Building Behavior Change into Government: GreeNYC and the Policy Adoption Gap

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Overview

This paper examines GreeNYC as a response to the policy-adoption gap: the space between what government mandates, funds, or builds and what residents actually do. It draws on program reports, PlaNYC documents, contemporaneous emails and attachments from the 2006-2008 archive of PlaNYC founding director Rohit Aggarwala, interviews with Mayor's Office staff and NYC & Company leadership across the founding and creative teams, and relevant academic research. It shows how GreeNYC evolved from an early public-awareness concept into a strategic, data-driven approach to behavior change. It situates this evolution within the broader governance context of a city that possessed multiple policy tools - regulation, incentives, and infrastructure investment - but an uneven ability to shape individual behavior directly. In some domains, voluntary behavior change was therefore not merely complementary, but the principal available mechanism for achieving policy outcomes. This paper argues that behavior change should be treated as a core policy function requiring dedicated planning, marketing resources, and institutional capacity rather than as a downstream communications activity.

A second thesis focuses on implementation inside government. It shows that effective behavior change programs, like GreeNYC, depend not only on methodology, but on a high degree of resourcefulness and internal entrepreneurship. Building and sustaining such a program within a mayoral administration requires thoughtful institutional positioning, strong alignment between skills and roles, creative use of limited resources, and the ability to earn credibility across agencies. These conditions are not incidental. They are central to whether the work succeeds and should be treated as transferable knowledge alongside the behavioral approach itself.

This paper examines how GreeNYC worked, what it accomplished, where its limits lay, and what its experience reveals about how cities can address the policy-adoption gap.

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1. The Policy Adoption Gap and Its Implementation Conditions

This paper examines GreeNYC as a case study of the *policy–adoption gap*, the space between the provision of policy, infrastructure, and programs, and the extent to which residents adopt the behaviors required to realize their intended outcomes. This gap is not a failure of policy design. It is a feature of urban environmental governance. Even when cities deploy strong mandates, invest in infrastructure, and align incentives, behavior change does not automatically follow. Nor is it unique to New York: Angrist and Dercon find that governments worldwide routinely adopt policy more quickly than they build the

implementation infrastructure needed to carry it out, a pattern this paper traces in detail through GreeNYC's own trajectory.[1]

This dynamic was illustrated across PlaNYC. For example, the City had near-complete authority over some domains, such as the ability to regulate commercial building energy performance, yet very limited influence over residential emissions. Household behavior sat largely outside regulatory reach, even though it was materially significant.

Faced with this landscape, policymakers had three options: focus only on areas where traditional policy tools could directly shape outcomes, rely on general public information campaigns, or treat voluntary behavior change as a distinct domain requiring its own methods, tools, and discipline. The second approach has been widely used and consistently limited. As behavioral science has demonstrated, behavior is shaped by capability, opportunity, and motivation, rather than information alone.[2] GreeNYC represented a deliberate move toward the third option.

This paper advances two related theses. The first is that the policy-adoption gap requires an approach that treats behavior change as a distinct discipline. The second is that delivering such a response depends on specific organizational conditions. As in other policy domains, outcomes depend not only on what is designed, but on the institutional structures that shape how that design is carried out in practice.

Methodological Note

This analysis draws on primary program reports, PlaNYC planning documents, foundational research conducted by Dalberg Global Development Advisors and GlobeScan, interviews, and records from Rohit Aggarwala's Mayor's Office email and attachment archive covering 2006-2008. The archival record is used for chronology, documented decisions, organizational arrangements, and contemporaneous statements; the 2026 Aggarwala interview is retained where it provides retrospective interpretation not recoverable from email. Because the compiled timeline and sourcebook is a research aid rather than an independent authority, citations refer to the underlying emails, attachments, and calendar entries reproduced in its appendix. The archive is necessarily incomplete: it captures only correspondence in which Aggarwala participated and excludes many telephone and in-person discussions. The author served as Director of GreeNYC from 2009 to 2017, leading the development of its behavior change strategy, marketing campaigns, and partnerships. This perspective is treated as one source of evidence and triangulated with documentary and interview materials. Three additional retrospective interviews were conducted in 2026: with Amy Chester, who oversaw early GreeNYC development and implementation in the Mayor's Office of Long-Term Planning & Sustainability; Willy Wong, then Creative Director at NYC & Company; and George Fertitta, then President and CEO of NYC & Company. These are used to corroborate the program's early purpose, marketing structure, creative development, funding mechanisms, and organizational evolution. Where recollections are uncertain, they are treated as interpretive evidence rather than substitutes for contemporaneous records.

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[1] Angrist, Noam, and Stefan Dercon. "Understanding Gaps between Education Policy and Practice." What Works Hub for Global Education Working Paper. Oxford: Blavatnik School of Government, University of Oxford, 2024.

[2]Susan Michie, Maartje van Stralen, and Robert West, "The Behaviour Change Wheel: A New Method for Characterising and Designing Behaviour Change Interventions," *Implementation Science* 6, no. 42 (2011).

2. Policy Instruments and the Limits of Information

GreeNYC emerged from a practical problem: New York City's most ambitious sustainability goals depended, in part, on behaviors that were difficult to mandate or enforce through traditional policy tools alone. Understanding what GreeNYC did, and why it worked, requires situating it within two bodies of knowledge: the literature on policy instruments, which explains the structural conditions that created the need for the program; and the literature on behavior change and social marketing, which provides the analytical vocabulary for what the program actually did. In both cases, the fit is partial. The policy instrument literature describes government's toolkit but offers little guidance on how to use the more voluntary, less coercive tools within a large municipal bureaucracy. The behavior change literature provides relevant frameworks, but most were developed for smaller-scale or community-level interventions and do not address the institutional conditions under which programs like GreeNYC must operate. GreeNYC's experience both draws on and extends these frameworks, applying principles that the academic literature would later formalize, and confronting implementation challenges that remain under-theorized.

The archival record also clarifies that two different problems developed on separate tracks. Building public support for PlaNYC was a political-mobilization challenge present from the beginning of the planning process; inducing residents to change particular daily behaviors was a consumer behavior-change challenge that entered the written record later and required different instruments. Distinguishing these tracks helps explain why an initiative introduced publicly as awareness-building could later become a more specialized policy-implementation function. Chester's recollection independently reinforces this distinction. She described the Campaign for New York's Future as operating on the political side of PlaNYC, while GreeNYC sat on the "operational" and "consumer" side, with an education and consumer-motivation function distinct from policy measures the City could directly control. This retrospective account strengthens the interpretation that resident behavior was understood as a different implementation problem from building public support for the plan itself.[3]

The Policy Instrument Spectrum

Policy instruments exist along a spectrum from coercive to voluntary, from providing information at the least intrusive end to eliminating choice altogether at the most restrictive. This spectrum helps explain why behavior change became a priority and took the shape it did. The 2006 energy-planning process offers one early, illustrative example: the City's principal tools addressed owners, operators, agencies, and construction standards, but reached no further. Laurie Kerr, the energy policy lead planning much of the office's buildings work, drafted a December policy focused on building-sector regulation and institutional demand reduction; none of it reached tenants making daily decisions about bulbs, appliances, and other plug loads. By March 2008, the energy chapter of PlaNYC's annual report would position GreeNYC alongside building-efficiency measures, Executive Order 109, and construction-code changes as a consumer-facing mechanism for the part of energy demand those instruments could not reach. Building law could require action by the landlord; it could not govern what the occupant plugged in.

