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## Climate Change Framing and Social Marketing: The Influences that Persuade

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## ESSAY

# Climate Change Framing and Social Marketing: The Influences that Persuade

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“One of the most essential roles of the ecologist is to create the language in which a true sense of reality, of value and of progress can be communicated to our society.”<sup>1</sup>

—Thomas Berry

While a large majority of Americans say the earth is warming, less than half believe that it is largely the result of human activity.<sup>2</sup> By contrast, 84% of scientists say human activity is causing the warming.<sup>3</sup> Of these scientists, 70% believe it to be a serious problem, while only 47% of the public shares this belief.<sup>4</sup> Correcting the disconnect between scientific reality and the public’s perception is crucial, as both support of governmental measures and individual action is required.

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1. THOMAS BERRY, *THE GREAT WORK: OUR WAY INTO THE FUTURE* 63 (1999).

2. Press Release, Pew Research Center, for the People and the Press, *Scientific Achievements Less Prominent than a Decade Ago: Public Praises Science; Scientists Fault Public, Media* 39 (July 9, 2009), *available at* <http://people.press.org/reports/pdf/528.pdf>.

3. *Id.*

4. *Id.*

The coming months have the potential for significant progress on climate change. To begin with, climate change legislation has been introduced in the 111<sup>th</sup> U.S. Congress.<sup>5</sup> Additionally, the crucial round of negotiations on the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change<sup>6</sup> and the Kyoto Protocol<sup>7</sup> is scheduled for discussion in Copenhagen.<sup>8</sup> Only public acceptance and commitment will create the public support needed to enable governments to take the necessary action to address climate change. While broad governmental policies that are critical to foster climate change solutions can only be achieved with public support, innumerable actions by individual communities and the general population are also essential to successfully curb greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions.

The question of how to educate the public on climate change issues and engage them to implement actions at both the community and individual levels is the subject of a growing body of knowledge. By utilizing the knowledge developed by contemporary decision scientists, and borrowing concepts from social marketing techniques, strategies are being developed that are specifically oriented towards climate change issues. Dispute resolution professionals engaged in facilitating community initiatives and working to foster GHG mitigation and adaptation measures are increasingly looking for guidance from these sources to maximize the impact of their work.

The multiple reasons for the inadequate level of concern and action on the part of the general public, as compared to the grave

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5. H.R. 2454, 111th Cong. (1st Sess. 2009) (as passed by the House on June 26, 2009); *see also* ECOAMERICA, SUMMARY REPORT, CLIMATE AND ENERGY TRUTHS: OUR COMMON FUTURE 5 (2009), [http://www.ecoamerica.net/sites/default/files/press/ecoAm\\_Climate\\_Energy\\_Truths.pdf](http://www.ecoamerica.net/sites/default/files/press/ecoAm_Climate_Energy_Truths.pdf).

6. U.N. Framework Convention on Climate Change, Full Text of the Convention, [http://unfccc.int/essential\\_background/convention/background/items/1349.php](http://unfccc.int/essential_background/convention/background/items/1349.php) (last visited Nov. 13, 2009).

7. Kyoto Protocol to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, Dec. 10, 1997, 37 I.L.M. 22, *available at* <http://unfccc.int/resource/docs/convkp/kpeng.pdf>.

8. *See* U.N. Framework Convention on Climate Change, <http://unfccc.int/2860.php> (last visited Nov. 13, 2009); *see also* ECOAMERICA, SUMMARY REPORT, *supra* note 5, at 5.

threat posed by climate change, have been analyzed.<sup>9</sup> These reasons include: (i) a lag in the actual consequences of increasing greenhouse gases; (ii) a lack of immediate impact on climate change from the recommended actions; (iii) skepticism of the solutions offered; (iv) the fact that imperfect markets do not account for externalities (i.e. the cost of the harm to the environment); (v) the prevalence of threats to self interest (at least in the short term) and conflict with political ideologies; (vi) the presentation by climate change of a classic case of the “tragedy of the commons;”<sup>10</sup> (vii) disproportionate burdens and impacts on different nations; (viii) continued arguments as to uncertain science; (ix) the media’s attempts to offer “balanced” views; and (x) a lack of persuasive communication and a failure to employ effective methodologies to motivate the population.<sup>11</sup>

This article will focus on two main issues: (1) how to frame the conversation about climate change in order to capture and persuade the general public; and (2) methodologies to inspire individual action to minimize GHG emissions and adapt to the inevitable changes that will be caused by climate change.

