

Think Before You Ask

**A Focus Framework for High-Impact Consumer
Research on Sustainable Behaviour**



May 2026

The Purpose of this Playbook

Any attempt to make the world more sustainable ultimately comes down to one thing: getting people to act differently. But behaviour rarely shifts just because we ask nicely, present facts, or launch a well-intended campaign. People make choices based on habits, emotions, identity, convenience, and countless subtle trade-offs — not abstract ideals. Furthermore, most choices are made subconsciously.

That's why real change begins with understanding what people do today, why they do it, and what stands in their way. Only by grounding decisions in behavioural reality can organisations create strategies, innovations, and communications that truly move people. Decisions that will make future-proof behaviour feel appealing rather than demanding.

This playbook is a shortcut to **consumer understanding**. Our goal is to help you:

- Make consumer research faster, smarter, and more reliable
- Prevent failed product launches caused by assumptions and echo chambers
- Ensure sustainability initiatives succeed because they fit how people really choose
- Empower teams with clarity instead of just more data

This playbook guides you through the principles of truly useful consumer research and offers a clear, step-by-step approach that leads from understanding to meaningful change. The result: a clear and precise starting point for your insights journey as well as great foundation for briefing external insights experts.

Think first!



Common Pitfalls That Distort Insight

We've tried to keep it simple. But in reality, doing consumer research is not an easy task. We've listed some common pitfalls, so you can avoid them.

- **Echo Chambers.** Testing ideas only within internal circles, friendly audiences, or like-minded consumers. It leads to misleading positivity and blind spots.
- **Socially Desirable Answers.** Sustainability, health, ethics = high risk of “good citizen answers”. Counter with: past-behaviour questions, trade-offs, anonymity, contextual tasks.
- AI as a **Substitute for Real People.** Synthetic respondents lack cultural nuance, lived experience, and general validity. Useful for inspiration, not for real decisions.
- **Method-first thinking.** (“We want a focus group/survey...”) Start with the decision; let the research questions dictate methods.
- **Overly broad curiosity.** Long, unrelated question lists dilute power and blur recommendations. You'll end up with a haystack of data, without meaningful insight. Instead, tie each question to a decision lever.
- **Pre-made decisions** seeking validation. If leadership only wants proof, you won't get insight. Reframe to what would change the decision or what follow-up decisions still need to be made.



Start With the Decisions



Research is only valuable when it unlocks a clear decision. Therefore, good research begins at the end. Before starting any research project, ask yourself:

What decision must this research enable?

- What area: strategic direction, innovation, communication?
- What can we realistically change as a result of the outcomes of research?
- What lack of information keeps me from making those decision today?

Those gaps become your research questions. The next page give you some guidance on what kinds of decisions there are.



The Innovation Triangle

To anchor your research needs, classify the decisions you want to make into one of the three key categories. Each decision field requires different insights.

Strategic Direction

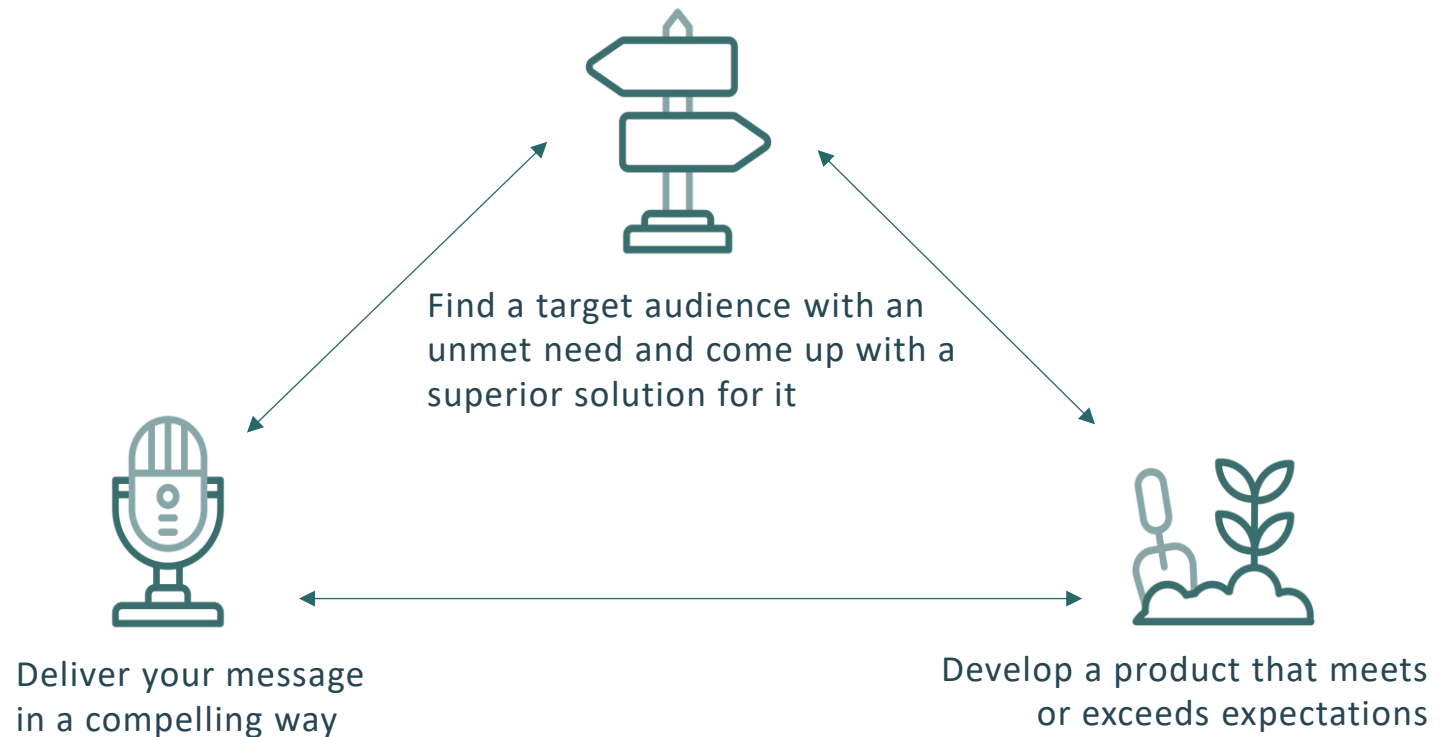
Category definition, unmet needs, long-term role of sustainability, segmentation, brand positioning.

