Connecting community and climate

About the project

As Hennepin County moves into a new phase of taking bold action on climate change, the county's ability to address the climate crisis will rely, in part, on engaging the public in taking action. This project involved getting up to speed with existing research into the public's knowledge and attitudes about climate change, barriers and motivations to taking action, and effective messaging strategies. The findings from this research is intended to help with the development of effective programs, messages, and outreach around climate change.

Key findings and guiding principles

The following are key findings that can be used as guiding principles for approaching work on climate change:

- Create a vision for a climate friendly future – be hopeful, inspiring, and empowering
- Understand your audience and use messaging and messengers that resonate with them – connect messaging to what your audience cares about, focus on actions and resources that are accessible to them, and find trusted messengers to deliver the message
- Be realistic about the climate reality and climate impacts – climate change is here, it's affecting us now, and we must act urgently to avoid the worst consequences
- Explain the science and connections to our lives – use metaphors to explain complex scientific concepts, acknowledge the scientific consensus, and explain how our lives depend on a stable climate
- Avoid blame and fear – empower people to get involved, evoke worry but not fear to increase engagement and urgency to act
- Be inclusive – connect stories to equity, justice, and reducing disparities
- Evoke values – including strengthening community, protecting people and nature, caring for the future, ensuring justice and fairness, seeking opportunity and next big thing, managing resources responsibly, and avoiding wastefulness
- Tell a story about local solutions, innovation, and opportunity – explain how solutions protect the people and places that your audience cares about and how the solutions are the next big thing that helps us create a world that better aligns with our hopes, dreams, and values
- Focus on the most impactful actions – for both the county and individuals and provide people tools and resources to engage others and act collectively

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Executive summary

Attitudes

People increasingly say climate change will impact them or their communities, and over time they are becoming more worried about climate change, more engaged with the issue, and more supportive of climate solutions. People have conflicting and wide-ranging emotions about climate change, feeling a mix of hopeful, resilient, disgusted, angry, outraged, and helpless. Although most people are concerned about the reality of climate change, they tend to underestimate how much others agree.

People desire action on climate change, believing we have a moral responsibility to act and that it's not too late. However, a sense of responsibility and desire for action doesn't necessarily translate into actual steps being taken or changes being made.

Understanding your audience

There is little consensus in America about climate change, except that it's not a good thing and that we all have a responsibility to do something about it. When it comes to climate change, people differ more on values, political ideology, and religious views than demographics. Despite differences, there is a strong foundation of public support for climate action.

In general, people who are younger, female, racial minorities, more highly educated, and politically liberal express more concern about climate change. White men in particular tend to be less concerned about environmental issues.

When considering different audience groups, there is a large group that is or could be generally supportive of climate action. These people tend to be focused on family and community or on their moral responsibility to protect God's creation. However, a big opportunity to reach people does not necessarily mean it will be easy to get them to pay attention to or take action on climate change as they still face many competing priorities and barriers to action.

After reviewing various research sources that group Americans based on attitudes, values, concern, and engagement, four audience segments were identified. These segments can help with prioritizing audiences for outreach as well as understanding audiences we are already working with.

- **Actively engaged champions and leaders (about 20% of the public):** Informed, involved, and looking to do more
- **Concerned but not very active (about 30% of the public):** Somewhat informed, focused on family and community, may be overwhelmed, unsure, and in need of inspiration
- **Unsure, disengaged, difficult to reach (about 40% of the public):** Don't seek out or pay attention to information, hold traditional values, focused elsewhere, but could change their minds
- **Actively opposed (about 10% of the public):** Certain climate change isn't happening and engaged in opposing action

Barriers

Climate change is a difficult problem psychologically for people to understand and act upon. The science is complicated, the impacts are terrifying and overwhelming, and the solutions are interconnected and multifaceted. People have a hard time believing humans can impact the weather, and the interconnectedness of the issue means simple solutions are not possible.