### **FRAMING THE CONVERSATION TO GATHER PUBLIC SUPPORT**

Scientists working on the study of decision-making processes have concluded that the way a message is delivered can have a dramatic impact on its acceptance. As noted by ICLEI<sup>12</sup> in its Resource Guide, for Outreach and Communication (ICLEI Guide),

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9. See SUSANNE MOSER & LISA DILLING, CREATING A CLIMATE FOR CLIMATE CHANGE, COMMUNICATING CLIMATE CHANGE AND FACILITATING SOCIAL CHANGE 5-14 (2007).

10. Garrett Hardin, *The Tragedy of the Commons*, 162 SCIENCE 1243, 1243-48 (1968) (discussing the dilemma that exclusively self-interested parties can create), available at <http://www.sciencemag.org/cgi/content/full/162/3859/1243>; see also Barry Schwartz, *Tyranny for the Commons Man*, THE NATIONAL INTEREST, July-Aug. 2009, available at <http://www.nationalinterest.org/Article.aspx?id=21664>.

11. See MOSER & DILLING, *supra* note 9, at 5-14.

12. ICLEI, founded in 1990 as the International Council for Local Environmental Initiatives, is a membership association of local governments committed to advancing climate protection and sustainable development. See ICLEI, About ICLEI, <http://www.iclei.org/index.php?id=global-about-iclei> (last visited Sept. 22, 2009).

[w]hen used effectively, communication provides an opportunity for local governments to raise public awareness, gain support, engage community members, promote successes, deliver calls for action, and inspire behavioral change. However, when used in the wrong context, either by using an inappropriate message for an audience or by using the wrong tone, or when not used at all, communication, or lack thereof, can discourage, turn off, or lead to apathy.<sup>13</sup>

Focusing the communication, or “framing” it, can significantly influence the reaction to it.<sup>14</sup>

Recognizing the importance of effective communication for climate change, ecoAmerica conducted the “Climate and Energy Truths: Our Common Future” research project.<sup>15</sup> The goal of the study was to “develop market-tested language that [could be provided] to climate solutions advocates and elected officials so that they have the tools to move public opinion and support” and develop “effective ‘branding.’”<sup>16</sup> The messaging is intended to appeal both to the “green” base and to the general public.<sup>17</sup>

The conclusions reached in this study should be given careful attention by those facilitating climate change discussions. This study concluded, *inter alia*, that:

- Focusing on “[g]lobal warming or climate change alone . . . [creates] a weak beginning to a message;”<sup>18</sup>
- The term “global warming” itself tends to be polarizing;<sup>19</sup>

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13. ICLEI, Outreach and Communication Guide, <http://www.icleiusa.org/action-center/engaging-your-community/outreach-and-communications-guide> [hereinafter ICLEI Guide] (download the report to access).

14. *Id.* at 25; Jon Gertner, *Why Isn't the Brain Green*, N.Y. TIMES, Apr. 19, 2009, available at <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/04/19/magazine/19Science-t.html>.

15. ECOAMERICA SUMMARY REPORT, *supra* note 5.

16. *Id.* at 5.

17. *Id.* at 6.

18. *Id.* at 7.

19. *Id.* at 10. See also John M. Broder, *Seeking to Save the Planet, with a Thesaurus*, N.Y. TIMES, May 1, 2009, available at <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/05/02/us/politics/02enviro.html> (quoting Mr. Perkowitz the founder of ecoAmerica as saying “[w]hen someone thinks of global warming, they think of a politicized, polarized argument. When you say ‘global warming,’ a certain group

- “Messages that focus on climate per se can be effective only when included with other values;”<sup>20</sup>
- Making the link to other energy related themes, such as “energy independence, reducing dependence on foreign oil, pollution, and safe, natural forms of energy, . . . [can be] highly energizing;”<sup>21</sup>
- The “[s]trongest themes are about safe, natural, clean sources of energy that create jobs and never run out;”<sup>22</sup>
- “Key elements of the successful message[ ] include emphasizing values such as freedom, independence, self-sufficiency, personal responsibility, national security, and economic prosperity;”<sup>23</sup>
- “Debating weather is not a successful strategy;”<sup>24</sup>
- People’s “uncertainty about climate change” should be side-stepped with messages such as “whatever caused it, scientists know what will fix it,” or, “even if we weren’t worried about changing climate and weather patterns, we should still be worried about the pollution in our air and the damage to our land;”<sup>25</sup>
- “Health concerns for oneself and one’s families are a strong frame, and linking these to pollution is powerful;”<sup>26</sup>
- Talking about “the specific amount of money we will save, the cost of fuel, [or] specific mileage standards,” does not work well;<sup>27</sup> and
- “Deteriorating atmosphere is the strongest phrase to describe changes in our weather and climate . . . [because]

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of Americans think that’s a code word for progressive liberals, gay marriage and other such issues.”).

