Life is a system.

**Key messaging tactic:** Call to innovate/Call to service.

## EXPLORATORY APPLICATIONS FROM THE UTILITY SECTOR

EcoAlign's recent research project used an exploratory focus group applying this Gravesian value lens to help utilities better understand how customers make sense of their utility programs and services.<sup>xii</sup> Twenty-two residents of the greater Maryland/Washington, DC area were recruited to represent a demographically and ideologically diverse cross-section of utility users. Using quantitative and qualitative assessment procedures, participant reactions to a set of visionary utility industry-related video vignettes were analyzed.

Prior to data analysis, several clear predictions were made:

- Prediction #1: Participant thinking styles and opinions would be generally predictable given their specific demographic profiles upon the following constellation of variables: gender, income, political affiliation, race and education level.
- Prediction #2: Level 4 Absolutistic Thinkers would be prone to all-or-nothing value-judgments, preferring those vignettes that evoked a sense of tradition, family, and the need for security in a dangerous world.
- Prediction #3: Level 5 Individualistic Thinkers would view the vignettes primarily through a financial lens, favoring those vignettes that portrayed cost-saving tools and innovations in a credible, pragmatic fashion.
- Prediction #4: Level 6 Humanistic Thinkers would focus mainly on the human dimension, preferring video vignettes that emphasize programs of service to the underprivileged, embracing social consciousness and fostering community.
- Prediction #5: Level 7 Systemic Thinkers would demonstrate the most positive overall response to the video vignettes, preferring those that related to renewable energy sources and innovative technology that foster collaborative partnership with the utility provider.

After the focus group discussions, transcripts were analyzed and all responses were systematically coded according to the following two simple questions:

- Question #1: Is this particular comment positive or negative?
- Question #2: What underlying Gravesian value-system does this comment represent?

Data from the first question helped determine which specific messaging elements from the videos participants found either appealing or distasteful. Data from the second question helped generate insight into why participants differed markedly in their reactions to the same ideas and topics (as raised within the group discussion following each vignette). This data was coded according to one of the four distinct Gravesian value-profiles outlined earlier (Absolutistic, Individualistic, Humanistic or Systemic).

The results were illuminating:

- 1) Nearly every single prediction was supported by the available data.<sup>xiii</sup> As expected, participant demographic profiles proved an extremely strong predictor of thinking style and conversational response data indicated clear, strong attitude patterns among respondents, depending upon their preferred thinking type.
- 2) Individualistic (Level 5) and Humanistic (Level 6) Thinkers displayed an unexpectedly high level of cynicism towards the video vignettes. This cynicism was distinct in nature between the value groups, consistent with expectations. Systemic (Level 7) Thinkers were the least cynical participants, most capable of enjoying the vision portrayed in the vignettes as credible and authentic.
- 3) Socially speaking, Systemic (Level 7) Thinkers seemed the default thought leaders of the group, expressing reactions that balanced financial and human-centered concerns. Individualistic (Level 5) Thinkers, on the other hand, were the most suspicious and domineering—and the least prone to viewing the discussion exercise as credible. Finally, Humanistic (Level 6) Thinkers seemed to waffle between perspectives raised by these two other value groups.

The qualitative and quantitative analyses of data obtained from these focus group discussions were used to generate a set of initial, high-level value-based utility customer profiles. These profiles were created by simply mapping observed focus group data onto the Gravesian framework, and

have already helped highly seasoned utility executives from across North America to better understand—and communicate with—their customers.<sup>xiv</sup>

These initial, high-level values-based utility consumer profiles are as follows:

### **Profile #1: The Individualistic Utility Consumer (estimated 30% of U.S. population)**

Utility consumers who view the world through the individualistic lens are primarily concerned with the financial bottom-line. Before they will get inspired about idealistic energy solutions for the future, they must be certain that these solutions will not negatively impact their own financial bottom-line. They are skeptical about the ability of large utility companies to provide efficient, responsive service, and view excessive communications with (and from) utility companies as a hassle. To these pragmatic, self-directed consumers less is more—less cost, less hassle, less worry. Because they are inherently mistrustful of “feel good” marketing and communications, the best path for inspiring such customers is usually through the pocket-book and through credible no-nonsense programs that provide new opportunities for them to *personally profit* (in money and/or time). Control is also a huge factor for these consumers. Any no-nonsense fiscally responsible program that gives them a greater sense of control over their energy (and energy-related financial expenditures) is likely to get their attention if properly messaged.

