

CLIMATE COMMUNICATIONS TIPS & TRICKS

KNOW YOUR AUDIENCE

One issue, multiple perspectives. Climate change crosses geographic, demographic and cultural borders. Different audiences will naturally have varied opinions and belief systems that determine their entry point on the issue or why it matters to them. Get to know the [Six Americas study](#) and develop messages that resonate with the core values of your audience, taking into account who are they, where they live, whom they trust and where do they go for information.

Pair the realities of climate change with your audience so that they feel a personal connection to the issue. Highlight impacts to their communities, public health concerns, and how local industries suffer.

Whom do they trust? A key part of creating engaging communications strategies is tapping trusted storytellers and respected leaders. Team up with someone whom your audience looks to for a source of news and information. Their endorsement will be invaluable to your message.

TAILOR YOUR MESSAGE

Local. Yes, it's a global issue. But too often, people think of climate change as a far off problem that only impacts other, distant places. Highlight the ways it affects local communities on the ground. In CA, talk about wildfires; in FL, it's all about sea level rise.

Personal. Many people feel like climate change is an abstract, too-big-to-deal-with kind of issue. Break it down by showing how it impacts people on a personal level, such as the parks and recreation spaces they cherish, health impacts on children and the elderly, or the price of food they buy.

Now. While the most devastating impacts of climate change are projected to affect future generations, climate change is a present threat that requires immediate, urgent action. It is already upon us, right here right now. The fingerprints of climate change are everywhere - from sea level rise and ocean acidification to extreme weather disasters and season creep - and they affect economics, national security, public health and more.

Be authentic. Decide where your expertise lies, and speak from that perspective. If you're a physician, talk about air quality and asthma. If you're a gardener, discuss bud burst. If you're a parent, emphasize climate impacts on the entire family's health and wellbeing.

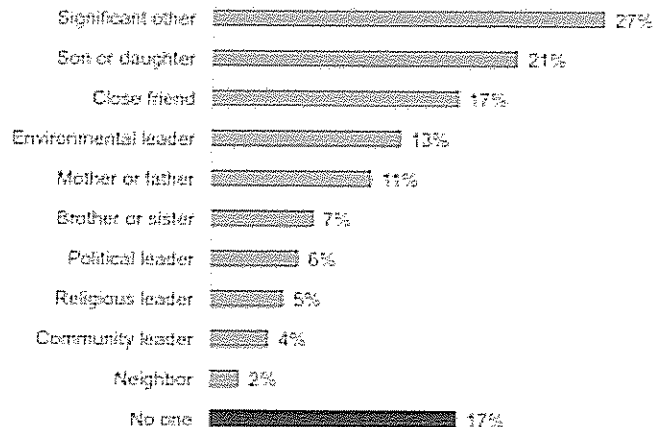
Keep it short. People have and will always continue to doubt the scientific consensus. Don't debate it. Target your message and use the science to support it. Who still debates the consensus on smoking and cancer?

Promote the solutions. Don't get stuck in a doomsday scenario. Climate change is solvable and we know how to do it: by switching from fossil fuels to clean energy sources like wind and solar and through coordinated action to reduce global emissions. Always accompany your message with real, feasible solutions that are already in place in your region, as well as opportunities for more.



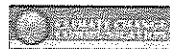
Americans Say Their Own Family and Friends Have the Greatest Ability to Convince Them to Take Action to Reduce Global Warming

- % who say person is among the three people most likely to convince them to take action -



Who among the following, if anyone, could convince you to take action to reduce global warming? (Please pick up to three types of people.)

Base: Americans 18+ (n=1,045).



George Mason University
Center for Climate Change Communication

Source: How Americans Communicate About Global Warming, April 2013; Yale Project on Climate Change Communication & George Mason University Center for Climate Change Communication

Five Barriers to Environmental Engagement

Adapted from: Pike, Cara et al., *Re:Green - The Ecological Roadmap*.