This structural distinction is corroborated by internal planning correspondence from the period. By late December 2006, Kerr was already naming "Demand Reduction" as a workstream distinct from building-code regulation and energy-supply planning, writing to Aggarwala to "discuss the Demand Reduction

[3] Amy Chester, interview with the author, August 24, 2026.

DRAFT

strategies" ahead of the State of the City address. At that stage, however, demand reduction still carried its utility-sector meaning: incentive programs and financing mechanisms aimed at building owners, not individual occupants. The explicit articulation of voluntary individual behavior change as a distinct policy category – as opposed to institutional demand reduction or political outreach – enters the written record only in February 2007, when Michael Northrop of the Rockefeller Brothers Fund proposed a "hortatory campaign" encouraging New Yorkers to adopt compact fluorescent bulbs voluntarily rather than through mandate. Aggarwala's reply confirmed the concept was already in motion: he noted that conversations with advertising firms were already underway and described CFL adoption as "the first 1-2% of our 30" – the first point in the documentary record at which individual behavior change is quantified as a distinct fraction of the city's 30 percent emissions-reduction target.

Chester recalled the same underlying logic more simply: there was "definitely" an understanding that conventional policy could "only go so far." In her memory, the relevance of GreeNYC lay less in whether early calculations could credibly assign a precise percentage of the emissions target to individual action than in the practical recognition that regulation could not make residents buy CFLs or change other household behaviors. This account supports the policy-instrument rationale.

As Aggarwala observed, policymakers operate with different degrees of freedom across domains. Where strong tools are available, they create corresponding expectations that policymakers will use them; where they are not, policy must rely on more experimental approaches. GreeNYC operated in precisely this constrained space – deploying voluntary, less coercive tools not merely where no stronger tool existed, but wherever the stronger tools available (infrastructure, incentives, regulation) could not by themselves guarantee the outcome.

The NYC-Specific Evidence Discipline

A defining feature of PlaNYC's development, and one that directly shaped GreeNYC's design, was a consistent discipline around generating New York City-specific evidence rather than importing approaches developed elsewhere. Aggarwala recalled that California was often seen as the gold standard for environmental policy, and that thoughtful advocates routinely proposed California-derived solutions that would have been counterproductive in New York. Free parking for hybrid cars, he noted, "makes perfect sense in a place where everybody has a car. But if you apply that in a place where 55 or 60% of the people don't own a car, you're actually going encourage a bunch of people to buy cars." The same principle extended from transportation. Water efficiency requirements that "pencil out to like $100 a gallon" may be rational in a desert context but are poorly suited to a city with a comparatively abundant water supply.

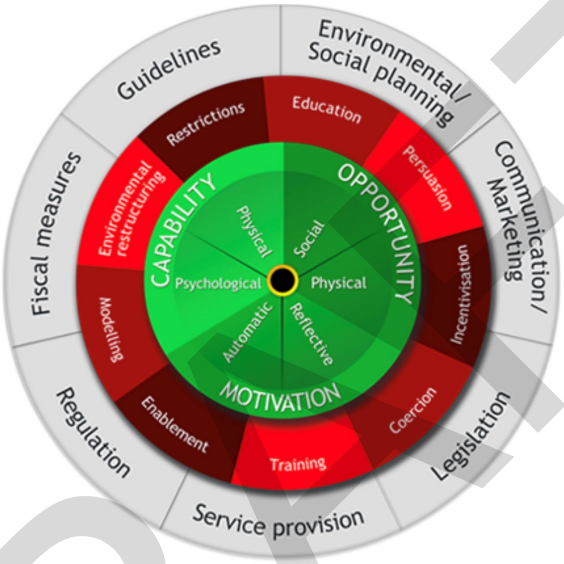
This discipline also shaped how the GreeNYC program approached behavior change, though not from the outset. Across energy use, transportation, and consumption, there were hundreds of potential actions that could have been promoted, each with some environmental benefit. A broad, undifferentiated approach, however, would have diluted impact and overwhelmed both the program and its audience. The Bloomberg administration's broader institutional commitment to data-driven policymaking created the conditions for a more rigorous approach, but it took the author's arrival in 2009 to identify the specific problem: New Yorkers could not realistically be asked to change hundreds of individual behaviors, and the program needed a disciplined basis for choosing which ones actually mattered. The challenge was not identifying possible actions, but determining which ones mattered most and were realistically adoptable at scale. This recognition led directly to the development of a more rigorous prioritization approach, culminating in the

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GreeNYC Behavioral Impact Study, which systematically evaluated potential behaviors based on their emissions impact, feasibility, and likelihood of adoption[4].

Behavior Change Frameworks and Applied Methodology

The Behaviour Change Wheel (BCW), developed by Michie, van Stralen, and West, offers the most widely adopted framework for systematically characterizing behavior change interventions. At its center is the COM-B model, which identifies capability, opportunity, and motivation as the three necessary conditions for behavior.



GreeNYC's Behavioral Impact Study was, in effect, a COM-B analysis conducted in applied form before that framework was formalized. Commissioned by the Mayor's Office of Long-Term Planning and Sustainability and carried out by Dalberg Global Development Advisors and GlobeScan, the study followed a structured four-phase process:

- Phase 1 identified and quantified the potential impact of over 200 individual actions against the city's GHG inventory;
- Phase 2 conducted a representative survey of 2,149 New Yorkers;
- Phase 3 analyzed the data and prioritized audience, messaging, and media recommendations; and
- Phase 4 developed a monitoring and evaluation framework. The study evaluated actions not only in terms of emissions impact but in terms of adoptability – asking who was not taking each action, why not, what would motivate them and whether those barriers and motivators were addressable through intervention.

[4] Roya Kazemi, Sonila Cook, Shivika Sahdev, Gwen Cottle, and Simon Jimenez, *New Yorkers' Contributions to a Greener, Greater City: A Behavioral Impact Study* (New York: Mayor's Office of Long-Term Planning and Sustainability, 2013), 12–15. Conducted 2010–2011 by Dalberg Global Development Advisors and GlobeScan.

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The study's top ten highest-impact actions – including replacing conventional cars with hybrids, switching to renewable electricity, performing home energy audits, weatherizing homes, and replacing incandescent bulbs with CFLs – were calculated to eliminate four million metric tons of CO_2e, achieving 7.5 percent of citywide GHG reductions and one-quarter of PlaNYC's overall emissions reduction goal.