20. ECOAMERICA SUMMARY REPORT, *supra* note 5, at 11.

21. *Id.* at 10.

22. *Id.* at 8.

23. *Id.*

24. *Id.* at 11.

25. *Id.* at 11.

26. ECOAMERICA SUMMARY REPORT, *supra* note 5, at 11.

27. *Id.* at 7. There does not appear to be a consensus on whether discussing cost savings is useful. *Compare id.* at 15 with ICLEI Guide, *supra* note 13.

it captures pollution, ozone depletion (which people worry about), and global warming all . . . [in] one.<sup>28</sup>

The study provides short descriptions of effective themes that facilitators can utilize, which include, national and economic security, freedom and self-sufficiency, the idea of “Made in America,” new manufacturing bases, and partnering with business.<sup>29</sup> Additionally, for an effective message, facilitators can employ such concepts as “We can argue, but why gamble?,” appealing to our children’s legacy, emphasizing family health, contrasting scientists versus special interests, and what science has predicted.<sup>30</sup> These themes not only provide a vehicle for delivering a powerful message, but can be expanded to foster meaningful discussions that help participants exchange views and recognize their common goals.

As anyone who has addressed an audience on climate change can attest, when a question and answer session starts, the first and most often repeated question is by those people who describe what they perceive as scientific “facts” that belie the consensus on climate change who then challenge the speaker with this information to debate the science. It is not possible to dissuade them from their position, but when told that there are numerous other reasons to take the same action,<sup>31</sup> including energy security,<sup>32</sup> energy reliability, clean air, public health, and quality of life concerns, they fall silent. It is best, as suggested by the ecoAmerica study, to anticipate these challenges by leading the conversation from the start with all of the reasons for action and explain that the same actions need to be taken for all of the issues discussed.

Emphasizing a ‘no regrets’ policy is also, as found by the ecoAmerica study, very helpful in deflecting any impact the climate change challengers in the audience might have on others. A favorite anecdote that reinforces the no regrets message comes

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28. ECOAMERICA SUMMARY REPORT, *supra* note 5, at 7 (emphasis omitted).

29. *Id.* at 20-26

30. *Id.*

31. *See also* MOSER & DILLING, *supra* note 9, at 208-09.

32. *See, e.g.*, CAN Analysis & Solutions, National Security, Powering America’s Defense: Energy and the Risks to National Security, <http://www.cna.org/nationalsecurity/energy/> (last visited Nov. 13, 2009) (supporting changes in energy policy based upon national security issues).

from the current California Governor, Arnold Schwarzenegger, who is said to have stated that if he had a sick child with ninety-eight doctors saying they could do something about it, and two doctors saying not to worry, he would go with the ninety-eight doctors and seek a cure.<sup>33</sup> Another favorite is a quote by General Gordon L. Sullivan, Former Chief of Staff, U.S. Army, from a retired U.S. General's report on the threat of climate change to national security who said, "We never have 100 percent certainty. We never have it. If you wait until you have 100 percent certainty, something bad is going to happen on the battlefield."<sup>34</sup>

Another approach, which may seem appealing is one that portrays the serious damage that will likely be caused by climate change. However, careful thought must be given to whether instilling fear should be used as a motivating tool, especially with regard to climate change, where such frightening information can lead to despair and resignation. If fear is employed, it must be accompanied by a strong positive message and solutions that people can implement.<sup>35</sup>

Furthermore, tailoring the "framing" to the particular interests and concerns of the specific target audience will enhance the efficacy of the message. Time and attention should be devoted to individualizing the conversation.<sup>36</sup> For example, high rates of asthma in a local community can be a strong driver for the advocacy of cleaner, more efficient vehicles that lower particulate emissions while also emitting less GHGs. Where

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33. Thomas L. Friedman, *The Power of Green*, N.Y. TIMES, Apr. 15, 2007, available at <http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9905E0DF153FF936A25757C0A9619C8B63&sec=&spon=&pagewanted=4> (quoting California Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger). The Governor is quoted as saying:

[i]f 98 doctors say my son is ill and needs medication and two say 'No, he doesn't, he is fine,' I will go with the 98. It's common sense—the same with global warming. We go with the majority, the large majority . . . [t]he key thing now is that since we know this industrial age has created it, let's get our act together and do everything we can to roll it back.

*Id.*

34. CNA, NATIONAL SECURITY AND THE THREAT OF CLIMATE CHANGE 10 (2007), available at <http://securityandclimate.cna.org/report/>.