Innovation

Consumer friction, value proposition, concept optimisation, product experience, barriers to adoption.

Communication

What to say, how to say it, which values to connect to, how to land sustainability credibly, which channel.



Use the CDCM Model to Structure the Problem

A simple but powerful behaviour-understanding framework

Write down as much as you can about the red circles. Be as precise as you can. And remember your sources. If you don't have a source, but just as feeling, that's ok too. Write down everything you (think you) know.

Filling in the framework prevents prematurely jumping to solutions. It ensures interventions fit the behaviour they're meant to change by dealing with the root causes.

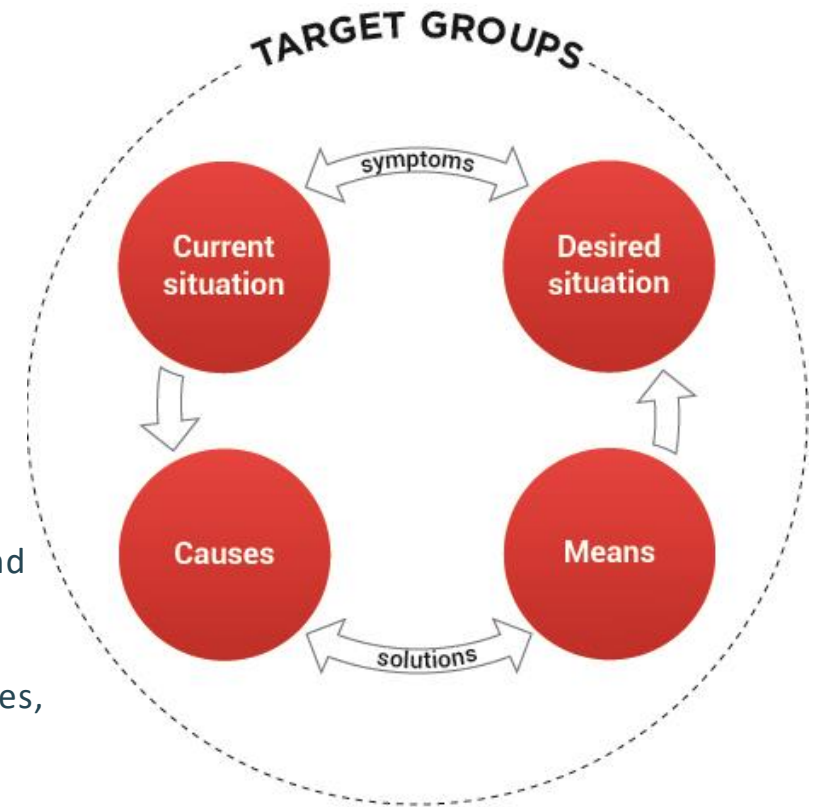
Current Situation: What people actually do, think, feel today

Desired Situation: Define concretely what the new behaviour should be (specific, measurable, realistic).