### **Profile #2: The Humanistic Utility Consumer (estimated 30% of U.S. population)**

Utility consumers who view the world through the humanistic lens are intellectually concerned with cost, but emotionally driven by the human factor. They have strong negative feelings about the selfish and manipulative actions of large organizations and often view utilities through this past-conditioned perspective (fairly or not). Such customers will be fiercely loyal towards any utility provider that is perceived to consistently display genuine caring and concern for their customers. Humanistic consumers are sensitive to manipulation, and highly receptive to honest human-centered marketing programs that also make good financial sense. Communication is vital with these consumers—the more human and authentic the better. These people don't just want a utility provider; they want a *relationship* with a socially-conscious company who they feel shares their aspiration to making the world a better place.

### **Profile #3: The Systemic Utility Consumer (estimated 10-15% of U.S. population)**

Utility consumers who view the world through the systemic lens are primarily concerned with the so-called “triple bottom-line.” More pragmatic than idealistic, they are drawn to utility solutions that successfully balance financial, humanistic, and environmental bottom lines in a way that sustains. Creating sustainable and empowering home energy solutions is an aspirational ideal for these customers, and they will be drawn to any innovative programs and technologies that help them accomplish this. Renewable energy options, real-time feedback processes, and the ability to generate an energy surplus for sale back to the grid are the exact type of solutions that stir this customer’s imagination. When communicating with these customers, it is helpful to demonstrate a desire to contribute through innovation and personally empowering programs with a both a financial and community focus.

(Note: Customer profiling was not attempted for the Level 4, Absolutistic, value group due to a lack of available focus group data. Future focus-group research targeting this particular group would prove highly useful for the creation of programs targeting more rural utility customers.)

**Insight into the Challenges of Low Income Consumers:** Historically, one of the most challenging customer groups for utility providers has been low income households. Unlike product and service providers in other industries, utilities often have a legal (and moral) obligation to continue providing service to their customers even when they are seriously delinquent in payments. How can utility providers finally create programs that motivate low income customers to make paying their bill a fiscal priority? A great first step will be to properly define the challenge. Lacking a scientific, values-based framework, most providers of the past have inadvertently lumped all low-income customers into the same psychological basket. Effective low income programs of the future should be designed with value-diversity top-of-mind mind. Using Graves framework utility providers can finally start distinguishing the full spectrum of psychological value profiles that may underlie the same observable behaviors (non-payments). They can then use this insight to devise strategic messaging campaigns that cut through the mental clutter and inspire renewed customer partnerships.

## **IMPLICATIONS AND APPLICATIONS**

Anyone who has invested the time and money required for an exhaustive bottom-up customer segmentation study has discovered that actionable,

intuitively applicable segmentation models are extremely expensive and difficult to come by. This is particularly the case for those utilities whose operations spread across different service territories and states. Although with this research we just scratched the surface, we were nonetheless able to uncover highly practical utility customer profiles with an initial contained investment. This gives testament to the tremendous value, efficiency, and practicality of the Gravesian lens.

Whether you are a utility provider who hopes to increase enrollment in energy saving programs, or a mainstream marketer who hopes to increase sales of the next great green widget, values-based customer profiling and messaging can help you accomplish your objectives with speed and economic efficiencies. By understanding the various mental contexts through which your audiences make sense of your offerings, you will design messages that are engineered to overcome mental resistance and inspire unprecedented results. No longer will you need to spend your time toying around with symptoms (behavior) when you can finally access people at the level of cause (values).

The environmental crisis is truly a global problem, and it will be solved through solutions that work globally. Culture, religion, age, income, gender, ethnicity—in the end, none of these variables truly matters, because none of them helps us tap into the hidden hopes dreams and aspirations of those we seek to motivate. Values are fundamental, inspirational and universal. Fascinatingly enough, these same basic value profiles that we've discussed have been found to occur in human beings the world over, regardless of cultural background or education, and have already been used behind the scene to help solve some of the most intractable problems of our time.

Why not use this same information to help close the gap between intentions and behavior, and help us all finally “walk the walk” with regards to the environment?

