

# Talk like a human

Lessons on how to  
communicate  
climate change

P( )TENTIAL  
ENERGY

[potentialenergycoalition.org](http://potentialenergycoalition.org)



# Why this Guide?

Climate change has a marketing problem. People don't understand it, therefore they don't care about it as much as they should. And since the people don't seem to care, climate change gets deprioritized.

*But we can solve this problem.*

Through extensive message testing, Potential Energy has compiled our top suggestions on how to better communicate the threat of climate change, encourage people to demand action, and inspire them by the progress we're already making.

Over the last 3 years, through a broad range of analytics techniques we have gathered significant data on what works and does not work when talking about climate. This document outlines what we have learned.

*Who is this for?*

It is indeed hard, if not impossible to create one guide that works for all people. That is the trick to climate communication - different people see the world in different ways and will have different reasons to care about the issue. But we do feel that there are some overarching rules that can broaden the tent beyond the one in four people today who are very worried and engaged on the issue. This language guide is designed for the big group in the middle, for whom we need to make climate change more relevant and urgent.



**(2.5 billion)**

Ads served and measured

**(141)**

Focus groups

**(418)**

Messages, ads, and concepts tested for persuasive effects

**(13)**

Rounds of large-scale, in-market testing tracking support for climate action among key target audiences

**(4)**

Global studies with sample of over 50,000 in 12 countries

**(101 million)**

Impressions delivered in live media tests to understand acquisition economics

**(1600+)**

Hours spent by citizens sharing their worries and hopes about the future, how they think about climate and clean energy, and sharing input and feedback on creative concepts

**(159)**

Surveys conducted across a range of climate issues

# First, Some Foundations

The key principle for any effective communication is to meet people where they are. And to be effective in climate, we need to recognize that most citizens don't know much. From our research, we see that...

The leading perceived cause of climate change in the US is **plastics**

About **half** of Americans think recycling can have an impact on climate change

Only **30%** think that diet can affect climate change

**Less than 20%** of people think renewables have gotten less expensive, while the cost of solar has declined 90% in the last decade

**Less than 25%** of people think there is scientific consensus on climate change, while over 99% of scientists agree

The data says that these two simple foundations are **STILL** among the most important messages:

1. That carbon pollution from fossil fuels stays in the atmosphere, causing the planet to overheat dangerously
2. That there is complete scientific consensus on this fact

# Here's the challenge,

what **scientists** say doesn't make sense...

...and what **politicians** say doesn't connect.

*"Greenhouse gasses are causing anthropogenic climate change."*

*"Sounds bad. I think. What am I gonna do about it?"*

*"We have to act now to stay under 1.5 degrees!"*

*"Why is everyone freaking out over a couple of degrees?"*

*"The sea levels are rising."*

*"Maybe. But won't that take 100 years and won't affect me or my property."*

*"We must decarbonize to get to net zero by 2040."*

*"Huh?"*

*"Taking action on climate change will create thousands of good-paying jobs."*

*"Not jobs that are for me."*

*"Climate action will spur innovation and make our lives better."*

*"I like my house, car, etc. I don't want to change how I live."*

*"Climate laws will lower costs for everyday Americans and reduce inflation."*

*"None of this will help me pay my rent or my bills today."*

# The 8 Principles of Climate Communication



## 01 Talk like a human

Regular people aren't policy wonks. Connect using language they understand.

### What the data tells us:

"Save Florida" beats "Get to Net Zero by 2040" by a factor of 5:1.

### Words to avoid:

- Decarbonization
- Net zero
- Anthropogenic
- Green house gasses
- Carbon footprint
- 1.5 degrees
- 100 year storm (what is that?)

### Words to use:

- Pollution
- Overheating
- Extreme weather
- Costing people too much
- The hottest year on record



## 02 Don't exaggerate

The truth is motivating enough. Catastrophe messaging can be polarizing especially if it seems like it comes with a political agenda. The key is to make the connection so people understand it on their own, rather than yell “CRISIS!”

*Be the rational source during the storm.*

### What the data tells us:

- Using terms like “climate emergency” and “climate crisis” work much better for people who are already alarmed, but actually not as well for others
- “The crisis is here, act now”: meaningfully reduced support among conservatives



### 03 No partisanship

Language can be political. Be mindful of perpetuating triggering tropes. Use language that appeals equally to conservative and progressive values. Simply saying “it’s not political” immediately lowers people’s defenses.

#### What the data tells us:

When we merely add the word “non partisan” in a message, we see a significant uptick in engagement.

#### Frames that appeal broadly

- Protect my community
- Conservation and preservation
- Safe and clean energy

#### Frames that are narrower

- Save the planet (odd yes, but it narrowly appeals to environmentalists)
- Reuse, reduce, recycle
- Sacrifice
- Green
- Tying climate to other political issues



## 04 Keep it local

We care about what we experience. Tie climate change to its real consequences.

### What the data tells us:

- Local impacts are almost always more impactful than global consequences
- Talking about local pride in progress is one of the most effective ways to engage people

### Words to avoid:

- Planetary

### Words to use:

- Our state
- Our town
- My neighbor
- Our kids





## 05 Humans, not concepts

People care about people, not abstract concepts. Spare us the theoreticals: global competitiveness, green innovation boom, economic leadership arguments. What works is that *people like me are being affected*.

