

Checklist, inclusive climate communication

Think holistically

Climate disruption is a looking glass which affects our perspectives about ourselves and everything on the planet, so it is unreasonable to think that there are magic words or that one-way 'messaging' can do much on its own – but as part of wide public engagement activities and grander narratives they can be of great help...

Give the conversation partner reason to stay

...Really great solutions aren't silver bullets either, simply because everyone won't think they are great and thus might be scared off – so consider thinking 'values-up' instead of 'numbers/proposals-down' and walk with rather than against people as their minds evaluate the underlying problem by working backwards from solutions they like/dislike...

Keep it simple

...Moreover, it helps if you make it easy to understand the problem's causes and magnitude and its solutions (including by using language and figures that people readily understand) – and tell simple and coherent stories (and new ones, if possible, thus opening up the climate story for new and diverse interpretations)...

Accept complexity

...At the same time, don't trivialize the scale and difficult nature of the problem – and know that even a well-defined audience will host a multitude of reactions to a message, which all deserve to be heard and debated publicly (but not in falsely balanced ways between disingenuous PR experts and media-novice scientists) as well as around the kitchen table...

Tailor your message (with novelty, without oversimplifications)

...Indeed, frame the message around things the audience is passionate about (and on the possibility to achieve increased likelihoods of avoiding harms to these), preferably in terms of impacts the audience might not have heard about before, rather

er than just try to provide people with more facts – but don't assume that you know what this is (in other words, find out beforehand if possible)...

Emotions must be addressed – and harnessed

...An honest account of probable impacts then requires being forthcoming in terms of creating supportive space to openly (and perhaps fiercely) discuss the issue and embrace the emotions that will follow, especially in order to prevent defense mechanisms from kicking in and to instead use those feelings as catalysts for engagement...

Everybody likes good action

...One crucial part of this is to not forget to couple impacts with meaningful and relevant solutions ('insurance policies' against climate risk) that exist on all levels, both in the form of counteraction and in the form of response and preparation – but be careful to not tone down the scope of change necessary and to communicate the co-benefits and positive visions that can be realized (and do so in a constructive way rather than by exaggerating and 'bright-siding' by saying that everything will be fine)...

Don't tell people what to think

...Remember, though, that it is always a big no-no to claim interpretative prerogative (including by propagating doom-mongering and other binary, extreme views) – as long as one doesn't wreak willful destruction, it is OK to be unconvinced about everything climate related (but do try to direct the question marks towards available solutions rather than climate science)...

Value the right values

...However, this does not mean that poor narratives and frames shouldn't be challenged – e.g., frames

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favoring self-focused, extrinsic values need to be drowned out by ones favoring self-transcending, compassionate, intrinsic ones, and personalized narratives regarding what's at stake need to replace impersonal, distant ones...

Don't put off what you can do today

...Because sufficient climate action needs to start immediately – so talk mostly about the present, including by connecting the future to the now, e.g. by focusing more on legacy and path dependencies resulting from decisions today than on unborn people...

What science is and is not

...However, science is not a crystal ball (meaning that the focus should be on eventual outcomes instead of specific years) but rather a method for asking ever more precise questions about the world – so make sure the recipients understand that climate disruption's basics are long settled but that even more detailed knowledge constantly is evolving (meaning that uncertainties should be treated as cautionary warnings, not excuses for passiveness), just as with all science...

Work with the subconscious

...For instance, and finally, developments in psychology over the last decades has unearthed many of the reasons for why you shouldn't be surprised if a flawlessly crafted message still ends up having no effect, namely due to the brain's automatic system with its heuristics and biases. That's why nudging (and strong policy) is a necessary complement to communication.

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Go to disruptdisruption.net/thought-experiment-inclusive-climate-communication
for more and for references to the research that inspired this checklist