## **CONCLUSIONS: TAKE-HOME STRATEGIES FOR MARKETERS IN THE ENERGY AND SUSTAINABILITY SPACE**

After years of hands-on experience applying this framework to real world communication challenges, I offer the following tactical and strategic messaging advice:

### **Suggestion #1: Frame offerings to suit the perceived needs of specific value segments**

One size doesn't fit all. Customers can only perceive your offerings through the lens of their preexisting mental filters, colored by their preferred thinking styles. Unless you frame your messages to suit their perceived needs, your messages will fall upon deaf ears. Don't lump everybody into the same basket. Devise highly nuanced messaging for specific consumer value segments. If you must create generic mass-market campaigns, make sure to do so with an understanding of the Gravesian value profiles, making strategic content and stylistic choices that resonate broadly (yet personally) with customers of all thinking types.

### **Suggestion #2: Whenever possible, build trust by engaging and overcoming cynicism**

Trust is absolutely essential. Unless your customers trust you, they will not feel inspired by your call to action and nothing will change. Understand the preferred species of cynicism that exist in your various consumer segments, and create marketing messages that strategically address toxic issues upfront, setting the stage for a deeper trust and rapport to unfold. Let Graves research simplify your task. Use the value-based lens to create communications that systematically overcome cynicism of every species and inspire your audiences to imagine a new, more sustainable way of behaving.

### **Suggestion #3: Shift from *content* to *context***

The same word or image can have multiple meanings depending upon the mental/situational context in which it is perceived. Before thinking about what content to use in your marketing, think first about what contexts your audience will be *thinking from* in relation to your message. This will help you create messages that speak directly to their self-perceived needs and aspirations. "What do my customers think about my offering?" is old school thinking. The better question is, "Where are my customers *thinking from in relation to* my offering?" Operating from this perspective, will you will finally attain the leverage/insight required to create messages that inspire sustainable behavior change—by shifting the very context from which your customers make sense of your products or services. The capacity to shift the perceptual context of audiences is what makes marketing powerful and memorable.<sup>xv</sup>

### **Suggestion #4: Shift from *demographics* to *psychographics***

Demographic thinking is quickly becoming outdated. Demographic variables are only important insofar as they give us insight into the hidden hopes,

fears and aspirations of our audiences. Why not avoid the middle-man and cut right to the chase? Shift your thinking from demographics to values. Use a proven framework refined by many decades of applied scientific research to reach your customers where they live, then call them to action in a way that resonates with their basic psychological make-up.

## **FUTURE RESEARCH NEEDS: SHORT-TERM OPPORTUNITIES**

### **Opportunity #1: Diagnose your troublemakers and turn them into converts**

Who are your most challenging and/or skeptical stakeholders? Upon what groups do you waste the most time and money trying to communicate with little or no results? Whether you are a utility provider trying to motivate low-income customers, or a corporate CMO trying to penetrate a mentally resistant market segments, the odds are that you have oversimplified your target audience and failed to fully grasp the depth and complexity of their psychological predicament. Use focus group research to determine the value profiles of your most difficult customers and develop communications that finally hit them where they live.

### **Opportunity #2: Redesign an enrollment program from the values perspective**

Countless millions of dollars are wasted every year on well-intended programs that generate little or no real-world traction. With the continued proliferation of energy saving technologies and huge infrastructure investments, this waste will only increase if we aren't prudent. Before unrolling your next program, perform a strategic values assessment of your target audiences and create a communication strategy that will improve adoption and greatly increase your odds of meeting challenging enrollment targets.

### **Opportunity #3: Enhance your existing customer segmentation model**

Companies often invest tremendous capital in segmentation models that are not intuitively useful or pragmatic for creating actionable communications. Get greater return from your existing customer segmentation framework by mapping it onto the Gravesian framework. These value-profiles were derived from decades of bottom-up data collection and behavioral observation—research far more extensive, thorough, global and resilient than any other customer segmentation model in human existence! Don't throw the baby

out with the bathwater. Let the Gravesian framework fill in the gaps to your current segmentation model, giving you (and your employees) newfound power for improving customer relationships and inspiring sustainable behavior change.

## PROJECT ENERGY CODE BACKGROUND

EcoAlign, a strategic marketing agency, was launched to understand, document and develop strategies to close the “green gap” between consumers’ stated intentions and their actual purchasing behavior in connection to energy consumption and the environment. We deeply believe that for the “green gap” to be addressed a massive societal behavioral change is required, one that will be driven by more than good green products. For this reason, EcoAlign is now working with social scientists to start a discussion on customer behavior towards sustainable energy consumption and conservation by identifying emotional, social, instinctual, psychological, subconscious codes that shape human actions and perceptions. This initiative is called “Project Energy Code.”

