

Communications Quick Reference Tip Sheet

Education and Outreach Work Group

City-County Task Force on Climate and Economic Equity

This tip sheet summarizes the evidence-based recommendations that were provided in a series of presentations to the Education and Outreach Work Group in 2021 and the 2022 Communications Guidelines developed by the Marketing and Education Team.

Why this is important

Scientists have warned for thirty years about the dangers of climate change and the devastating effect it will have for life on earth. Similarly, indications about the unequal treatment of minorities and people of color have been evident for decades. These are systemic problems that cause needless human suffering on a massive scale.

And yet, society has not acted in proportion to the magnitude of these issues. Part of the problem is the way these issues have been communicated to the public. Psychologists, social scientists, and others have conducted extensive research to determine how to create more effective public communications that lead to action.¹

Five Common Mistakes

1. **The global approach.** When scientists look at climate patterns, or world leaders assemble to address climate change, a global approach is called for. This is not however, the arena in which the average person operates or has any sense of control.
2. **Too much information.** Working memory can be stressed by information overload, eroding the processing ability of the brain.
3. **Relying on facts.** Humans make decisions based on emotion and use facts to justify their actions. When presented with facts that counter deeply held beliefs, people often double down on their initial beliefs.
4. **Catastrophic images and messaging.** Trying to shock people into action does not work. Numbing, denial, and avoidance are common responses to devastating news.
5. **Focusing on individual action.** Individual action is part of the solution. However, focusing only on small-scale acts, such as swapping out light bulbs, trivializes the issue and fails to address the need for collective action.

According to science, our brains:

- Discount the relevance of issues that are distant in time or place
- Privilege personal experience over analysis
- Take cues from the actions of others
- Are loss and risk averse
- Seek consistency with personal values and identity
- Use heuristics (mental short-cuts) to make decisions

Change the Goal

It is not required that someone “believes” in climate change and racial justice, or that they understand the mechanics of global warming and social systems, in order for them to support clean energy or advocate for the equitable expansion of green jobs. Communications should focus on motivating the audience toward meaningful positive action, with education and explanation playing a supportive role.²

Make the Messaging Personal, Local, and Concrete

1. **Personal.** Connect with what is important to the audience and speaks to their personal experiences, emotions, and values. Favor pictures of local people in action over graphs and charts. Provide a few key data points to support assertions and be prepared to offer additional information as requested.
2. **Local.** Start with -- and connect -- local events to larger conditions. Tap into local pride and social norms by citing positive action taken by residents and local trusted leaders.
3. **Concrete.** Cite local benefits and call for concrete action.

¹ These recommendations focus on climate change but are equally relevant to addressing economic and racial equity.

² While efforts to persuade often land on deaf ears, positive personal action can lead to changes in attitudes and beliefs.

Use this Checklist

Instead of this:	Do this:
Open with credits	Grab attention <ul style="list-style-type: none">- Focus on the audience- Keep formal introductions short; put acknowledgements at the end- Lead with a compelling image, story, or anecdote
Persuade and explain	Listen and discover <ul style="list-style-type: none">- Open with a question (rhetorical or actual)- Learn what your audience cares about and respect their experience- Use the “parking lot” technique to collect questions- Discover new insights together
Rely on facts and analysis	Use narratives that unite <ul style="list-style-type: none">- Connect to shared values and experiences- Use stories, anecdotes, metaphors, and testimonials- Use facts sparingly and cite the source to establish credibility
Begin with global causes and effects	Discuss local causes and effects <ul style="list-style-type: none">- Refer to recent, frequent, and/or memorable local events- Connect local conditions to larger causes (not vice versa)- Acknowledge feelings of confusion or discomfort
Focus on problems and catastrophic effects	Focus on solutions and benefits <ul style="list-style-type: none">- Emphasize concrete action being taken by people like them- Indicate the benefits and what will be lost if we fail to act
Use graphs and charts	Provide concrete examples <ul style="list-style-type: none">- When possible, use photos of local people in action.- Translate large numbers into human oriented graphics (e.g. 1 out of 5 instead of 20%)
Make a general ask	Make it easy to participate <ul style="list-style-type: none">- Ask for a small initial commitment - make it specific and public- Follow-up with a bigger public ask/ commitment

Access these resources

- PowerPoint Presentation [Toolkit and Guidelines](#)
- 2021 EOWG Presentations on [Audiences](#), [Effective Messaging](#), and [Engagement](#)
- 2022 [Communications Guide](#) adopted by the Marketing and Education Team
- The [Events Toolkit](#) contains brochures, handouts, and information on specific proposals, including [Green Jobs](#), [Food Waste](#), [Nature in the City](#), and [Transportation](#). Brochures are available in print.

Want to learn more about the science behind effective messaging? The Communications Guide provides extensive research. Here are some quick references:

- Robert Cialdini: [The Science of Persuasion: Seven Principles of Persuasion](#)
- Linden, Maibach, Leiserowitz: [Improving Public Engagement with Climate Change: Five “Best Practice” Insights from Psychological Science](#)