### What the data tells us:

- Every time we test a message with a human face in it, it outperforms anything else
- Time and time again, *loss aversion* frames beat *gain frames*. “If we don’t stop polluting, the things you love (insert what works) are at risk.” This works so much better than “if we solve climate change, the economy will be better and you will have a new green job.”

### Here’s an example:

Let’s say you want to persuade someone that we need to reduce fossil fuel production. “Keep it in the ground” turns out to be a lousy slogan. It isn’t very relevant and makes people wonder how they are going to drive to work. But “No drilling near day care” motivates people.

**Some valuable things to focus on** - include kitchen table issues such as high air conditioning bills, days you can’t go outside, water shortages, high food prices due to drought, air quality.



## 06 Fight pollution, not climate change

We aren't fighting climate change. We are fighting the polluters who are causing climate change.

Pollution framing is an essential part of effective climate communication. It's a frame that already exists in the brain and it works. And when we concentrate the accountability on the entities that make up the bulk of pollution, it is both clarifying and motivating.

### What the data tells us:

Accountability messages are in the top 10% of the hundreds of messages we have tested.

### Framings that work well

- Fairness - it isn't right that we allow some bad actors to pollute in a way that costs us all
- End dependency - our dependency on dirty expensive energy is costing us money and health



## 07 Focus on today

The future is easy to ignore. What's happening now matters now.

If you want to motivate people, choose specific, concrete, already happening impacts - and solutions - that are locally relevant. Highlight what's tangibly happening today versus the thirty year goal.

### What the data tells us:

- We asked citizens if they supported net zero by 2050 and by 2040 and got the same percentage response. People don't "get" these targets

### What not to say

- We have a net zero target by 2040

### What to say

- If we reduce pollution 10% every year, we can end climate change before it's too late for our kids



## 08 Messengers make the message

People are more likely to trust information from trustworthy sources. Those still exist.

### What the data tells us:

A message often delivered by a credible messenger often performs 4x as well as those without.

### Who people trust (among many others)

- Scientists (yes they do, but important we humanize them)
- Farmers
- Doctors
- Firefighters

### Who people don't trust

- Politicians

# Eight tips we have found useful...

**1** Use vivid language that wakes people up. It works on the brain in a different way. Thinking about the term global warming. Both are very positive terms. Who doesn't want to be warm? And global is nice too! Talk about toxic pollution and overheating instead.

**2** Climate isn't an adjective. Climate jobs, climate action, climate this, climate that. Regular people don't talk this way. When you do, you sound like you have a particular agenda to many people.

**3** No one cares about celsius or even global temperatures. 1.5 degrees is a small number. When we asked citizens across the globe how much they thought the UN said was a safe limit, they said 4 degree celsius!

**4** Time targets don't work. Our research said that support for decarbonising by 2040 was at the same levels as support for decarbonizing by 2050. People don't think this way.

**5** You don't need to use the phrase "phase out the oil and gas industry." It's not necessary. (And it does polarize people.) Most people immediately wonder how they will heat their homes or get their kids to school. Talk about making our energy 100% clean rather than eliminating an industry.

**6** Accompany with a consequence. We have found that if within five words of saying the term climate change you always add an actual "felt consequence," message salience soars. "The Climate Changing is causing extreme fires." "The Climate Changing is reducing crop yields and raising food prices."

**7** Go in the front door. For many years the conventional wisdom was to duck the direct approach and find a side door. "Don't talk about climate. Just talk about the solution." Or the latest - "Don't focus on climate change, focus on clean energy jobs." Time after time we have seen the direct approach - stop the pollution that is overheating the planet - is the most effective.

**8** No forcing and no bans. Limitation always loses. When we mentioned the phrase "gas stove ban" we create 5 opponents to action for every one supporter.





## Here are **two** sentences that work really well

### Talking about the problem

The use of **dirty energy** has been emitting **heat-trapping pollution** into the atmosphere forming a thick blanket around the Earth, causing our planet to overheat and creating **irreversible damage**.

### Talking about the recent climate law

(hint: don't say "Inflation Reduction Act")

Experts expect this plan to cause a **40% reduction in toxic air and carbon pollution** in the next ten years. This is the biggest carbon pollution reduction plan in American history.

## The **four** traps of climate communication

### The “**we need to sacrifice**” trap

We don't need to change our way of life, we need polluters to change theirs.

### The “**distant promise**” trap

No more vision, all action.

### The “**government is outlawing...**” trap

We're not forcing anyone into a cleaner future. In today's context, it is all too easy to fall prey into culture wars, “government overreach”, and hyper-partisanship. Talk about upgrades, not bans.

### The “**get a new car**” trap

People aren't thinking about their next car, and don't yet see EVs as “for them”. They will, but don't make it all about the vehicle today.



# Glossary of terms

Say **less** of this... and **more** of this...

Climate change

Sustainable

Warming

Emissions

Renewable energy

Ban

Transition or transformation

Carbon tax

Greener

Sacrifice

Big Oil

Decarbonize

Extreme weather

Safe and healthy

Over heating

Carbon pollution

Clean energy

Upgrade

Progress

Pollution fine

Cleaner, quieter, faster

Enjoy

Dirty fossil energy

Eliminate pollution

Thank you

POTENTIAL  
ENERGY