35. See ICLEI Guide, *supra* note 13, at 8; DOUG MCKENZIE-MOHR & WILLIAM SMITH, FOSTERING SUSTAINABLE BEHAVIOR: AN INTRODUCTION TO COMMUNITY BASED SOCIAL MARKETING 43 (1999); see also, MOSER & DILLING, *supra* note 9, at 64-80.

36. MCKENZIE-MOHR & SMITH, *supra* note 35, at 25.



applicable, local business opportunities that could gain from the new energy economy can also be identified.

### SOCIAL MARKETING TO CHANGE BEHAVIOR

It will take the collective will of the vast population to make the changes necessary to address climate change. While “blue ribbon panels” of representative stakeholders who convene to map out a strategy can be useful to start the effort and develop the broader tools, they can only offer a beginning. Too many communities have used such panels and completed an excellent climate change plan only to have it end up collecting dust on the shelf. Getting those plans off the shelf and implementing and motivating real action steps are the challenges that must be met. Community-based social marketing approaches have been recognized as central to inform and shape such efforts.<sup>37</sup>

Social marketing is the use of marketing principles to influence human behavior in order to achieve specific behavioral goals for a social good.<sup>38</sup> Objectives include raising awareness, changing attitudes, and changing behavior.<sup>39</sup> Social marketing recognizes that people do not change their behaviors easily and that it can take a great deal of time to move people to actually change behavior.<sup>40</sup> “People [move] through a series of stages whenever they make a fundamental change in their behavior,” and must complete a particular set of tasks at each stage to move to the next one.<sup>41</sup> Different change mechanisms and techniques are effective at different stages and must be carefully selected

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37. See, e.g., GOVERNOR’S CLIMATE CHANGE INTEGRATION GROUP, FINAL REPORT TO THE GOVERNOR, A FRAMEWORK FOR ADDRESSING RAPID CLIMATE CHANGE STATE OF OREGON 58-59 (2008), available at <http://www.oregon.gov/ENERGY/GBLWRM/CCIG.shtml>.

38. Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, Turning Point: Collaborating for a New Century in Public Health, available at <http://www.rwjf.org/reports/npreports/turning.htm> (this page provides a summary as well as a link to the full report).

39. ICLEI Guide, *supra* note 13, at 7.

40. *Id.*

41. EZRA M. MARKOWITZ & BOB DOPPELT, CLIMATE LEADERSHIP INITIATIVE, REDUCING GREENHOUSE GAS EMISSIONS THROUGH BEHAVIORAL CHANGE AN ASSESSMENT OF PAST RESEARCH ON ENERGY USE, TRANSPORTATION AND WATER CONSUMPTION 10-11 (2009) [http://www.uoregon.edu/~climlead/pdfs/behavioral\\_change.pdf](http://www.uoregon.edu/~climlead/pdfs/behavioral_change.pdf).

and applied to move people through the stages from indifference, to deliberation, to designing new behavior, to doing, and finally to defending against obstacles.<sup>42</sup>

Educational campaigns, either alone or coupled with a demonstration of cost savings, have been found to be inadequate in actually changing behavior.<sup>43</sup> The leading text on how to more effectively change environmental human behavior, *Fostering Sustainable Behavior: An Introduction to Community Based Social Marketing* by Doug McKenzie-Mohr and William Smith, sets out the basics of this challenge.<sup>44</sup> This primer explains in detail the various steps required: (a) identifying barriers, which will differ depending on the behavior being addressed, (e.g. barriers to recycling will differ from barriers to encouraging use of mass transit) utilizing such tools as literature reviews, phone surveys, focus groups;<sup>45</sup> (b) employing behavior changing tools such as gaining a commitment from the individual, preferably in public or as part of a group;<sup>46</sup> (c) employing “prompts” or “nudges”<sup>47</sup> that trigger sustainable behavior;<sup>48</sup> (d) modeling and developing social norms;<sup>49</sup> (e) capturing attention, crafting the message, selecting the messenger and providing feedback; <sup>50</sup> (f) utilizing incentives to enhance motivation;<sup>51</sup> (g) removing

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42. *Id.* at 11-13 (describing each phase in order).

43. MCKENZIE-MOHR & SMITH, *supra* note 35, at 2-3; *see also* MOSER & DILLING, *supra* note 9, at 11, 223-33.

44. MCKENZIE-MOHR & SMITH, *supra* note 35, at 2-3; *see also* MOSER & DILLING, *supra* note 9, at 237-399 (discussing of how to move people to action).

45. MCKENZIE-MOHR & SMITH, *supra* note 35, at 8-17 (references to ‘Fostering Sustainable Behavior’ are to the online version, in the section entitled ‘Uncovering Barriers’).

