

Beyond the CFL: Winning Images for Energy Efficiency

Focus Group Research Summary

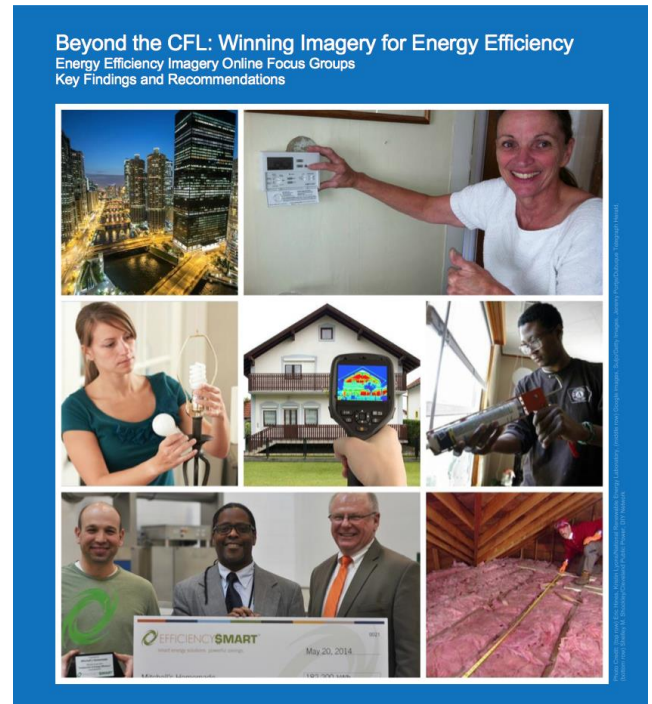
INTRODUCTION

A Google image search for [energy efficiency](#) confirms that good visuals are few and far between. CFL bulbs, plugs, outlets, and cliché images of hands holding the globe... this is our visual vocabulary for energy efficiency today.

In the fall of 2014, Resource Media conducted online focus groups with homeowners and renters in the Pacific Northwest and Midwest to gain a better understanding of images that get people excited about energy efficiency and inspired to take action in support of energy-saving practices, policies and programs.

The research confirms that visuals can:

- Bring home energy efficiency for people in a way that is simply not possible with other types of clean energy
- Get people thinking about what they could be doing in their own homes to save energy
- Inspire angry, visceral responses about energy waste
- Pique interest in what businesses and institutions are doing to save energy and money and support those that are working to save energy
- Create a constructive context for conversations about programs and policies that drive energy efficiency in homes and businesses.



Who did we talk to?

76 Participants:

38 Pacific Northwest
38 Midwest
Homeowners & renters
Ages 30-65
63% Suburban
37% Urban

Participants were asked to provide detailed reactions to 21 images and four videos over four days.

The full report, "Beyond the CFL: Winning Images for Energy Efficiency" can be accessed on Resource Media's [website](#).

Political party:

45% Democrat
29% Independent
19% Republican
7% Unaffiliated

Point of view:

55% Moderate
26% Liberal
19% Conservative

Top Recommendation

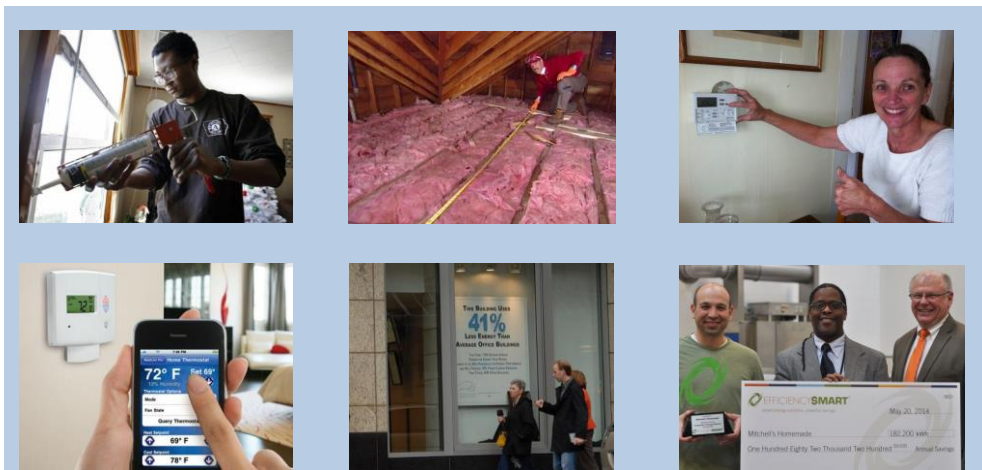
Personal, positive action speaks loudest

While Americans view energy efficiency in a very positive light, they tend to think of it as a question of personal choice and responsibility, not a matter for government programs and policies. And, most Americans don't think of energy efficiency as a solution to larger energy issues.

Smart use of imagery can help us overcome these challenges by getting people excited about the practical reality and forward momentum of energy efficiency improvements and the many benefits they provide. This helps put people in the best possible frame of mind to support the policies and programs that drive energy efficiency innovations.

Images that show people and businesses actively doing things to reduce energy use in the context of a particular program or regulation, with storytelling focused on the people who are making it happen, the benefits of doing so (money savings, etc.), the emotional benefits (feeling smart, sense of control, etc.), and the specific strategies employed have the potential to soften messaging around a regulatory efficiency program and connect with peoples' aspirations for saving energy.