The following five barriers keep Americans, even some individuals with the strongest ecological values, from getting involved with environmental issues. Fortunately, there are ways to break through these barriers and build engagement in solutions.

1. Ecological Sainthood

Real or not, the perception that environmentalists are willing to sacrifice all self-interest to save the Earth sets an unattainable standard even for those who care about the natural world and take steps to be green. While revered by the most eco-minded, environmentalists are also chastised for self-righteousness and for being out of touch with the challenges and needs of most Americans. Ecological sainthood contributes to a sense of guilt and a feeling that one can never be green enough.

2. Elitism

Having the time and money to be green seems out of reach for many, as eco-friendly choices are often seen as costly alternatives and other non-consumerist actions can be less apparent. Despite the stereotype of environmentalists as white urban elites, income and race are not the strongest determinants of environmental concern; there are many Americans at all income levels and of all races that believe that living in a clean environment, having access to the outdoors, and eating healthy food shouldn't be a luxury. The elitism barrier means that many people do not relate to environmental issues or believe that environmental solutions will be in their best interest.

3. Cognition

Our brains are wired to process information that conveys a simple cause and effect. Most people do not think systemically and have a difficult time seeing the connections across issues, such as energy use and

climate change. The inherent complexities and interconnectedness of environmental issues makes direct cause and effect difficult to ascertain. When it comes to environmental protection, lack of systemic thinking leads to uncertainty around the role of government, business and individuals, and as a result erodes support for action.

4. Overload

The public is bombarded with green messaging from numerous, and often competing, sources. Environmental issues quickly become overwhelming, with it becoming difficult to know which problems are most urgent, how to respond, and whom to trust. Americans are engaging in individual actions such as reducing energy use at home or buying organic because they are trying to send messages about their preferences to corporate and government decision makers; however, they do not have a clear sense that these efforts make any difference.

5. Fatalism

People may care about the environment, but without a compelling vision of solutions, the range and magnitude of ecological problems causes people to become overwhelmed and tune out. There is a growing sense that either nothing can be done because it's too late to make much of a difference, or, particularly in the case of climate change, that we simply do not have the political or economic will to act even though we have the technological capacity. This efficacy gap, where individuals care but feel that the situation is hopeless, creates an emotional and psychological dissonance.

The good news is that there are ways to overcome these barriers:

1. Redefine Environmental Action.

- Most Americans want to feel that their lives have meaning and that they are making a contribution to environmental protection. Provide clear reinforcement on how environmental actions add up and influence policy, economics, or social norms.
- Don't be afraid to give people something big to do. When we minimize the ask, we minimize the problem.

2. Embrace Diversity.

- Reflect that Americans of all walks of life care about the environment. Include stories and images that illustrate a range of environmental identities.
- A diversity of worldviews is needed to develop innovative solutions to complex challenges. Additionally, environmental impacts harm some more than others so it is important to co-create outreach agendas with a range of stakeholders by building on shared values and addressing inequities.

3. Amplify Stories of Hope.

- Move past the dominant environmental narrative of a dying planet by providing a sense of hope. Emphasize the benefits of taking action.
- Tell a credible story of how we can make the transition from our carbon-intensive, unsustainable systems, to low-carbon, resilient communities. Outline discrete steps that individuals, government and business can take.

4. Focus on Culture, Not Just Politics.

- Add emotion to outreach efforts by conveying how environmental degradation and climate disruption are impacting things people already care about, such as favorite foods, cultural icons, recreational interests, and treasured landscapes.
- Provide opportunities for audiences to express their concern or passion through music, poetry, or art.

5. Incorporate a Moral Call to Action and Create a Sense of Meaning.

- Create a clear line in the sand that helps illustrate to audiences how their actions reflect their values and sense of morality. Ways to do this include using industry lies and manipulation as a focal point for moral outrage, or emphasizing the importance of taking care of the most vulnerable.
- People feel motivated to express and/or respond to a moral call to action when they are supported by trusted peers who share their worldviews, values, and identities. Develop outreach strategies that connect people to one another and create a sense of community.

