

7 TOP EVIDENCE-BASED CLIMATE COMMUNICATIONS TIPS

from Climate Advocacy Lab



“Global Warming” vs. “Climate Change”? Studies find “global warming” creates more ‘hot’ feelings of passion and alarm and is good for motivating supporters. “Climate change” evokes ‘cooler’ responses and less skepticism from conservatives.



Identify and find your right audience Many advocates spend time and money blasting messages to everyone equally. Stop doing this! To win on climate we must segment audiences and speak their language. Marketers and political campaigns learned this a long time ago. But traditional demographics (age, sex, race, etc.) don’t tell you much about people’s climate views or propensity to take action. Luckily there are free tools for you to use to help. Audience segmentations such as the Six Americas of Climate Change or “Conservative Conservationists” & “Energy Patriots” clusters offer more useful groupings. To find these people, there are mapping tools such as the Yale Climate Opinion Maps, micro-targeting models for the voter file, and audience-targeting features on social media platforms.



Prepare for battle If you expect opposition messaging, prepare your supporters by exposing them to those arguments first and debunk—this inoculation strategy has repeatedly proven effective. You can also preemptively define the issue (counter-framing)—for example, make the issue about corporate greed so it’s harder for opponents to frame it around cost.



Emphasize scientific consensus Many people—including our supporters—don’t know there’s a scientific consensus, and research shows that simply informing people that 97% of climate scientists are in agreement can change minds, particularly for moderate conservatives. But highlighting the consensus works because it’s not actually about science; it’s about trusted people (scientists). Generally, mentioning the actual climate science per se won’t change minds or motivate action. Climate skepticism actually, has little to do with a lack of knowledge.



Peer pressure Humans are social animals—emphasize public support. Study after study confirms that we generally want to conform, not be outliers—despite what people may say or think about themselves. What we believe about what others do and think (social norms) has a powerful effect on our own climate attitudes and actions. But it turns out most people underestimate how many others care about climate change (pluralistic ignorance), which can lead to a spiral of silence; correcting this myth leads to higher engagement. Emphasize the true level of support (especially among people like your audience), and encourage supporters to speak to their networks. Show, don’t just tell: examples of people just like them acting, implementing, changing behaviors and attitudes.



Balance hope & threats When you read a story about ice caps melting faster than before, do you feel empowered or deflated? Exactly! But when you read a story about a town that just went 100% renewable how do you feel? Exactly! Help people to know success is achievable (efficacy) and feel that it is likely (hope). Show them they can take action, their actions matter, collective action can work, decision makers will listen, and solutions are effective. Balance this with the need to generate attention, urgency, and concern by showing that climate is a threat to things people care about. Focus on impacts close to them (in terms of space, time, and people, identity, and values). But be careful not to overdo it and create fear, which can trigger avoidance of the issue. In other words, if your audience is unconcerned about climate, highlight that it is happening now, nearby, and to people (not just polar bears and power plants). If they lack inspiration, underline it’s a manageable, bitesize issue that they can meaningfully help to address.



Frame in terms of health Relatively few Americans understand the public health impacts of climate. Positioning climate as a health issue garners greater interest than other frames, and even conservatives see it as a hopeful message. Be careful to still mention climate and not focus exclusively on health, as this has been shown to maximize activism. For example, talking about air pollution, asthma and premature death makes the climate crisis real and relatable. “Hey, I don’t know much about climate science but I know my family would be healthier if we took electric buses every day instead of breathing fumes.”