The study also produced a segmentation model identifying five distinct behavioral profiles: Inadvertent Greens (9%), Pragmatic Homeowners (17%), Young Urbanites (15%), Aspiring Greens (27%), and Skeptics (31%). GreeNYC's campaigns placed particular emphasis on Aspiring Greens and Pragmatic Homeowners, together 44 percent of the city's population, who were identified as the most receptive to communication campaigns and most likely to change, while maintaining broader reach across other segments.

The survey also found that 43 percent of New Yorkers reported a high level of concern about environmental problems, with relatively low skepticism, and that local government and ordinary residents were jointly identified as the stakeholder groups with the most potential to affect environmental change – each cited by 34 percent of respondents. Importantly, motivations varied by action type rather than constituting a single uniform barrier: cost savings was the primary motivator for energy efficiency actions, health for food-related actions, and environmental concern ranked second or third across categories. This differentiation shaped GreeNYC's campaign-by-campaign messaging approach, with each campaign leading with the specific motivator most relevant to its target behavior and audience segment.

The Distinction between Communications and Behavior Change

A conceptual distinction that was central to GreeNYC's identity, and that is easy to understate, is the difference between communications and behavior change. Aggarwala articulated this distinction directly: "communications is a very well understood concept... just get information out. But the behavior change piece is the thing that's a little... more special for a sustainability team to recognize as its own distinct mechanism." Most government sustainability communications, and much government communication more broadly, operate in a familiar way: they generate awareness, disseminate information, and assume that knowing will lead to doing. GreeNYC departed from this model by treating behavior change as a distinct target requiring its own methodology. The informational model dominates government communications practice because it is familiar and inexpensive. The behavior change model is more resource-intensive and less standard, which is precisely why programs that apply it systematically are rare and worth documenting.

Contemporaneous evidence supports this account of an evolving distinction. Less than two months after the initial launch, communications strategist Joan Spivak warned that the campaign lacked message specificity, a clearly identified messenger, personal-benefit framing, and sufficient guidance on how to perform each action. She found the campaign's public materials left basic questions of message and audience unanswered and argued that its civic framing – aggregate citywide savings, comparisons to subway lighting – was the wrong register for individual behavior change: residents needed to understand "what they can gain individually," expressed in terms as concrete as dollars saved per year on an electricity bill. Her July 2007 assessment marks a clear pivot from publicizing an environmental agenda to diagnosing what would be required to influence conduct.

George Fertitta, who led NYC & Company during this period, offered a related but distinct diagnosis of the same underlying problem in a 2026 interview: the capability GreeNYC required is not one most cities

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possess, because most cities build press and communications capacity, not marketing capacity, and routinely treat the two as interchangeable when they are not. "Every city has a press office," he noted, "but that's not the same" as marketing – press offices are measured by "how many eyeballs saw a press conference," while marketing, in his framing, means "building a marketing idea into a marketing campaign that's sustainable." He noted that GreeNYC was deliberately treated differently from the outset as "more of a longer-term strategy," built around a durable character rather than a single announcement, because its goal was long-term behavior change rather than a one-off program or event.[5]

Social Marketing and the Limits of Existing Frameworks

Within this landscape, social marketing provides the closest theoretical framing for GreeNYC's approach. Defined as the application of marketing principles to influence behavior for social benefit, it offers a framework for designing interventions that go beyond information provision. Nancy Lee's practitioner model distinguishes between three policy tools: education ("Show Me"), law ("Make Me"), and social marketing ("Help Me") – highlighting the role of behavior-focused interventions alongside regulation and public information.[6] Community-Based Social Marketing (CBSM) similarly emphasizes identifying and addressing specific behavioral barriers rather than broadcasting information.[7]

These frameworks help explain why traditional government approaches, which often rely on awareness and information, are insufficient to drive sustained behavior change. However, they offer limited guidance for how to operationalize this work at the scale and complexity of a large city. CBSM, in particular, was developed for smaller, community-based interventions and does not address the institutional conditions under which large cities operate.

GreeNYC built on these foundations but extended them into a municipal governance context in two ways. First, it demonstrated how behavior change principles can be applied as an integrated component of policy implementation, rather than as a downstream communications function. Second, and just as critical to the program's success, it showed that applying those principles inside government depends on organizational conditions the existing literature does not address: institutional positioning, staffing choices, resourcefulness, and the ability to build credibility across agencies. The sections that follow take up both extensions in turn.

3. The Policy Adoption Gap in Practice: The PlaNYC Arc

The first three iterations of PlaNYC, released in 2007, 2011, and 2015, provide a record of how New York City's leadership understood and operationalized the relationship between policy and resident behavior over time. Read alongside the Behavioral Impact Study, the 2017 Small Steps, Big Strides report, the Aggarwala interview, and the 2006-2008 archival record, they trace a clear arc: from a loosely defined, awareness-oriented placeholder in 2007, to an explicit and quantified strategic lever in 2011, to a diffused function folded into broader civic-engagement and regulatory framing under a new mayoral administration by 2015.

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[5] George Fertitta, interview with the author, September 2026.

[6] Nancy Lee and Philip Kotler, *Social Marketing: Changing Behaviors for Good*, 5th ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 2016), 8–10.

[7] Doug McKenzie-Mohr, *Fostering Sustainable Behavior: An Introduction to Community-Based Social Marketing*, 3rd ed. (Gabriola Island, BC: New Society Publishers, 2011), 1–15.

2007: The Placeholder

The original 2007 PlaNYC contains no substantive discussion of behavior change as a policy domain. GreeNYC appears only as an "energy awareness and training campaign" with a goal of increasing awareness and helping residents "appreciate the urgency" of environmental issues.[8] There is no accompanying strategy for how awareness would translate into action.

Aggarwala's account of this period is illuminating. He characterized GreeNYC's appearance in the 2007 plan as "only slightly more than a placeholder," noting that while there was early recognition of the importance of behavior change, the program's identity and approach had not yet been fully developed at the time of publication. This distinction is instructive: identifying behavior change as a priority and determining how to operationalize it are related but distinct challenges, and the PlaNYC experience highlights the evolution from one to the other.