How to Overcome Climate Fatalism

From: The [“Overcoming Climate Fatalism” Roundtable](#) with David Gershon and Susanne Moser. April, 2012

- Understand that hope is a precondition to effective action. Cynical beliefs on behalf of organizers will hamper engagement efforts by undermining others’ willingness to take action.
- Building and sustaining hope is an interior practice. It is enhanced by being part of a solution that we believe can actually make a difference. If we do act without conviction or hope our main contribution will be to spread these sentiments to others and initiate a vicious cycle. [Recommended reading: *Active Hope: How to Face the Mess We’re in without Going Crazy* by Joanna Macy and Chris Johnstone and *Hope is an Imperative* by David Orr]
- Be clear on what we can hope for. It is not the climate of yesteryear.
- Create safe spaces for people to talk with peers about their feelings (e.g., fears, anger, worry, guilt, despair, overwhelm) and what gives them hope and meaning.
- Provide a clear understanding of how to translate concern into action. Simply sitting with the emotions brought up by climate change is not enough and can lead to avoidance behavior.
- Help people see their role in the change process. Understanding how social change happens is more important than understanding how climate change happens because it provides a sense of agency, a goal and a path to get there.
- Build a sense of the collective as it lifts people out of their more insular worlds (where it is reasonable to feel overwhelmed and that individual actions are futile) and encourages them to be part of something bigger than themselves.
- To motivate people to take action get people to tap into their intrinsic, their deepest motivations—this is more sustainable than motivating people through money or social status.
- Forming neighbor-to-neighbor engagement efforts that produce results on a block level are a good way to create hope because they provide an experience of self-efficacy, and they build the social capital needed to support us through challenging times.
- Don’t foster fear, but speak to the emotional responses people have—despair, fear, anger, guilt etc.—and engage them in “heartful” conversations. Starting from a place of love, hope and gratitude when engaging others puts people in a different mindset.
- Preach to the choir and get them to sing loud enough so that others will hear them. These early adopters can be the leverage point because they are already receptive and they have the best ability to influence their peers, rather than the experts who are suspect because they are perceived as having an agenda.
- Use “backcasting” as part of a visioning process. By having a clear picture of what people really want (the vision), it will be easier for people to tap into their motivations; by “backcasting” from there (i.e. exploring what needs to happen to get to that ultimate goal), people better understand what’s possible, what’s in the way and what changes need to happen.



How to Communicate about Climate Action as a Moral Imperative

From: "[Why Few Americans View Climate Change as a Moral Problem](#)" by Ezra Markowitz

Despite a “growing chorus” of thinkers and religious leaders calling for the recognition of climate action as a moral imperative, much of the public lacks a sense of moral obligation towards the issue. In a guest blog post on Big Think’s Age of Engagement blog, University of Oregon doctoral candidate Ezra Markowitz tackles this question and describes how feelings of moral responsibility have been shown to drive concern and motivate action.

He recommends the following six strategies for communicating about climate action from a moral perspective:

1. Engage a **full range of moral values**, such as respect for authority and loyalty to one’s community.
2. Focus on the **burdens that can be avoided** by addressing climate change (e.g. outbreaks of disease and drought-induced hardships).
3. Motivate action through messages that generate **positive emotional responses**—such as hope, pride and gratitude—rather than those that appeal to guilt, shame and anxiety.
4. Avoid linking climate action exclusively to extrinsic motives—such as job growth and economic stability—by also emphasizing **intrinsic values and motives**.
5. Highlight the **goals and values of those impacted** by climate change, in order to make their stories more relatable and less distant.
6. Emphasize **widely shared, positive social norms**—such as frugality—as a way to increase the importance of considering one’s moral obligation.