Images from our study that fit this description are included in the table below.



Respondents reacted positively to all of these images; people easily grasped what the first four represented, and these images prompted enthusiastic conversations about things people had done or would like to do to improve energy efficiency in their own homes. Reactions to the last two images (the building with the sign and the men holding the check) prompted positive reactions and many questions. People wanted to know how the businesses were able to achieve energy efficiency savings and whether they could patronize the businesses in order to reward them for their leadership. These images would be improved with more explicit information about the type of business, money saved and energy efficiency improvements utilized.

Photo Credit: (top row) Jeremy Portje/Dubuque Telegraph Herald, DIY Network, Kristin Lyons/National Renewable Energy Laboratory, (bottom row) Google images, Paul Yao, Shelley M. Shockley/Cleveland Public Power

ADDITIONAL RECOMMENDATIONS

Use waste imagery sparingly & strategically

Waste imagery can be effective at generating outrage, but that outrage does not necessarily translate into support for policies. People tend to blame the individual or company for being irresponsible, and do not bridge to policy fixes to address the problem. For that reason, waste images should be used sparingly, and coupled with images showing solutions to eliminate or reduce waste.

Embrace energy efficiency as a form of clean energy

Advocates often worry when people equate efficiency with things like solar panels and wind turbines. Rather than try to “fix” the tendency to lump energy efficiency with other forms of clean energy, capitalize on it. People see energy efficiency, conservation and renewable energy as positive things that they want to be a part of.

Strongest photos are relatable and revealing

Images that were easily relatable, obviously tied to energy efficiency and intriguing inspired the most positive and engaged responses from participants. Conversely, the more abstract the image, the more the disconnect. This tells us that imagery needs to have a very clear connection to energy efficiency to be understood and relatable.

Building Signage: the low hanging fruit

Signage at homes, office buildings, retail stores and new developments can help bring energy efficiency out of the shadows and into the light and show people that energy-efficiency is happening all around them. This will be critical to the social norming of energy efficiency – making it seem that everyone is doing it, and that people are proud of doing it. Advocates could work with energy service companies to develop signs touting buildings’ energy efficiency gains with links to websites with more information and testimonials from owners.



The research shows that the strongest images for energy efficiency are easily-relatable and revealing, and show real people doing things to save energy. In this photo, it is clear that these kids are using low-energy light bulbs, an obvious way to save energy. The photo depicts “real” people—it is clearly not a stock photo. And, the kids in the photo are facing the camera and smiling, a sure-fire way to grab the viewer’s attention. *Photo credit: 350.org/Flickr*

RESEARCH FINDINGS

Energy efficiency inspires good vibes all around

People have a good understanding of what energy efficiency is and think about it in very positive, aspirational and personal terms.

Support for energy efficiency spans the political spectrum

People of all political persuasions support energy efficiency. With the exception of responses to an image of a woman changing a CFL bulb (see below), the conversation around energy efficiency is remarkably un-politicized.

Personal experience = increased engagement

Respondents expressed genuine enthusiasm to share their experiences saving energy in their homes, and genuine interest in what others are doing to save energy.

Visuals can prompt strong emotions and excitement

Because most people have personal experience doing things to save energy, visuals can bring energy efficiency home for people in a way that's not possible when it comes to other kinds of clean energy. Visuals are particularly adept at getting people excited about doing things to reduce energy use in their own homes and interested in what businesses and institutions are doing to save energy and money.

Personal responsibility, not government

People tend to think of energy efficiency as a personal responsibility, and not the job of regulations or government. Respondents believe everyone has a responsibility to save energy, but they resist the suggestion that government should play an active role in driving efficiency measures through policies and regulations.

Difficult to bridge personal to bigger picture

People don't naturally make the connection between their personal interest in energy efficiency and things they might do to make their own homes more efficient, and the larger context of energy use in residential and commercial buildings, transportation and industrial operations and the role of policy to drive more efficient practices.

Skepticism re: institutions and government

Skepticism about businesses and government entities popped up throughout the study. It was not a strong theme, but in a conversation that was otherwise wildly positive, this skepticism was noticeable and is clearly a vein that opponents to energy efficiency can easily mine.

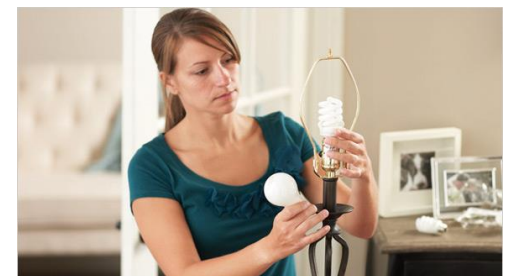
For more tips on improving energy efficiency imagery, [download our tip sheet](#) or [email us](#) to join an upcoming webinar.



This image was very appealing to most participants and got them talking about steps they had taken in their own homes to save energy. *Photo credit: Kristin Lyons, National Renewable Energy Laboratory*



This image of an empty office building with all the lights on prompted angry responses from many participants, one declaring, "Fire the building manager!" *Photo credit: Russell Davies*



This image made some respondents angry about the government mandating the use of certain types of light bulbs. One said, "We are being treated like children." *Photo credit: Google Images*