The 2007 plan did not capture the full extent of work already underway. GreeNYC's naming and conceptual origins actually predate the April 2007 launch, and the 2007 plan itself, by several months. The name was developed in fall 2006 alongside at least one companion brand identity, OpeNYC, as part of the communications architecture for Mayor Bloomberg's December 12, 2006 address at the Queens Museum of Art – each brand tied to a distinct section of the forthcoming plan. That speech included a video of the Mayor demonstrating sustainable behaviors at home, an early and untheorized version of the personal-exemplar logic that communications strategist Joan Spivak would later argue was strategically essential to behavior change (see Section 5, below). The calendar record shows the GreeNYC name already attached to planning meetings by January 29, 2007, nearly three months before the plan's public release. What was genuinely nascent in April 2007, in other words, was not the GreeNYC concept but its operational definition: the shift from a naming exercise tied to a mayoral speech to a fully theorized behavior-change methodology was still underway.[9]

Willy Wong adds a practical layer to this origin story. In addition to the broader communications architecture, he remembers an immediate need for a brandable mark that could appear on the City's emerging hybrid taxi fleet. That utilitarian requirement helps explain why visual identity developed before a fully articulated behavior-change methodology: the program needed a recognizable public property before its strategic operating model had matured.[10]

A surviving brochure fills in this sequence in more detail than either interview could alone. The brochure shows PlaNYC's three sub-brands already in place four months before GreeNYC's public launch, each assigned its own color and rendered in PlaNYC's stylized wordmark treatment: blue for OpeNYC and orange for MaintaiNYC, both drawn from the city's existing palette, and green – deliberately not an existing city color – for GreeNYC. According to Wong, when GreeNYC's visibility needs outgrew that treatment, the team decided against carrying the PlaNYC wordmark style forward on its own and instead folded the brand into the City's broader NYC identity program then in development. The mark that

[8]City of New York, *PlaNYC: A Greener, Greater New York* (New York: Office of the Mayor, 2007), 96–97.

[9] Calendar entries, "Videos for the Mayor's Sustainability Speech Meeting," Tuesday, November 28, 2006, organizer: Dan Doctoroff; calendar entries titled "March Speech/GreeNYC," first appearing Monday, January 29, 2007, organizers: Economic Development Assistant at EDC and Amy Chester. Rohit Aggarwala personal email and calendar archive, 2006–2008.

[10] Willy Wong, interview with the author, September 7, 2026.

resulted, designed by an outside studio, paired the GreeNYC/NYC wordmark with a stylized apple; it rolled out on the hybrid taxi fleet, utility bill inserts, and out-of-home advertising before Birdie existed.[11]



"The methodological and organizational foundations that would define GreeNYC emerged in the subsequent years, as the limits of regulation became more visible – particularly in the residential sector, where energy use accounted for 37 percent of the city's GHG emissions by 2011.

The first explicit written articulation of voluntary consumer action as a policy instrument appears on February 20, 2007. Michael Northrop proposed a mayor-led, nonmandatory campaign asking residents to purchase CFLs. Aggarwala replied that the team was already speaking with advertising firms, estimated CFL adoption as the first one to two percent of the City's 30 percent emissions-reduction goal, and immediately turned to the practical funding architecture: GE coupons, donated bulbs, and a possible matching grant. The exchange documents the point at which individual action was explicitly framed as a quantified contribution to PlaNYC rather than only a generic awareness objective.[12]

2011: Behavior Change as Strategic Lever

[11] Willy Wong, interview with the author, September 7, 2026; Willy Wong, email to the author, September 8, 2026, attaching "PlaNYC: A Special Supplement from the City of New York" (New York: The Mayor's Sustainability Advisory Board, December 2006). Neither the original pre-Birdie logo, the infinity-apple mark, nor any Apple correspondence appears in the Aggarwala email archive; this account rests on the 2026 interviews and the brochure alone.

[12] Michael Northrop to Rohit Aggarwala et al., February 20, 2007; Rohit Aggarwala to Michael Northrop et al., February 20, 2007

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The 2011 Public Engagement chapter makes explicit the role of individual behavior in achieving PlaNYC's goals. It recognizes that "the countless choices that over 8 million New Yorkers make every day will determine whether New York truly becomes a greener and greater place," positioning residents as co-producers of environmental outcomes alongside government action[13]. The Behavioral Impact Study survey data reinforces this framing, with New Yorkers identifying both "local government" and "people like me / ordinary residents" as the primary agents of environmental change.

Outside the Public Engagement chapter, GreeNYC appears only intermittently in PlaNYC, typically as a supporting mechanism rather than a central policy tool. Across sectoral chapters such as energy, air quality, and solid waste, the plan identifies behaviors including household energy use, recycling, driving practices as critical to achieving outcomes. These are addressed primarily through policy, infrastructure, and programmatic interventions with outreach added as an essential complement. More broadly, the plan emphasizes community engagement, volunteerism, and local stewardship across multiple domains, positioning residents as active participants in sustainability efforts. GreeNYC sits within this landscape as the city's primary vehicle for reaching individuals at scale.

Here, the policy adoption gap becomes explicit and quantified, with behavior recognized as central to achieving policy outcomes, even if the mechanisms for influencing it remain unevenly integrated across the plan.

2015: Operational Tool within a Regulatory Framework

In the 2015 OneNYC plan, GreeNYC largely disappears as a named program, even as the underlying need for resident action remains central. Released under a new mayoral administration, the plan reflects a shift in framing and priorities that reshapes how resident engagement is positioned within the broader strategy. The plan repeatedly acknowledges that government "does not control all the levers" and must engage residents and the private sector to achieve its goals, but this insight is not operationalized through a dedicated behavior-change framework. Instead, the functions previously associated with GreeNYC are diffused across broader concepts of public engagement, civic participation, and equity-driven governance.

4. Building Capacity for Behavior Change: The Organizational Foundations of GreeNYC

Understanding what GreeNYC accomplished requires examining how it was built. Its effectiveness was not simply the result of applying a behavior change methodology. It also depended on a set of organizational, political, and human conditions that are not typical within government and do not arise automatically. Four factors were particularly important: establishing a distinct institutional home, recruiting a nontraditional skill set, building a resource model based on partnerships rather than appropriation, and accumulating internal credibility through demonstrated results.

Institutional Home

Establishing GreeNYC within the Mayor's Office was a critical design decision. This positioning allowed the program to operate across agencies rather than within a single departmental mandate, aligning behavior

[13] City of New York. PlaNYC: A Greener, Greater New York. New York: Office of the Mayor, 2011.

change efforts with multiple policy domains. It also signaled that the work was central to the city's broader sustainability agenda, rather than a peripheral communications function.

Recognizing the Need for a Different Kind of Capability

Aggarwala recalled that the decision to establish GreeNYC as a standalone program, and to recruit specifically for private-sector marketing capability, grew directly from the recognition that voluntary behavior change required a different kind of intervention than the administration had previously built. Behavior change, he observed, was something "we knew had to happen" but that he "had not thought about much more deeply than that" by the time PlaNYC was published. It was the subsequent work on buildings that made the nature and scale of the need visible. Once visible, it became clear that the capability required was not one for which government typically hired.

