

*The Application of Foot-in-the-Door Motivational Theory
to the Promotion of Energy Conservation Investments
Through the Use of Home Energy Audits*

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INTRODUCTION

Society has not reached a consensus on the need for widespread promotion of energy conservation. Some people believe that the economy grows in direct proportion to energy use. They say that slowing the expansion in our nation's energy consumption will decelerate the growth of gross national product. Others, such as Amory Lovins, the author of *Soft Energy Paths* (1977: 4), believe that:

how much energy we use to accomplish our social goals could...be considered a measure less of our success than of our failure- just as the amount of traffic we must endure to get where we want to go is a measure not of well-being but rather of our failure to establish a rational settlement pattern.

Under the assumption that energy conservation is, in general, beneficial to society, my research will attempt to investigate what factors motivate people to conserve energy.

Classical economic theory states that a person will make an investment if it is "economically rational" to do so, i.e., if the investment will earn him or her money or other benefits within a reasonable period of time. This perspective suggests that people should invest in energy conservation technologies if such investments will produce significant savings on energy costs. However, as Paul Stern points out in his book *Energy Use: The Human Dimension* (1984: 2), people are not always "economically rational". The book states:

Most analyses proceed from the simplifying assumption that energy producers and consumers are rational actors...This assumption is a useful simplification...But such aggregate truths conceal great variation among energy producers and users...People have values, dreams, and social needs, and they sometimes act on them. They often act out of habit, laziness, duty, trust, or a desire to please others, and they act differently than they would if they were to carefully calculate their self-interest.

Emotional and behavioral factors play a strong role in determining whether the homeowner will invest in conservation technologies as well as what types of investments he or she will make. For this reason, it is important to investigate how behavioral theories

and motivational techniques can be applied to induce energy conservation behavior. This is the focus of my research.

Theoretical Perspectives

In his article, "Saving Energy: The Human Dimension," Paul Stern suggests the relevance of "foot-in-the-door" motivational theory for inducing homeowners to conserve energy (1984: 22). He cites a study done by the U.S. Department of Energy in which a group of homeowners received a free shower flow restricter along with a pamphlet on low cost energy conservation measures for the home. This group subsequently went on to take more of the energy saving measures listed in the pamphlet than did the members of a comparison group, who had not received free shower-flow restricters.

The "Foot-in-the-Door" concept was first identified by Jonathan L. Freedman (1966).

The author says:

One assumption about compliance that has often been made either explicitly or implicitly is that once a person has been induced to comply with a small request he is more likely to comply with a larger demand. This is the principle that is commonly referred to as the foot-in-the-door or gradation technique (Freedman, 1966: 195).

Freedman tested the "Foot-in-the-Door" effect in a field experiment during which housewives were asked to allow a survey team of five to six men to come into their homes for two hours to classify the household products they used. This large request was made under four different conditions two of which formed the basis of the "foot-in-the-door" experiment. In the first of these two, an initial contact was made in which the subject was asked to answer some questions about the kinds of soaps she used, and if she agreed, the questions were actually asked (performance condition). In the second condition, no initial contact with the housewife was made before the request to classify her household products (one-contact condition).

Freedman found that, as predicted, subjects who had agreed to and carried out a small request (performance condition) were afterwards more likely to comply with a bigger request than were subjects who had been asked only the larger request (one-contact condition). More than 50% of the performance condition subjects complied with the larger request while fewer than 25% of the subjects in the one-contact group agreed to do so.

The research presented in this paper examines whether Freedman's basic theory can be used to induce homeowners to invest in energy conservation technologies after they receive a home energy audit.