

Leeds University Business School – Research and Innovation Podcast

Episode 5: Communicating how to reduce carbon footprints through consumer food choices

Speakers: Dr Astrid Kause and Professor Wändi Bruine de Bruin

- Astrid: Hello, I'm Astrid Kause.
- Wändi: And I'm Wändi Bruine de Bruin.
- Astrid: And in this episode of the Research and Innovation Podcast, we're going to be talking about public perceptions of how to reduce our carbon footprints through consumer food choices.
- Wändi: Right, so do you want to say a little bit about why you decided you wanted to study carbon footprints of consumer food choices?
- Astrid: Yes. So, the motivation to study this came from climate and environmental sciences. So, we looked into the reports of the inter-governmental panel on climate change, and they summarise all the research on climate that has been conducted over a number of years. And we were interested in what were the most effective things that this panel says we could do as consumers in order to reduce our carbon footprints, and this is the greenhouse gas emissions in the atmosphere.
- Wändi: So, what are those things?
- Astrid: Those things are: reduce the amount of meat that you eat and replace them with some plant-based products, and reduce the amount of dairy that we eat in the westernised countries. These are the two most.
- Wändi: Yes, but it's not really what people know, right?
- Astrid: No, it's not what they know, so according to the research that we conducted, so we conducted a big survey with UK participants from the general population and we asked them what they think that the most effective things are. And what they said is they think it's effective to buy local and to buy organic and to reduce packaging. And these things are, to a certain extent, effective. But there are other things that are much more effective such as reducing meat and dairy consumption.
- Wändi: Right. So, why do you think people don't know that?

Astrid: Oh, that has a variety of reasons. I think one of them is marketing campaigns from large supermarkets. So, the information that is available to us in our social and non-social environments, when we make everyday decisions such as going shopping or being in restaurants or choosing food in the university canteens, these campaigns target mostly recycling and local food consumption and production. And I think that's good, that tackles a lot of other environmental problems such as pollution of the oceans or support of the local economy, but it is not necessarily the best thing we can do in order to protect the climate.

Wändi: Yes, and what I found so shocking about our findings is that it's especially... or perhaps I should say, also the consumers who identify as pro-environmental, who don't seem to know how to reduce the carbon footprint of their food choices. And presumably those are the people who really want to do it, and they want to curb climate change with their food choices, and they don't really know what to do.

Astrid: Yes, I agree. That was pretty surprising when we analysed the findings from our survey. And that is why I think it's very important to put out very simple and very transparent information about carbon footprints related to food, because it should reach those people who really make, already, a lot of effort in order to reduce their carbon footprint, but according to our findings they do not necessarily do the right thing. So, what we need to do next is to develop formats which allow people to understand this type of information, because this is another problem. This is often communicated in a way that it's way too complicated and we can't relate it to our everyday decisions when we, for example, sit in a restaurant and have a look at the menu, like, where should I know from what the carbon footprint is? And even if I know something about the carbon footprint, how should I know how much 325 grams of greenhouse emissions is, that's a number that is, I would say, of very little meaning to decisions, or to us when we make decisions in daily life.

Wändi: Yes, I mean basically these kinds of communications suffer from the problem that the experts have developed expert language and expert formats that experts use to communicate to each other, but they don't necessarily help lay people in the real world make decisions about their food, right? So, if grams of carbon is not the best way of communicating, what is the best way of communicating?



Astrid: So, the best way of communicating is... or a better way of communicating is to look at the changes that we can make, because that relates to our everyday decisions where we also replace one thing with another thing and navigate through our environments by choosing one or the other thing. So, the question is not, I would say, how many grams of greenhouse gas emissions are associated or relate to, for example, a kilogram of cheese, but how much CO₂ can be avoided by replacing that cheese by something else. And a format that, according to our survey, has proven to be better than grams of carbon emissions is to say percentage change, so for example the carbon footprint of what I have on my bread or on my sandwich today can be reduced by 30 or 40% if I replace, for example, cheese by some plant-based product.

Wändi: Right, so this is a really clear example of how the psychology of decision making and understanding how people make these kinds of decisions can help to improve communications from climate scientists to consumers. And so, this is a very important interdisciplinary collaboration between psychologists and environmental engineers and climate scientists to help consumers make real decisions about this.

Astrid: Yes. What do you think, what is so special about consumers' decisions in comparison to experts, like, what makes it so difficult or in what situation are they? What is your experience with that because you've conducted so much research on consumer research, on consumers in different disciplines such as medicine and finance and environment, like what is so tricky about consumer decisions?

Wändi: Oh well, you know, making decisions in our daily lives, we have a lot of different decisions to make, right? So, when experts make... when you study how, for example, a doctor makes a decision or an expert makes a decision, you focus on that one decision because that's what they are focussing on in the moment. But for real people making real decisions in real life, there are a lot of things going on. When they're deciding what to eat, they're not just deciding, what can I do about the climate? But they're also deciding, what do I feel like eating right now? What is the healthiest thing to eat? So, there are a lot of things going on at the same time and so if you want to provide information that people can use, it has to be simple, not focussed on having a lot of background expertise in it, and it should be able to be... people

should be able to integrate with a decision that they're making right then. That's a big challenge.

Astrid: Yes, I agree. Simplicity is probably something that scientists, and I include myself here, should always be aware of. That it should be to the point, and if somebody wants to know more, they should know where to find more and more detailed information, but for our everyday decisions it should be simple. Even for the policy decisions, I guess.

Wändi: I agree. So, what does it mean for food policies?

Astrid: So, I think policies should consist of two parts, essentially, so there should be, given the findings from climate scientists that we mentioned a few minutes ago, that the global amount of carbon, that is produced by humans really, to a big extent, consists of... or comes from food production, I think for the policies it definitely means that we need to reduce that. So, we need to change our agriculture, we need to change the things we eat on a global scale, on a collective scale. And this is something that is central to climate policy from my point of view. And the other part of these policies should account for the fact that people may not necessarily know about the carbon footprint, so they should also entail very transparent communications so that, actually, the general population can understand what the impact of their food choices is, and can understand what the meaning and what the goal of these policies is. And how, and in what way, those are effective because that empowers people to make the right choices also, for example, when they vote.

Wändi: Because there are some consumers who really want to do this, and they don't seem to be in the know on how to do it. And making changes in your food choices can make a big impact because you eat... as an individual you already eat quite a bit and if it's a larger group of individuals who are willing to make this change, we can make a big difference.

Astrid: Yes, I agree.