Chester's recollection makes the novelty of this staffing choice unusually concrete. She remembers a moment when the team concluded that what it needed was a "brand manager," adding that she had "probably never heard those words together before." The comment is revealing not because brand management was novel in the private sector, but because it was not part of the standard vocabulary or staffing model of a municipal sustainability office. The hiring decision therefore represented an early institutional recognition that influencing voluntary consumer behavior required a capability different from conventional policy analysis or public information.[14]

The difficulty of locating this profile is documented directly in the hiring record for the position that preceded the author's tenure. The GreeNYC Policy Advisor search, launched in October 2007, listed brand management as its lead responsibility and licensing-program development as a named deliverable – the vocabulary of commercial brand management rather than government communications or policy analysis. The role required end-to-end commercial marketing capability rather than a narrow communications specialty: research and strategy, brand stewardship, creative development, media planning, partnership management, execution, and licensing. This kind of end-to-end capability is uncommon in government. It also required the ability to operate with limited resources, building and executing campaigns without a dedicated budget.

Several candidates were interviewed over the following months and either withdrew or were passed over for lacking that specific commercial background, and an active negotiation with one finalist collapsed in early 2008. The search continued through to the fall of that year when a qualified candidate was identified and an offer was made. The year-long search is a concrete illustration of the claim above: the capability GreeNYC required did not fit government's standard hiring channels, and the gap between the brand's ambitions and the office's staffing capacity was a persistent structural constraint rather than a temporary one, both before and during the author's tenure.

The author, who served as Director of GreeNYC, brought experience leading comprehensive marketing efforts in the private sector, including responsibility for research, strategy, creative development, and execution. Within GreeNYC, this translated into responsibility not only for market research and campaign development, but for developing the overall marketing approach, identifying and securing external funding partners, brand building and creative development, media planning, campaign activation and measurement. This alignment between the demands of the role and the capabilities brought to it enabled

[14] Amy Chester, interview with the author, August 24, 2026.

DRAFT

the program to operate in a more strategic and adaptive way than is typical within government communications functions.

Creative Funding and Strategic Partnerships

A defining feature of GreeNYC's model was its ability to leverage media, funding, and partnerships to deliver meaningful impact despite severe resource constraints. From 2009 through 2015, the program operated with one full-time dedicated staff person and no standing operating budget, assembling resources through a combination of philanthropic support, cross-agency collaboration, and private-sector partnerships aligned around shared goals.

Campaigns were built through targeted partnerships that aligned public objectives with partner incentives. Philanthropic funding from the Overbrook Foundation enabled the program's foundational research. City agencies such as the Department of Sanitation and the Department of Environmental Protection contributed media assets, programmatic alignment, and access to existing audiences. Private-sector partnerships played a central role in campaign execution: the Alliance of Automobile Manufacturers supported the *Turn It Off* anti-idling campaign, The Home Depot partnered on the *Switch and Save* CFL campaign, and Best Buy supported the energy-efficient air conditioning campaign. Partners underwrote media and provided access to distribution channels at the point of decision-making, allowing campaigns to reach residents at moments when behavior could be influenced. Across campaigns, this model generated more than 1.5 billion media impressions.

This resourcing model has roots that predate the author's 2009 tenure. In early 2007, pitches were being made to Bank of America for $750,000 in founding sponsorship and GE and Con Edison anchored the campaign's first programmatic partnership, around compact fluorescent bulbs, supplying a discount coupon and props for the Mayor's Earth Day remarks, while NYC & Company secured donated media placement for the initial out-of-home, television and print buy. The pattern of assembling resources through corporate and philanthropic alignment, rather than appropriated budget, was therefore present in GreeNYC's design from its first months and continued, in modified form, through the partnership model described above.[15]

Over time, this model produced a reinforcing dynamic. As campaigns demonstrated measurable results and the GreeNYC brand gained recognition, agencies and partners increasingly sought to collaborate in order to leverage that reach. In this context, brand credibility functioned as institutional currency: the program expanded not through formal budget increases, but through demonstrated value and the ability to attract aligned resources.

Direct city funding followed rather than preceded proof of concept: only after several years of running campaigns without city money, paired with post-campaign survey research demonstrating New Yorkers'

[15] Ashley Jacobs (NYC & Company) to Rohit Aggarwala and Alison Kling, forwarding "Final as of 3/9," Monday, March 12, 2007, attaching Bank of America sponsorship proposal ($750,000 primary sponsorship ask); Alison Kling (NYC Economic Development Corporation) to Rohit Aggarwala, "GE proposal," Tuesday, April 24, 2007; Peter O'Toole (GE Corporate) to Rohit Aggarwala et al., "RE: Earth Day press," Friday, April 20, 2007; Rachel Webber (News Corporation) to Rohit Aggarwala and Roy Bahat, "RE: GreeNYC ads," Friday, June 1, 2007. Rohit Aggarwala personal email archive, 2006–2008.

favorable response to the brand, did other agencies begin contributing their own budgets after a kind of proof of concept. Notably, the program's first dedicated line-item budget arrived after Aggarwala had already left city government, meaning the founding leadership that established GreeNYC never oversaw it as a directly funded program – credibility, in this account, substituted for budget for longer than even the founding director's tenure.[16]

Together, these arrangements illustrate a core lesson of the GreeNYC model: effective behavior change depends not only on strong data and campaign design, but also on the ability to mobilize resources through strategic alignment. In resource-constrained environments, financing and partnership development are not supporting functions, but central components of implementation.

5. Operationalizing Behavior Change: The GreeNYC System

The previous section established that GreeNYC's effectiveness depended on a specific set of organizational conditions. This section shows how those conditions were translated into an operating system for behavior change – one that linked research, targeting, intervention design, delivery, and measurement into a coordinated process within a constrained institutional environment.

GreeNYC was not a communications program, but an applied behavior change system. Its theory of change departed from the informational model that dominates government practice. Rather than assuming that awareness leads to action, the program structured interventions to move from awareness to adoption through a range of steps: establishing social norms, reducing perceived and actual barriers, aligning actions with motivations people already held – such as cost savings, health, or convenience – and providing a clear and immediate path to action.

Research and Behavior Prioritization

The foundation of the model was a decision to invest in rigorous research before launching campaigns. The Behavioral Impact Study, conducted over six months through extensive academic research, expert interviews, focus groups, a 2,149-person representative survey, and consultation with leading city agencies and NGOs, evaluated more than 200 potential actions along two dimensions: environmental impact and likelihood of adoption. The study mapped behaviors not only to the city's GHG inventory, but to its air quality and solid waste data as well, ensuring campaign targets aligned with the sectors where individual action could meaningfully contribute across each of these areas. This avoided a common pitfall in behavior change programs: focusing on visible or symbolic actions with limited aggregate impact.

The study's findings did more than select which behaviors to prioritize; they shaped every element of the campaigns built around them. Audience segmentation identified which New Yorkers were most reachable and receptive for each target behavior, directing where and to whom campaigns spoke. Barrier and motivation analysis for each behavior determined the messaging strategy: whether a campaign should lead with cost savings, health, or convenience depended on what the research found actually moved that audience. Media channel selection followed the same logic, matching how each segment could realistically be reached to where campaign resources were spent. Creative development translated those insights into

[16] Roya Kazemi, remarks in interview with Amy Chester, August 24, 2026.

