Communicating About Climate Change: Research, Theory, & Practice

Local Government Commission
Tuesday, October 31, 2017

Dan Barry -- ecoAmerica
Mission: Build a critical mass of institutional leadership, public support, and political will for definitive climate solutions in the United States.

- Provide programs + resources
- Elevate visible leadership
- Shift the national narrative
- Build collective impact
Leadership Circles
Institutional Partners
Sector & Partner Programs
Communications and Values
Research & Guides
National, Community and Partner Polling
Summits & Forum to share best ideas and practices
1,421,000 professionals
84,968 Congregations
23.3 million Members
AN INCONVENIENT TRUTH

A REASSURING LIE

THE CHRISTIAN SCIENCE MONITOR
Americans’ Priorities

Source: January 2016 Survey of National Priorities, Pew Research Center

Source: ecoAmerica
% Adults who think humans are causing the Earth to warm

Credit: Yale Program on Climate Change Communication, George Mason Center for Climate Change Communication
% Adults who think scientists agree on the causes

Credit: Yale Program on Climate Change Communication, George Mason Center for Climate Change Communication
% Adults who think there are smart ways to fix global warming

Credit: Yale Program on Climate Change Communication, George Mason Center for Climate Change Communication
% Adults who talk about global warming...

Credit: Yale Program on Climate Change Communication, George Mason Center for Climate Change Communication
Motivated Avoidance

Fear
Confirmation bias
Techno optimism
Conflict avoidance
Competing priorities
Social norms
Fatalism & resignation
What Do People Hear About Climate Change?

We have been warning about this for years, and you did too little to stop it.

Subtext: it’s your fault for not listening to us
What Do People Hear About Climate Change?

The scientists agree that this is happening.

*Subtext: you are ignorant if you don’t agree*
What Do People Hear About Climate Change?

If we don’t stop burning fossils fuels we cannot stop this from happening.

*Subtext: you must abandon your way of life to save the planet*
What Do People Hear About Climate Change?

Weather disasters are going to keep getting worse.

*Subtext: too late, you blew it, and we’re all going to die*
Evolution of Climate Messaging

**V1**
Armageddon
Global Warming

**V2**
Social Benefits
Opportunity

**V3**
Personal Relevance
Family and Freedom
www.ecoAmerica.org/Research
Methodology

1. meta analysis
2. focus groups
3. online dial tests
4. national phone survey

Oversampled African Americans. Hispanic/Latinos; health, faith, business, higher ed; climate advocates.
Why Values?

Our cores values are established early, and don’t change much -- or quickly

People make choices based upon their core personal values

Large scale social change requires changes in people’s core personal values
Why Values?

Climate >>> Weather

Values >>> Opinions

Frames >>> Messages
What Resonates With 75% of Americans?

**Exceptionalism, compassion**
- We can all make small steps to make the world better (94%)
- People can be the solution (90%)
- Compassion for those who are suffering (86%)

**Personal rights to clean environment for all**
- Clean drinking water (84%)
- Clean air (83%)
- Safe neighborhood, free of toxics (79%)
- Access to natural spaces, parks (75%)

**Responsibility to do something about climate**
- Companies that pollute (81%)
- EPA (78%)
- Me (75%)
Top Climate Values Findings

Americans Follow Their Tribes
Won’t Abandon the American Dream
My Family First = Competing Priorities
One Size Does Not Fit All
Benefits Are Essential for Action
Curse of Techno-Optimism
Climate Action Is Elite and Alienating
Emerging Connections Still Emerging
Americans Follow Tribes, Are Afraid to Stray

**FINDINGS**

- We rely on views from their trusted tribes – family, pastor, political party leaders, favorite TV channels
- If their “tribes” don’t support climate solutions, they won’t
- Americans trust leaders in their daily lives, and look to them for guidance
- Environmentalists are **not** part of their tribe

**LEARNINGS**

- Form deep and lasting collaborations with **groups** of leaders who connect with Americans in their daily lives
- Empower them to speak and lead by example in ways that support the needs of their constituencies – **personalize climate, connect w/ solutions**
- Tell “conversion” stories for authenticity, and to bring others along
I Shop, therefore I am
Not Ready to Abandon the American Dream

FINDINGS

– Upwardly mobile, status-seeking Americans strongly reject sacrifice or doing with “less”

– These ‘keep up with the Jones” types represent the core of American consumers – advertiser targets

– They work hard and seek better homes, cars, education and “things”

– They have “earned” the right not to be denied what others have

LEARNINGS

• Messages like “The Story of Stuff” do not resonate with most Americans

• Don’t emphasize changes and “new”. They are afraid of change and don’t want rules changed/goal posts moved

• Need extrinsic motivation: Emphasize rewards for good and avoiding bad

• They are followers. Need to show success and being part of the group
**FINDINGS**