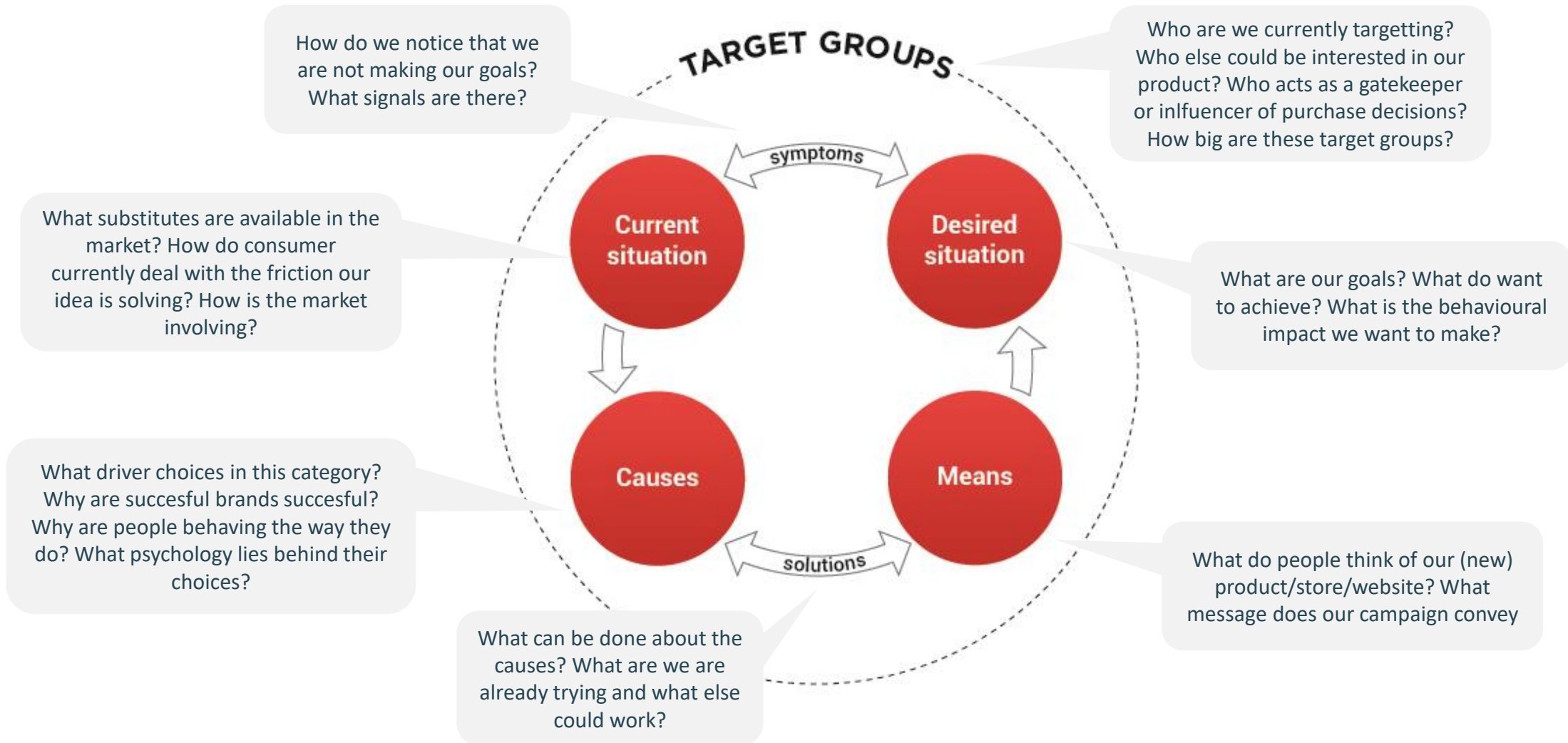
Causes: Why the gap exists. Try to split the reasons into factors that (de)motivate and factors that enable the desired behaviour.

Means: Interventions that match the causes: product, communication, pricing, nudges, policy. Don't just write them down, but also think about what you know how people react to products, messages, etc.

Target groups: Any group of stakeholders relevant for you. Think of users and non-users. Remember a sociodemographic is not defined enough to act as a target group



Ask yourself the right questions



Find out What You Already Know

The CDCM model should have given you an idea about areas you already know quite a lot about. Also about in what areas you don't know enough yet. Use that as a starting point for a thorough round of desk research.

Before doing any new research, you should:

- Review existing internal knowledge (past studies, trackers, behavioural data, past concept tests, etc.)
- Review external knowledge (academic work, public databases, category reports, etc)
- Speak to market experts who can tell you how the market works
- Look for successful brands/products that have found a solution for the issues you are facing.

Identifying the pieces of the puzzle you already have, prevents reinventing the wheel, reduces cost, and sharpens the remaining questions.

You can use AI for this step. It's often very good at summarizing knowledge. But remember to check for hallucinations and always ask for the sources used (and verify those).