DRAFT

specific executions – addressing the exact barrier identified for a given behavior, rather than producing generic environmental messaging. And because the study established baseline metrics and a framework for tracking behavioral and environmental outcomes, it made measurement possible from the outset, rather than retrofitted after a campaign had already launched. In this sense, the Behavioral Impact Study was not an input to a single decision, but the analytical backbone of the entire operating system described in this section.

From Insight to Action: Removing Barriers and Activating Motivation

The research findings translated directly into campaign design. For the Switch and Save CFL campaign, the study identified three specific barriers: higher purchase price, insufficient knowledge of energy benefits, and concerns about unflattering light. The campaign's messaging, artwork, and partnership with The Home Depot were each designed to address one of these barriers explicitly. The resulting campaign generated close to 600 million media impressions, a 12 percent increase in self-reported CFL purchases, and an estimated carbon reduction of 56,700 $MTCO_2e$. Retail data also showed a 25 percent increase in CFL sales over the same period, though this likely reflects a combination of factors beyond the campaign alone.[17]

The Stop Junk Mail campaign addressed friction. While many residents were receptive to reducing unwanted mail, the process for opting out was cumbersome. Creating a simple, centralized tool reduced that barrier, converting latent willingness into action and leading to large-scale adoption.

Across campaigns, the program applied a consistent principle: identify the dominant barriers and motivations for a specific action and audience, reduce or remove the barriers, and design creative that leads with the motivator most likely to drive action.

Brand as Behavioral Infrastructure

A defining feature of GreeNYC was its use of brand development as a behavior-change mechanism rather than a visual overlay. Voice, tone, design, and language were treated as integral to how messages would be received, trusted, and acted upon. These elements were developed deliberately to build credibility and resonance at scale, recognizing that participation in voluntary behavior change depends not only on information, but on how that information is delivered.

Wong's account of the creative evolution helps explain why this mattered. He recalled that some early GreeNYC materials felt "very corporate" and did not fit the more "humanistic and friendly" direction the city was pursuing. The creative brief, in practice, was therefore not simply to make environmental information attractive, but to make it feel approachable enough to enter everyday civic life.

The December 2006 PlaNYC brochure discussed above supplies a concrete "before" against which this shift can be measured. Its GreeNYC section is illustrated with a photograph of a man wading through floodwater on a Brooklyn street, captioned "Imagine commuting by water (but only when you want to)," alongside statistics on rising temperatures and asthma hospitalization rates presented without any accompanying behavioral guidance. The surrounding PlaNYC materials follow the same register throughout: gridlocked traffic, a darkened skyline during the 2003 blackout, and population projections

[17] Kazemi et al., *Behavioral Impact Study*, 27.

DRAFT

framed as looming strain rather than manageable choices. This is the "shaming, guilt, and fear-based" register Birdie was built to move away from, preserved in a dated, citable artifact rather than only asserted in retrospect.[18]



Central to this approach was the creation of Birdie, a friendly, optimistic, non-authoritative character designed to move away from the negative heavy-handed approaches that had often characterized environmental messaging. Rather than positioning the program's messenger as an expert instructing residents, Birdie was framed as a proxy for New Yorkers – learning alongside them and modeling small, achievable actions. This positioning lowered the psychological barrier to participation, made pro-environmental behaviors feel more accessible and socially normative, and broadened the program's appeal beyond those already inclined toward "green" behaviors.



[18] "PlaNYC: A Special Supplement from the City of New York" (New York: The Mayor's Sustainability Advisory Board, December 2006), provided by Willy Wong, email to the author, September 8, 2026.

Wong recalled bringing illustrator Todd St. John into the work because his character-based style could make the program more engaging and fun, and because the messages could become shorter, simpler, and more memorable. In Wong's telling, Birdie also solved a strategic platform problem: once the character became recognizable, the City could use the same trusted property to talk about CFLs, water, transportation, or other behaviors without rebuilding awareness from scratch for every issue. Brand consistency thus reduced the transaction cost of each new campaign while allowing the subject matter to change.

The brand system reinforced this role through consistent application across channels and contexts. Birdie appeared across paid, owned, and earned media, as well as "in-person" events in all five boroughs, creating repeated, recognizable touchpoints. Supporting elements – including a customized, highly legible typeface and consistently accessible, supportive language – were designed to prioritize clarity and approachability. Together, these choices helped establish a tone that was distinct from traditional government communications and contributed to high levels of recognition and favorability, as documented in survey research.

Measurement: Linking Campaigns to Behavioral and Environmental Outcomes

A defining feature of GreeNYC's model was its effort to measure behavioral outcomes and environmental impact alongside communications reach. The framework developed through the Behavioral Impact Study organized evaluation into three tiers: awareness (e.g., media impressions and campaign recognition), behavioral response (e.g., self-reported actions, participation rates, and administrative or sales data), and impact (estimated environmental outcomes such as waste reduction or avoided emissions).

This structure made it possible to connect campaigns to observable changes in behavior and, in some cases, to quantify their contribution to citywide sustainability goals. For example, the Stop Junk Mail campaign led to New Yorkers opting out of more than 1.2 million mailings, reducing over 20 million pounds of paper waste. The B.Y.O. campaign contributed to the avoidance of more than 300 million plastic bags, while the "Turn It Off" campaign produced a 111 percent increase in 311 reports of idling violations.[19] These results do not represent precise attribution in a controlled experimental sense. However, the framework represents a meaningful shift toward outcome-based accountability.

6. Implications for Policy and Practice

The GreeNYC case has implications for both how behavior change is designed within public policy and how it is implemented within government institutions. Taken together, these implications suggest that the primary barriers to effective behavior change are not conceptual but organizational.

Behavior Change as a Core Policy Function

The first implication is that behavior change must be treated as a core policy function rather than a secondary communications activity. Information alone is rarely sufficient to produce sustained behavioral change. The GreeNYC Behavioral Impact Study makes this clear: even in a city where 43 percent of

[19] City of New York. Small Steps, Big Strides: Insights from GreeNYC. New York: NYC Mayor's Office of Sustainability, 2017.

DRAFT

residents expressed high concern about environmental issues, awareness did not consistently translate into action. Behavior change required interventions designed around specific barriers and motivations, not simply the dissemination of information.

This distinction reframes the role of communications within policy implementation. Rather than a communications function serving as the only step – used to promote or explain policies once they are in place – GreeNYC operated as a marketing function: a mechanism through which policy goals were actually realized. The GreeNYC model demonstrates that without this layer, even well-designed policies, infrastructure investments, and incentives may not achieve their intended outcomes.

