

# Most Americans Unsure of Most Effective Ways to Save Energy

By *GreenBiz Staff*

Created 2010-08-18 06:00

Most Americans overlook efficiency as the most effective means of reducing energy consumption.

At the same time, poor public perception of the amount of energy needed by appliances and certain activities may be preventing consumers from making more informed choices when it comes to energy-saving behavior, a [new survey](#) suggests.

The gaps in knowledge versus reality suggest there is a significant opportunity for education to help consumers make better decisions to save energy. For example, Americans are more likely to say using less energy, such as shutting off lights, is the quickest path to energy conservation, without considering the potential savings from using more energy efficient equipment and behaviors, such as switching to compact fluorescent lightbulbs.

"Relative to experts' recommendations, participants were overly focused on curtailment rather than efficiency, possibly because improvements almost always involve research, effort, and out-of-pocket costs (e.g., buying a new energy-efficient appliance)," the report said, "whereas curtailment may be easier to imagine and incorporate into one's daily behaviors without any upfront costs."

Respondents were asked about the single most effective thing they could do to conserve energy. Fifty-five percent named curtailing energy use, such as driving less, as the most effective method, while just 11.7 percent chose efficiency.

They were also asked to estimate the amount of energy used by nine devices and energy saved by six household activities. Researchers found many misconceptions, such as the belief that using a clothesline to dry clothing saves more energy than changing the washer's settings; the opposite is true. Participants also thought a central air conditioner used 1.3 times as much energy as a room air conditioner, when it actually uses 3.5 times as much. Participants estimated that trucks consume as much energy as trains and ships, when they actually use 10 times as much energy per ton-mile.

They accurately estimated that moving goods by airplane is the most energy-intensive shipping method, and using virgin aluminum or glass to make cans or bottles takes more energy than using recycled materials.

Interestingly, participants who went out of their way to act in ways that were more environmentally friendly guessed less accurately.

"Unexpectedly, participants who engaged more in energy-conserving behaviors had less accurate perceptions of energy use and savings, possibly reflecting unrealistic optimism about the effectiveness of their personal energy-saving strategies compared with alternative ones," the report said. "Alternatively, people may focus primarily on the behaviors they have already adopted, leading to inaccuracies in judging how much energy other behaviors use or save."

The survey covered 505 people in the U.S. The article, "Public perceptions of energy consumption and savings," was authored by Shahzeen Z. Attaria, Michael L. DeKayb, Cliff I. Davidsonc, and Wändi Bruine de Bruin from Columbia University, Ohios State University, and Carnegie Mellon University, respectively. The article appeared in the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences.

*Image CC licensed by Flickr user [jeffwilcox](#).*

- [GreenBiz](#)
- [Consumer Trends](#)
- [Energy Conservation](#)
- [Energy Efficiency](#)

---

**Source URL:** <http://www.greenbiz.com/news/2010/08/18/most-americans-unsure-most-effective-ways-save-energy>