Challenge your thinking!



Once CDCM frames the problem and you have processed everything you already know, ask:

- Is this knowledge or an assumption?
- Is this evidence or internal folklore?
- Is this consumer reality or wishful thinking from our side?
- Is this real category insight or an echo from the industry bubble?

This step protects against waste, bias, and misleading “gut feel truths” and zombie statistics. Verify knowledge, triangulate using different sources and probe your colleague about where their assumptions come from.

Remember: Assumption = hypothesis -> test it!



Define the Insight Needs

Now it's time to summarise what you need to know. Try using the following framework:

We need to make the following decisions:

In order to do so, we need the following insights:

To help fill in the second part, look at these suggestions:

- What must we know about current behaviour?
- What must we know about (possible) target groups?
- What must we understand about why people do what they do: motivations, barriers, identity, norms?
- What must we learn about category expectations?
- What new ideas, messages, or products should we test?

Now your insight needs have become a precise checklist. And that checklist is the key to the next step: finding the right source of insight.





**Need help?
We've got your back.**



About Future of Food Institute

Our Mission:

Help sustainable food companies innovate faster and communicate with more impact, by offering crystal-clear consumer insights.

Using our insights, our clients can develop the **right products**, for the **right consumers**, with the **right message**.

What makes us different?

- We are the specialised consumer insights agency in **sustainable & healthy food** choices.
- We know what's happening in the food chain. Whenever we can, we draw from **existing knowledge**, trends and media.
- We are a network organization. We build the **best team for each project** by connecting experts, universities, consultants and researchers.
- Our effective and efficient way of working gives you **more insight for your budget**.

Since 2018, we've been working with mission-driven food brands and non-profits that have a **positive impact on society and our planet**. Together we empower consumers to make food choices that are good for them as well as the planet.

We offer all proven market research methodologies. On top of that we have a number of specialities:

- Our proprietary consumer segmentation: **Food Profiles**. We have identified 6 distinct **types of consumers**, each with a different mindset when it comes to food choices.
- Our curated **insights, trends and innovations database** containing hundreds of inspirational developments in marketing & advertising, tech, policy, and consumer **insights** in the food and sustainability sector.

Our areas of expertise



Strategy &
Positioning



Innovation



Branding &
Communication

Our capabilities



Quant &
Qual Insights



Trends, Media
& Knowledge



Field studies



Network
Organisation

Some of our clients and partners

FOOD
CABINET

CARBERY

Bionext

KUMASI

eit Food
EIT Food is supported by the EIT
a body of the European Union

VIV
ERA

LOWLANDER
Love the planet

puratos
Food Innovation for Good



How can we help?



Quantitative Research

Reliable numbers help turn complex decisions into clear direction. We combine category expertise with efficient, high-quality research execution—giving you quantitative insights you can trust to move your business forward.



Qualitative Research

Qualitative insights reveals the **motivations, emotions, and cultural beliefs** that shape consumer behavior. With extensive experience in sustainable food choices and a strong team of experts, we uncover the deep human insights that spark innovation and sharpen strategic direction.



Food Profiles

Food Profiles is a research-backed **segmentation** model that identifies six distinct consumer types based on their food values, motivations, and behaviors—providing far more precision than traditional demographic segmentation. Developed by Future of Food Institute and Food Cabinet, it helps brands tailor their products, messaging, and innovation strategies to what truly drives each consumer group.

WORK WITH US



Usage & Attitude

Usage & Attitude research gives you a deep understanding of how consumers **use** your products (and your competitors')—and how they **think** and **feel** about them. By combining real-world usage behavior with emerging category developments and global consumer trends, we help you future-proof your portfolio and fill your innovation pipeline with products consumers truly want.



Concept Testing

Concept testing helps you de-risk innovation by **validating ideas** early with real consumers, ensuring your next product or proposition is grounded in evidence rather than assumptions. We deliver fast, reliable, cost-effective, and actionable concept evaluations—refining ideas, uncovering new opportunities, and strengthening propositions before full-scale development.



Communication Research

Communication research ensures your **messaging** truly **resonates** by grounding it in the language, tone, and motivations of your target audience. By involving real consumers early, we help you develop clear, relatable, and high-impact communication that makes every advertising euro work harder.



Policy Research

Policy research helps ensure that interventions, regulations, and campaigns are grounded in a solid understanding of real consumer behaviour and the motivations and barriers that shape this behavior. By combining **behavioral insights** with our deep expertise in sustainable food choices, we help policymakers design effective, evidence-based solutions that truly drive positive change.





Durk Bosma | durk@futureoffood.institute +31 (0)6 14 23 24 41

www.futureoffood.institute

The Hague Tech
Waldorpstraat 5
2521 CA Den Haag
VAT: NL861166292B01
COC: 77841603