This trajectory was not fully anticipated at the outset. The archival chronology shows that the named brand, launch partnerships, and initial advertisements preceded a developed behavior-change methodology. Within weeks of launch, the team was asking whether the campaign could actually change behavior; within months, it was defining a specialized brand-management role; and over the following years, GreeNYC built the research and evaluation architecture described above. The evolution from awareness initiative to structured, evidence-based program was therefore a process of institutional learning, not the execution of a fully formed original design.[20]

Policy Instruments, Degrees of Freedom, and the Role of Behavior Change

A second implication concerns the variation in regulatory authority across policy domains. As Aggarwala observed, "thoughtful policymakers have different degrees of freedom on different topics," distinguishing between areas where government holds near-total control – such as the building code – and those where it has very limited influence, such as individual consumption choices. Between these poles lies a spectrum of partial authority, enforcement feasibility, and political viability that shapes what policy can realistically achieve. This variation is documented contemporaneously rather than only recollected: the same March 2008 annual report chapter that describes buildings as 80 percent of citywide emissions, reachable through Local Law 86, benchmarking, and Executive Order 109, contains no comparable regulatory instrument for the individual tenant or resident, consistent with Aggarwala's framing of near-total authority in one domain and very limited authority in the other.[21]

The policy-adoption gap is not uniform across this spectrum. In domains where mandates exist but compliance is uneven, the challenge is often one of enforcement and participation. In domains where regulatory pathways are limited or unavailable, behavior change becomes a primary mechanism rather than a supporting one. Programs designed to close this gap must therefore begin with a clear diagnosis of where they sit within this landscape. Interventions appropriate for a domain with enforceable rules but weak compliance (such as idling) differ fundamentally from those appropriate where no regulatory solution is available (such as residential lighting or food choices).

This has direct implications for how behavior change is positioned within a broader policy strategy. The GreeNYC case demonstrates that voluntary behavior change can function as a gap-filling layer within a mix of policy instruments – complementing regulation where it exists and substituting where it does not. In some cases, behavior change enables immediate action and builds familiarity with new practices; in others,

[20] Joan Spivak to Jonathan Dickinson, July 9, 2007; GreeNYC Policy Advisor job description, November 2007; Rohit Aggarwala, interview with the author, 2026

[21] Melissa Wright to Francis Barry, "PlaNYC annual report chapter drafts 3/23," Sunday, March 24, 2008; Laurie Kerr to Rohit Aggarwala and Jonathan Dickinson, "Re: plan-y-c language state of the city," Wednesday, December 27, 2006. Rohit Aggarwala personal email archive, 2006–2008.

it operates in advance of or alongside formal policy tools. The program's early work promoting compact fluorescent lighting, followed by the eventual phaseout of incandescent bulbs, illustrates how voluntary adoption and regulation can operate sequentially as part of a coordinated approach.

Taken together, this suggests that behavior change is not a substitute for policy, but a flexible instrument that operates differently depending on where formal authority begins and ends.

Implementation Capacity as a Binding Constraint

GreeNYC's effectiveness depended on the ability to assemble capabilities that are not standard within government: cross-agency positioning, integrated marketing and behavioral expertise, a data-driven approach to marketing plans, flexible resource models, and the accumulation of credibility through demonstrated results. Where this capacity is absent, even a well-designed methodology cannot be executed: research can identify the right behaviors and the right messages, but without marketing expertise, flexible resourcing, and institutional standing across agencies, that research has no path to becoming a campaign. Design and delivery are therefore not sequential steps but interdependent ones – a point comparable findings in other sectors reinforce directly: capacity gaps, not design gaps, explain much of the persistent shortfall between announced policy and realized outcomes, whether in climate policy broadly or in the specific case of municipal transit build-out. GreeNYC's experience adds a further, more specific claim to this literature: the missing capacity is not generic administrative capacity, but a particular combination of marketing skill and government access that most cities never build.

Wong's description of how City creative work was accomplished illustrates one specific form this capacity took: resourcefulness as a deliberate practice rather than an improvised workaround. With limited formal resources, he emphasized the need to work through relationships, use whatever assets were available, and structure collaborations so that each participant could see a benefit. This is consistent with GreeNYC's later operating model, in which resourcefulness was not an improvisational side effect of inadequate funding, but a practical competency – the specific skill required to make cross-agency and public-private implementation work in the absence of a dedicated budget.

George Fertitta's cross-city vantage point suggests this capacity gap is not specific to New York. Drawing on more than a decade advising city sustainability and marketing offices through Bloomberg Associates, he described the shortage of marketing – as distinct from press and communications – capability as a near-universal pattern: cities routinely have unfilled positions or underfunded line items for this function, sometimes to save money and sometimes because "the recruitment process is so onerous," and default instead to press offices whose function and skill set are fundamentally different. In his account, even modest funding directed specifically at marketing capability – rather than communications – can be disproportionately effective precisely because so few cities build it deliberately. This generalizes the claim above beyond a single city's staffing accident: the capability gap GreeNYC had to overcome was not incidental to New York's bureaucracy, but a structural feature of how city governments are staffed everywhere.[22]

Informal Scaling

[22] George Fertitta, interview with the author, September 2026.

DRAFT

A related implication concerns how programs scale within government in the absence of formal authority. Aggarwala described GreeNYC as something that "became a flywheel that got bigger and bigger," reflecting a pattern in which expansion was driven not by formal mandate or budget growth, but by the ability to demonstrate value in ways that other actors chose to adopt and support. The pattern is visible in the contemporaneous record within a year of launch: by early 2008, GreeNYC was fielding unsolicited partnership and co-branding requests from a Broadway theater trade association, a WABC radio host, and the New York Power Authority's Auto Show press event, alongside internal concern about unauthorized use of the brand on a city agency stormwater brochure – the kind of organic, opt-in demand for association with the brand that the "flywheel" description captures, arising well before the program had a dedicated brand manager in place.[23]

This mode of growth differs from standard accounts of government program design, which emphasize formal structures, delegated authority, and appropriated resources. In the GreeNYC case, expansion occurred through informal mechanisms: agencies opted in rather than being directed, partnerships were formed around perceived value rather than requirement, and resources followed demonstrated effectiveness rather than initial allocation.

This suggests that behavior change programs may operate through a different scaling logic than traditional policy instruments. Rather than expanding through formal authorization, they can expand through adoption – growing as other actors choose to participate in and extend the model. This form of internal entrepreneurship depends less on hierarchical authority and more on the ability to generate credibility, align incentives, and sustain demand over time.

Program Durability and Leadership Dependence

The GreeNYC case demonstrates that program effectiveness and program persistence are distinct. Behavior change initiatives built on trust, tone, and accumulated brand equity are not self-sustaining. They require ongoing leadership support to maintain coherence, visibility, and impact.