- Achievement oriented Americans have a strong “me-and-my-family-first” orientation
- Other groups hold these values, too
- Climate action currently conflicts with their values

**LEARNINGS**

- These Americans are a key solutions audience – they vote and influence the rest of middle America
- Promote benefits: “smart”, responsible, and protect children/family
- Provide extrinsic motivation– rewards, success stories, leadership, workplace programs
Benefits Are Essential For Action

FINDINGS

– There is a direct correlation between belief in climate change and belief in benefits
– Mainstream Americans currently not seeing benefits of solutions
– Many think they will be personally negatively affected by solutions
– They don’t see relevant penalties for not acting

LEARNINGS

• Emphasize real solutions and personally relevant benefits.
• Connect climate solutions with benefits for pocketbooks, families and communities that will occur soon
• Show how doing something now will protect their quality of life, what they have worked so hard to achieve

Pocketbooks  Health  Community
The Curse of Techno-Optimism

FINDINGS

– Americans have affinity for technological solutions
– Like ingenuity, innovation, entrepreneurialism
– Can lead to ignoring policy or other social change
– Can lead to disengagement, lack of personal responsibility

LEARNINGS

• Tap into American leadership, innovation
• Harness support for clean energy advancement
• Co-opt “all of the above” to build support for a package of solutions
• Show how everyday Americans can get involved, and rewards for doing so

Abundance
THE FUTURE IS BETTER THAN YOU THINK

ecoAmerica
building climate leadership
Climate Action is Elite and Alienating

**FINDINGS**

- Climate beliefs are associated with educational, financial, and social networks of privilege and power
- Climate change is not a practical, real issue for ordinary Americans

**LEARNINGS**

- If we want Americans to care about climate change, we need messengers that they relate to, not intellectual, environmental elitists
- Solutions must benefit everyday American: pocketbooks and values
Emerging Connections Still Emerging

**FINDINGS**

– Most Americans are not making the connections between health or weather and climate change
– Most health professionals are not engaged
– Most media sources are not making the connection
– Many Americans do not recognize the causes and implications

**LEARNINGS**

• More needs to be done to help Americans make the climate-health and climate-weather connection
• Use local examples and visible comparisons (e.g. before and after)
• Compare trends and use events as examples of trends
Summary Recommendations

• Focus on people vs. technology, policy, planet
• Engage groups, and empower local leaders to lead
• Understand and incorporate everyday concerns
• Emphasize solutions, benefits and success
• Deliver and position solutions as bold and effective
• Emphasize relevant reality, use “science” sparingly
• Make pragmatic appeals, such as being prepared, regaining control, independence, and security
• Reinforce climate-health and climate weather
• Avoid connecting solutions with “new” or “change” – instead focus on personal benefit, family values
PART TWO: Effective Messaging and Messengers
November 21

- Learn 15-step process for message development
- Explore importance of stakeholder mapping and engagement
The 15 Steps

**Build Rapport**
1. Start with people, stay with people
2. Connect on common values
3. Acknowledge ambivalence
4. Make it real

**Inspire & Empower**
5. Emphasize solutions
6. Inspire and empower
7. Focus on personal benefit
8. End with your “ask”
9. Sequence matters
10. Describe, don’t label

**Strengthen Message**
11. Have at least one powerful fact from a trusted messenger
12. Ditch doom and gloom
13. Use stories to strengthen engagement
14. Stay above the fray
15. Message discipline is critical
**REPLACE** | **EMBRACE**
---|---
Climate change, climate crisis, global warming | Damage to the climate
Stop/mitigate/slow down climate change | Create healthy and safe communities, protect our families’ and children’s health
Renewable energy, green energy, domestic energy | Local/locally made clean energy, home-grown energy, clean energy, made right at home
The planet, polar bears | Families, our children, and future generations
Economy | Good for [city or state], good for people
Creates jobs (on its own) | Saves money and creates jobs
Dirty energy, fossil fuel energy | Dirty fuels, out-of-date fuels, outdated fuels
Rely on fossil fuels, relied on dirty energy | Use, used dirty fuels
Government taking steps to curb pollution | Rules and fines fines on
Build resilient communities | Build stronger communities
Country | Home
Protects the environment | Best place for our families

“Let’s Talk Climate” [www.ecoamerica.org/research](http://www.ecoamerica.org/research)
Tips to Prepare & Strengthen Communities

1. Strengthen social networks
2. Work across groups
3. Incorporate solutions into plans
Tips to Engage the Public on Climate Change

1. Acknowledge emotion
2. Focus on local
3. Emphasize solutions & co-benefits
ecoAmerica Resources

- American Climate Values 2014
- Let’s Talk Communities and Climate
  - report release in February 2017
  - webinars and briefings
- Path to Positive Communities
  - impact and engagement resources
Questions?

Thanks!

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