## ECOALIGN: THE ENERGY AND ENVIRONMENT AGENCY

EcoAlign is the energy and environment marketing agency. We develop and execute marketing strategies for utilities, renewable energy providers and companies operating in the energy and environment space. We are uniquely suited to help companies achieve their business objectives, from reaching efficiency program targets and improving customer satisfaction, to launching new products, increasing market share and repositioning for growth in the green tech space.

## THE AUTHOR

John Marshall Roberts is an author, speaker, and applied research psychologist with more than a decade of strategic communications consulting experience. His work to date has focused largely on overcoming consumer skepticism through strategic communication design, and the application of values-based messaging for inspiring sustainable behaviors. His recently published book “Igniting Inspiration: A Persuasion Manual for Visionaries,” proposes a new interdisciplinary paradigm for creating inspirational media and messaging called Transformational Design™. A

seamless blend of systems theory, developmental psychology, and common sense, this new framework allows socially conscious people—marketers, business leaders, and activists—to design messages that systematically overcome cynicism and inspire others to act. Learn more on his website: [www.jmarshallroberts.com](http://www.jmarshallroberts.com).

## ENDNOTES

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- <sup>i</sup> EcoPinion, Issue 5, November 2008. "Climate Change and Consumers: The Challenge Ahead," EcoAlign, Washington DC, <http://www.ecoalign.com>. See also Whitmarsh, L. 2009. "Behavioral Responses to Climate Change: Asymmetry of Intentions and Impacts." *Journal of Environmental Psychology*, Vol. 29, No. 1. p 13-23.
- <sup>ii</sup> For example, see Beck, E.P. and Cowan, C. 2005, *Spiral Dynamics: Mastering Values, Leadership, and Change*, and Lakoff, G. 2002, *Moral Politics: How Liberals and Conservatives Think*.
- <sup>iii</sup> Schwartz, S. 2009. "Basic Values: How They Motivate and Inhibit Prosocial Behavior," in *Anthology: Herzliya Symposium on Personality and Social Psychology*, Vol. 1.
- <sup>iv</sup> For a comprehensive scholarly overview see Graves, C. W. 2005. *The Never Ending Quest: Clare W. Graves Explores Human Nature: A Treatise on an Emergent Cyclical Conception of Adult Behavioral Systems and Their Development*.
- <sup>v</sup> Roberts, J. M. 2008. *Igniting Inspiration: A Persuasion Manual for Visionaries*.
- <sup>vi</sup> Graves, C. W. 2004. *Levels of Human Existence*.
- <sup>vii</sup> Note that Graves original naming system was actually rather cumbersome. These labels have been given by the author to simplify the learning process and make the conversation more accessible for mainstream audiences.
- <sup>viii</sup> These interpretations of Graves thinking levels draw primarily from Graves original research, but also include helpful communication tactics, tips, and illustrative examples gleaned from years of real world practice by the author.
- <sup>ix</sup> For many excellent case studies of Graves theories applied to the corporate world view, see "Spiral Dynamics: A Challenge to Leadership," by leading Gravesian consultant Don W. Beck. (DVD) ClearFire Media. 2006.
- <sup>x</sup> For a more detailed elaboration, see Roberts, J. M. 2008. *Igniting Inspiration: A Persuasion Manual for Visionaries*.
- <sup>xi</sup> These theme statements are exact (or slightly reworded) versions of those used by Graves in his original research.
- <sup>xii</sup> For details read Roberts, J. M. "DILLO Focus Groups: A Values-Based Assessment of Utility Customer Responses." Available from EcoAlign. <http://www.ecoalign.com>.

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- <sup>xiii</sup> Prediction #5 could not be adequately tested in the present study due to a lack of level 4 (absolutistic) thinking respondents in the focus group sample.
  - <sup>xiv</sup> The results of this project were presented to a board of utility professionals from across North America in a collaborative. Customer Care Research Consortium (CCRC) workshop, Phoenix, AZ, January, 2009.
  - <sup>xv</sup> For a great example of breakthrough, context shifting marketing, look no further than the highly celebrated "Think Small" VW Beetle campaign 1959. Visit <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qw2rRSLvIO0>.