The program's trajectory across administrations illustrates this dynamic. While GreeNYC demonstrated measurable results and established a recognizable public-facing platform, its prominence and resourcing declined under the subsequent mayoral administration. The shift did not reflect a change in underlying policy goals, which remained focused on sustainability and emissions reduction, but rather a change in how resident engagement was structured and prioritized within the broader policy framework. Over time, the centralized brand and campaign model that had defined GreeNYC was phased out, with its functions dispersed across agencies and initiatives.

George Fertitta's account corroborates this pattern from a third, structurally independent vantage point: not GreeNYC itself, but NYC & Company's broader role as an in-house marketing arm for city government. By his account, NYC & Company's close working relationship with City Hall – the relationship that had made GreeNYC's launch possible in the first place – also went cold under the subsequent

[23] Amy Chester to Tom Ferrugia (Broadway.org), "quick thoughts," Tuesday, March 25, 2008; Rohit Aggarwala to Stu Loeser, "Re: john gambling," Friday, February 15, 2008; Carter Strickland Jr. to Amy Chester and Rohit Aggarwala, "RE: Auto Show Press Event," Tuesday, March 11, 2008; Rohit Aggarwala to Paraag Sarva and Brianna Wolf, "RE: Storm water and adopt a highway," Thursday, March 27, 2008. Rohit Aggarwala personal email archive, 2006–2008.

administration, with "very little connection" between the two. That the same discontinuity affected both a specific behavior-change program and the broader institutional capacity that had helped build it suggests the vulnerability described above is not unique to GreeNYC, but characteristic of marketing-driven city initiatives generally: they depend on sustained executive sponsorship in a way that regulatory programs, once codified, do not.

This pattern highlights a structural vulnerability. Regulatory approaches, once enacted, tend to persist through formal rules and enforcement mechanisms. By contrast, behavior change programs depend on continued institutional sponsorship and alignment with leadership priorities. Their effectiveness can be demonstrated, but their continuity is not guaranteed. Sustaining such programs therefore requires not only designing effective interventions but embedding them in ways that are resilient to changes in political leadership.

Transferability and Limits

The GreeNYC model is transferable in principle, but not automatically replicable. Its core elements – research-driven prioritization, audience segmentation and targeting, strategic messaging design, and outcome-oriented measurement – can be adapted across contexts. These components provide a practical framework for designing behavior change interventions within policy environments. This transferability is not solely theoretical. Other cities have launched sustainability behavior-change programs explicitly modeled on GreeNYC, and the author authored a guidebook for the Urban Sustainability Directors Network (USDN) to help city sustainability offices plan and implement comparable programs elsewhere – evidence that the framework has already traveled beyond its originating institutional context, even as the discussion below cautions against treating that travel as automatic.[24]

However, the case also highlights the limits of methodological transfer. The effectiveness of the model depended not only on its design, but on the organizational conditions that supported it: cross-agency positioning, specialized skill sets, flexible resource models, and sustained leadership backing. Without these conditions, the same methods are unlikely to produce comparable results.

There are also substantive limits. Not all high-impact behaviors are politically viable targets, and the scope of intervention is shaped by local norms, institutional authority, and policy priorities. As a result, transferability requires adaptation rather than replication – both to the institutional context and to the specific behaviors being targeted.

Conclusion

This paper has examined GreeNYC as a response to the policy-adoption gap: the persistent distance between policy provision and the behaviors required to realize policy outcomes. The case demonstrates that behavior change can function as a meaningful component of public policy when it is approached not as a communications task, but as a structured intervention grounded in research, targeted design, and measurable outcomes. GreeNYC's contribution lies in the integration of these elements into a functioning system. Under constrained conditions, the program linked research, targeting, creative design, delivery, and measurement in a way that made behavior change legible within a policy framework. In doing so, it

[24] Roya Kazemi, remarks in interview with Amy Chester, August 24, 2026.

DRAFT

reframed the role of communications from awareness-building to implementation – positioning it as a mechanism through which policy goals are realized in practice.

The origins of this approach were not fully planned. The archival record shows a sequence rather than a single founding insight: a brand and mayoral demonstration developed before PlaNYC's launch; a regulatory toolkit focused on buildings and institutions; a February 2007 articulation of voluntary consumer action as a quantified policy contribution; a commercially structured launch funded in part through NYC & Company's own media contracts and built around sponsors, utilities, retailers, and donated media; a visual identity that moved through at multiple iterations before Birdie's creation gave the program a durable character; and a prolonged search for the brand-management capability needed to turn an evolving campaign into a long-term operating function. Aggarwala's interview provides the retrospective interpretation connecting these events. Together, the sources show GreeNYC emerging through institutional learning at the boundary of formal authority. The Chester and Wong interviews strengthen this interpretation from two different institutional vantage points: Chester recalls an initiative conceived as a consumer-motivation function beyond the reach of conventional policy tools, while Wong recalls a brand and creative platform that had to become more approachable, memorable, and reusable as it evolved. George Fertitta adds a third vantage point from entirely outside city government: assessing GreeNYC as a marketing professional against dozens of other cities, he frames its distinctiveness as the product of a genuine marketing discipline – research, brand-building, creative production – that most cities never build, defaulting instead to press and communications capacity alone. Together, their accounts make the progression from early campaign property to specialized behavior-change capacity more legible.

The broader literature suggests that this gap is structural and persistent. But the GreeNYC case adds a critical dimension: closing it depends not only on identifying effective interventions, but on building the institutional capacity to design, deliver, and sustain them. Where that capacity exists, behavior change can complement, extend, or in some cases substitute for traditional policy tools. Where it does not, even well-designed policies may fall short of their intended impact.

That capacity, once built, is not self-sustaining. GreeNYC's own trajectory makes this concrete rather than abstract: three independent accounts – the author's, Chester's, and Fertitta's, the latter describing NYC & Company's broader relationship with City Hall – converge on the same finding, that the program's decline tracked a change in political leadership rather than any change in its results or in the city's underlying policy goals. A behavior-change program can be effective and still be dismantled; the two are not the same test and treating them as one is a mistake this paper argues cities should not repeat.

The model is also transferable, though not automatically so. Other cities have built programs explicitly modeled on GreeNYC, and its methods have been formalized into guidance – including a guidebook the author wrote for the Urban Sustainability Directors Network –suggesting the approach travels beyond the institutional conditions that produced it. But transfer requires rebuilding those conditions, not simply adopting the methodology: the organizational capacity described above is itself part of what must be exported, not a fixed cost other cities can skip.

For practitioners, the implication is that behavior change should be treated as a core policy function, designed alongside regulation, incentives, and infrastructure, and supported by the organizational conditions required to execute it at scale. Those conditions must also be deliberately protected against changes in political leadership, not assumed to persist because the work has already proven itself. For researchers, the case underscores the need to examine not only what works, but how and under what

DRAFT

conditions it can be made to work within real institutions. The policy adoption gap is unlikely to disappear. The implication is not that behavior change replaces traditional policy tools, but that without it, those tools are often incomplete.

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