

Energy efficiency: time for a new approach

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It is time to be more specific on the narrative for energy efficiency. We have lived with two ways of motivating people to be energy efficient for more than 35 years.

Both of them made sense once, but their best-before-date has passed. They repel more than they attract and, worse, they lead to negative thoughts.

The first narrative was created in a time of dire necessity. Born out of the first oil crisis, it was about conservation and sacrifice. OECD countries faced oil shortages and there was a collective understanding that we had to give up a bit of our comfort for some time. It was a time of warfare.

The second narrative, which is still the dominant one, is that of efficiency. Most often communicated with slogans such as ‘win-win’ or ‘do more with less’, this is far more correct than the first one, not least because it indicates that we are still misusing resources.

It is quite puzzling to see supply curves for energy efficiency with negative costs. Are people really content with spoiling resources? Or do they not believe in perfect markets and the gospel of general equilibrium?

The undeniable facts are that we still have a huge untapped potential for energy efficiency, and that we need to exploit it fast. According to the IEA’s latest analysis, more than half of greenhouse gas mitigation has to come from end-use efficiency.

Energy efficiency, even if widely deployed, might not be enough. We may have to think about energy sufficiency. This calls for a new way of ‘marketing’ the message. It is time to shift the narrative.

The next narrative must be about comfort, modernity, coolness, values – terms that will communicate energy efficiency not through necessity or rationality but by describing the way things should be for a sustainable society. The fact that a similar shift is taking place in the business landscape is of great help.

Technology allows us to provide energy services in more sophisticated ways. For example, advanced ICT provides control at our fingertips; better design can make energy-saving equipment more functional and beautiful at the same time; supply solutions in miniature scale are available for photovoltaic or wind installations on roofs and in gardens.

Energy efficiency can be delivered by businesses that are far removed from the old centralised utilities, which traditionally tend to put technology first. These new businesses are rather service providers putting customer service first. They will market their products accordingly.

Energy efficiency should be desirable, comfortable and natural. It should be delivered on people's doorstep by someone they recognise and like. Energy efficiency should be built into the installations as well as into the perception of a good and decent living. It is time for this third narrative to take off.

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