

By Invitation

# Singapore's green transition: How to win hearts and minds

By thinking creatively, we could reframe the sustainability narrative to appeal to the broadest spectrum of society



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For *The Straits Times*

The proposal for consumers of pre-packaged drinks to pay a 10- or 20-cent deposit, reclaimable upon return of the beverage container ("Canned, bottled drinks may cost 10 to 20 cents more in recycling scheme", Sept 21), will help to boost Singapore's national recycling effort.

In explaining the scheme, Senior Minister of State for Sustainability and the Environment Amy Khor stressed that the money collected would be a deposit rather than a tax.

This is an important clarification, lest consumers perceive this proposal as yet another instance of costs rising as a result of Singapore's green transition.

It is important to consider how sustainability efforts are framed as this may affect their public reception.

For sure, the immediacy of the climate challenge is focusing minds and impelling major adjustments to industry, transport and daily living.

Some of these changes are undoubtedly painful, but a reframing of the narrative, along with suitable incentives and encouragement, could elicit a much warmer response to the climate agenda among citizens and consumers.

At the national level, the climate and sustainability agenda has in recent years been recast as a strategic opportunity for Singapore.

As a small nation accounting for a mere 0.1 per cent of global carbon emissions, a plausible case could be made that Singapore's efforts – or lack thereof – would not move the needle.

It is also evident that Singapore has limited wind, solar or geothermal energy potential compared with larger countries.

Still, the Government has sensed an opportunity for Singapore to be a first mover in green technologies and finance. By helping to catalyse advances in various sustainability-related domains, Singapore is also strengthening its



As human beings are social creatures, there could be a role for friendly competition to spur one another to good works, says the writer. It may be possible to design good-natured contests around recycling or energy conservation, which could see resident and neighbourhood committees rallying people to reduce, reuse and recycle.  
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competitiveness and readiness for the future green economy.

For individuals, however, the green transition is typically experienced as forced adjustments to daily living, often with added cost and inconvenience – for instance, being charged for takeaway packaging and plastic bags, and getting used to drinks served without straws – even as energy costs continue to rise.

## SURCHARGE OR DISCOUNT?

There are good reasons for retailers to charge an extra 20 or 30 cents for takeaway packaging and plastic bags.

After all, there is a real cost involved, which consumers should factor into their decisions.

"Loss aversion" – a concept described by psychologists Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky – suggests that people are more likely to sit up and take notice when faced with a loss, such as a surcharge, as compared with the prospect of gain such as a discount.

However, the effect of this is to imprint on people's minds that the green transition is a burden, even if necessary for the sake of the planet.

By contrast, a discount for earth-friendly actions such as bringing along one's food containers and shopping bags would impart a more positive framing by aligning what's good

for the environment with a direct benefit for the individual.

## HOW IT ALL ADDS UP

Another positive move would be to help consumers appreciate how their actions can contribute to the larger picture.

People may be inspired to action with a better grasp of how their individual efforts count.

This is true in companies and organisations, and may well be for the global climate movement too.

For instance, a fast-food restaurant could inform customers how much plastic waste and pollution are reduced each year by doing away with plastic straws.

Furniture mega store Ikea takes pains to explain to customers how their self-service model keeps prices low. This aligns the company's focus on cost and productivity with the customer's interest. Perhaps the climate agenda could benefit from a similar framing.

## IN DEFENCE OF THE CARROT

Fear and shame have their part to play in changing behaviour, but there is a role too for incentives and encouragement.

As parents of young children, my wife and I have had to balance both the carrot and stick in trying to foster good habits and behaviour in the little ones. Necessary adjustments to our parenting style

have been made along the way.

For instance, we have abandoned a purist approach that disavows rewards for fear of displacing a child's intrinsic motivation (such as to tidy the room or finish homework) with extrinsic motivation.

These days, the children's good behaviour is still not explicitly "rewarded" but favourite snacks are deployed as timely encouragement as they plug away at their tasks.

Incentives may similarly be warranted in the pursuit of public policy goals.

Singapore's National Steps Challenge broke new ground as the "world's first population-level fitness tracker-based physical activity initiative".

The Health Promotion Board, in designing this initiative, leveraged behavioural insights, offering rewards in the form of shopping vouchers to encourage sustained behavioural change.

In this way, doctors' warnings of the health risks from a sedentary lifestyle are complemented by a programme that is positive, encouraging and fun.

Perhaps we could take a leaf from this playbook in thinking about how to encourage everyday efforts to reduce, reuse and recycle (the three "R"s).

An example is the Energy Market Authority's Energy Saving Challenge: Watt Your Bill Shows, which gives residents who reduce

their electricity consumption the chance to win retail vouchers.

Over time, good practices may turn into reflexive habits and established norms, so that extrinsic motivation is no longer necessary.

## STOKING HEALTHY COMPETITION

As human beings are social creatures, there could also be a role for friendly competition to spur one another to good works.

Between 1995 and 2003, Housing Board estates and blocks competed for the title of "cleanest" in a nationwide contest meant to encourage civic-mindedness among residents.

Eventually, this became seen as a competition among town councils and cleaners, instead of among residents. However, it may be possible to design good-natured contests around recycling or energy conservation, which could see resident and neighbourhood committees rallying residents to contribute to 3R efforts.

If the full cost of externalities from mass consumerism cannot be priced in, policymakers may still have recourse to other policy levers – what economists refer to as the "theory of the second best".

For instance, could there be greater incentives or facilitation for passing on used products, recycling or upcycling in support of the circular economy?

The upshot is that by thinking

creatively, we could reframe the sustainability narrative to appeal to the broadest spectrum of society.

While efforts to win hearts and minds are ongoing, we must also not lose sight of the biggest needle mover in the climate challenge – industry.

There is a need for sustained research and heavy investment in game-changing technologies such as carbon capture and renewable energy.

Even in the domain of industry, the actions of individuals can complement the efforts of governments.

By exercising choices wisely, well-informed investors and consumers can encourage companies to reduce their carbon footprint and take necessary steps to transform for a more sustainable future.

By aligning global, corporate and individual interests, and framing the climate narrative to highlight both opportunities and threats, we can look beyond the gathering storm clouds towards the ray of light on the horizon.

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