46. *Id.* at 18-25 (referencing the section on effective tools).

47. *See* RICHARD H. THALER & CASS R. SUNSTEIN, *NUDGE* (2008) (describing the efficacy of “nudges” to drive people to better decisions and behavior in many contexts; from eating habits to increasing savings). For example, the authors report that the use of a glowing red ball to indicate high energy usage and a glowing green ball to indicate modest energy usage, reduced the peak usage by 40%. *Id.* at 196.

e modest energy usage, reduced the peak usage by 40%. *Id.* at 196.

48. MCKENZIE-MOHR & SMITH, *supra* note 35, at 26-31.

49. *Id.* at 32-37.

50. *Id.* at 38-49.

51. *Id.* at 50-56. Incentives should be used with care since action in response to incentives may not be pursued when the incentive is withdrawn, unlike changes motivated by internal value decisions.

external barriers and making it easy;<sup>52</sup> and (h) designing, piloting, implementing and evaluating a strategy.<sup>53</sup>

The ICLEI Guide, drawing on the work done by the United Nations Environment Program (UNEP)<sup>54</sup> and others, employs social marketing theory and tools to provide a resource for engaging community members to support climate protection efforts. The guide outlines the seminal inquiries that should be considered before embarking on any initiative to change attitudes or behavior in order to communicate effectively:

- What is your message?
- Who is the target audience for your message?
- What does your audience know and think now?
- What you would like them to know, think, and do? If you want your audience to take action, what action are you asking them to take? If your message focuses on taking action, you should also ask:
  - What are the perceived barriers that prevent the target audience from taking action?
  - What are the perceived benefits they would receive if they changed their behavior?
  - Why is it in the best interest of the target audience to take action?
  - How can the barriers be lowered and the benefits increased?
  - What is the target audience doing instead of the preferred action? What are the benefits they feel that they would be giving up?
- How you can get your message across to your audience?

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52. *Id.* at 58-61.

53. *Id.* at 62-69.

54. FUTERRA & U.N. ENV'T PROGRAMME, COMMUNICATING SUSTAINABILITY: HOW TO PRODUCE EFFECTIVE PUBLIC CAMPAIGNS (2005), <http://www.unep.fr/shared/publications/pdf/DTIx0679xPACcommunicatingEN.pdf>.

(Both the medium by which you present the message and the messenger who will be delivering the message).<sup>55</sup>

The ICLEI Guide provides specific methodologies for identifying the target audience and provides guidance on developing the proper medium and messenger for municipal employees, the residential sector, the business sector, youth, and seniors.

Approaches and strategies relating to climate change must always be designed with an eye towards the specific goals set and the unique characteristics of the population involved. But the guides discussed in this article and other available tools<sup>56</sup> can be of great assistance in developing and implementing individualized initiatives.

### CONCLUSION

“Public sentiment is everything. With Public sentiment nothing can fail. Without it nothing can succeed.”<sup>57</sup>

—Abraham Lincoln

Abraham Lincoln’s words could have been coined to speak to the challenges we face with climate change today. The public sentiment is critical, and it is the public that must be brought to understand, accept and to act. Absent public support, government will be unable to take necessary measures and efforts to arrest the growth of GHG emissions will falter. However, with public support, GHG emissions can be reduced and resilience to climate change can be developed. With favorable public

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55. ICLEI Guide, *supra* note 13, at 5.

56. *See, e.g.*, A.K. SNOVER, ET AL., CENTER FOR SCIENCE IN THE EARTH SYSTEM, PREPARING FOR CLIMATE CHANGE: GUIDEBOOK FOR LOCAL REGIONAL AND STATE GOVERNMENT (2007), <http://www.icleiusa.org/action-center/planning/adaptation-guidebook/view?searchterm> (select link to view document); LIVIA BIZIKOVA, TINA NEALE & IAN BURTON, CANADIAN COMMUNITIES GUIDEBOOK FOR ADAPTATION TO CLIMATE CHANGE (2009), <http://www.epa.gov/cre/adaptationresources.html> (follow the ‘Guidance Documents’ link).

57. THE COMPLETE LINCOLN-DOUGLAS DEBATES OF 1858 128 (Paul M. Angle ed., 1991).

sentiment, a new societal norm can be developed over time that will shift behavior so that individual actions parallel government initiatives.

The extensive learning that has been developed in the social sciences must be tapped by those working with communities and the public. Framing the conversation for maximum appeal and employing community based social marketing techniques will be instrumental in attaining public sentiment in favor of taking action to address climate change.