



The Research Behind Guest Behavior: Example - Towel Reuse

Changing behavior is the key to lowering energy costs, whether at home, at the office. Yet sustainable behavior change is difficult for individuals, whether it's turning out the lights, turning off the water while you brush your teeth, or turning down your thermostat in the wintertime. In the guest room, you can help your guests help you run a more efficient and manageable business.

Most of us can proudly confirm that we *do* turn off our lights and we *do* recycle and we *do* turn off the faucet when we're not using the sink. However, sometimes these habits are lost during travel, since guests can leave their sustainable habits at home, just as easily as their work and daily routines. However, when guests are reminded to bring those habits with them on their travel, you, the lodging business owner, benefit from lower energy costs and by gaining recognition for your efforts to conserve energy and water.



Today, research is being done to help affect sustainable change. In some cases, this research has been done directly to benefit lodging business owners. For several years, lodging businesses have embarked on extensive campaigns to remind their guests to act conscientiously in terms of water and energy use. To explain the possibilities of energy savings from guest behavior campaigns, this handout will discuss Towel Reuse Programs and ***how can these campaigns can be more than a marketing tool and convert into real savings for the facility.***

The research is out and the results are in...

Recent studies show that while 83 percent of hotels have a reuse program in place, guest participation is mediocre at best.¹ The problem lies in the messaging. Often, small placards appeal to helping the hotel save energy, to save the environment, or conserve resources. Researchers have decided to put these messages to the test, to see what kind of messages convince guests to participate. A study by Cialdini at Arizona State University discovered the following (as reported by Tracey in the Monitor², my emphasis):

Normative messages

Researchers at Arizona State University (ASU) have once again documented the power of social norms in influencing behavior in a series of as-yet-unpublished experiments that urged hotel guests to reuse their towels. Cialdini, the Regents' Professor of Psychology, and psychology graduate students Noah Goldstein and Vidas Griskevicius examined whether guests would more often comply with signs that ***promoted descriptive norms rather than conventional signs*** that merely encourage guests to help save the environment.

In one study, they randomly assigned one of five cards in 260 guests' rooms that explained how reusing towels would conserve energy and save the environment:

¹ <http://www.greenlodgingnews.com/Cypress-Hotel-Spa-Releases-New-MicroCotton-Green-Earth-Towel>

² Tracey, Melissa Dittman. 2005. Monitor. Crafting persuasive pro-environment messages: Psychologists draw from social psychology research to encourage more environmentally friendly behaviors. Vol 36, No. 9 <<http://www.apa.org/monitor/oct05/persuasive.aspx>>

- "Help the hotel save energy," focusing on the benefit to the hotel.
- "Help save the environment," emphasizing environmental protection.
- "Partner with us to help save the environment," centering on environmental cooperation.
- "Help save resources for future generations," highlighting the benefit to future generations.
- "Join your fellow citizens in helping to save the environment," focusing on the descriptive norm.

The most successful message was the descriptive norm message, which stated that reusing towels was the norm for hotel guests. Forty-one percent of these guests reused their towels. Researchers found the least effective message was the one that emphasized the benefit to the hotel--leading to only 20 percent of guests reusing their towels--followed by signs that urged environmental protection and the benefit to future generations, which both led to about 31 percent reusing towels.

Additional trials by Goldstein and Cialdini produced similar results, with participation reaching nearly 50% with a strong message about what others were doing (see box).

Message to guest	Towel reuse
Help the hotel save energy	16%
Partner with us to help the environment	31
Almost 75% of guests reuse towels	44
75% of the guests who stayed in this room reuse towels	49

Sources: Study by Noah J. Goldstein, Vidas Griskevicius, Robert B. Cialdini of Arizona State University; AOL

What does this tell us about guest behavior?

The difference in the effectiveness of the messages lies in that while it is nice to help the hotel save money, it feels good to save the environment, and it's responsible to preserve resources for the future, these reasons are not sufficient to actually change behavior. Your guests may cite these reasons as why they think they act, but your guests act on subtle cues.



Research shows that we all want to feel that we're normal. Guests want to fit in with the rest of the lodgers at your business. If they got a hint that 75% of your lodgers say they can reuse their towels a second day and don't need them to be washed...that 75% of those that stay at this type of hotel don't want to be wasteful...and that 75% hang their towels to use them a second day; If you remind your guests that most people like them are making this choice, chances are that they, too, will decide they don't need their towels washed each day and will hang them up.

What works? What's my next step?

Consider using language such as:

"Over 75% of the guests who stay in this room decide to re-use their towels a second day. Please hang your towels if you also want to re-use your towels tomorrow."

"Over 75% of our guests re-use their towels for a second day. Please join them by hanging your towels up."

The Clean Energy Resource Teams (CERTs) wants to help you achieve your water and energy conservation goals. One way in which we hope to support your efforts is to provide signage designed like the example above to help you engage your guests in conservation efforts that reinforce their sustainable behavior and benefit you as a lodging provider and business.

For more information: Visit CERTs' lodging project planning site (<http://lodging.mncerts.org>) for more information on research-proven approaches for recycling and turning off the lights, or contact Michelle Vigen at vigen010@umn.edu or 612-626-0455.