The intentional rise of misinformation campaigns has made climate change a more confusing and polarizing issue. These campaigns have been funded by fossil fuel companies, spread by politicians, public figures, and the media, and perpetuated within social groups.

All of this has contributed to climate silence – or an informal, silent agreement not to talk about climate change. Reasons people avoid talking about climate change include that they think they don't know enough, think it's too polarizing, find it too scary or overwhelming, or don't see how it connects to their identity or things they care about. For most people, climate change has been classified as an environmental issue, so it faces the same limitations as the environmental movement as a whole. It is perceived as elite, white, and wealthy, meaning public discourse on climate change has not been inclusive and acting on climate change has not been a social norm for many groups.

All of these factors contribute to a lack of urgency to act on climate. We have other more pressing things to worry about in our lives and in society, and we don't see the connections between climate change and other societal issues. People may believe that climate change will only impact future generations, that the costs of climate change are too high given the uncertainty, and that the benefits of action are intangible or far off.

Motivation

Some key ways to increase motivation to care about and act on climate change include:

- **Developing social norms:** People are more likely to act when they see others like them care about the issue and they think it fits with their identity.
- **Evoking self-transcendent values:** Values that evoke caring about the well-being of others or things outside of ourselves increases our intrinsic motivation to act.
- **Tapping into productive emotions:** Feeling a sense of worry, which includes both concern as well as interest and hope, is more productive than fear, which can cause people to disengage.
- **Building confidence and capacity for action:** Provide guidance on what actions to take and help people see how their actions are impactful. Benefits people may be seeking include a sense of purpose, connection to others, and belonging to something greater than one's self.

Behaviors to prioritize

There is often a disconnect among the actions people think are effective at addressing climate change and which ones actually are. Individual action on climate change helps get people more engaged in the issue, scales to more impactful collective action, and puts pressure on government agencies, businesses, and institutions to make greater, systemic changes.

The most important behaviors to encourage people to take:

- **Talking about climate change:** This helps promote social change and develop social norms, and there is ample opportunity to increase public discourse on climate change.
- **Becoming politically and civically engaged:** Most people support climate policies and climate education but are not politically or civically engaged. They may think others are doing it or people like them don't take these actions. Ways to increase this action include framing campaigning as part of a new reality, showing how people like them are taking this action, and getting people they know to ask them to take action.
- **Impactful individual actions:** Focus on individual actions that are most impactful for reducing emissions, which include switching to a plant-based diet, reducing food waste, flying less, reducing personal car use, switching to an electric vehicle, purchasing green energy, using smart meters, upgrading household equipment to the most efficient technologies, and reducing consumption. When encouraging behavior change, make it easy and fun

while also making people think and reflect. Encourage people to use their individual actions as a communication tool to engage others by talking about what they are doing.

Messaging

Communicating the science

Understanding the science of climate change makes people more concerned about the issue, more likely to support action, and more confident in talking to others.

The first thing to consider is the best term to use to describe the issue. Climate change has been viewed as more scientifically accurate but polarizing, while global warming may increase emotional engagement. Terms like climate crisis, failure, shock, disruption, breakdown, and emergency have been suggested to communicate urgency and the tension between our deeply held goals and values and current actions. The phrase damage to the climate suggest something we've chosen and can prevent.

Metaphors are helpful for explaining scientific concepts. Effective metaphors for climate change include:

- **Heat-trapping blanket:** When we burn fossil fuels, carbon dioxide builds up in our atmosphere and acts like a blanket that traps hear around the world, disrupting the climate.
- **Too much carbon:** Regular levels of carbon dioxide are created by normal life processes, but rampant levels of carbon dioxide are produced when we burn fossil fuels for energy. Nature is out of balance.
- **Ocean as the climate's heart:** Just as the heart circulates blood and regulates our body's temperature, the ocean regulates the world's climate system by controlling the circulation of heat and moisture.
- **Climate as the foundation of our lives:** Climate is the foundations of our lives, and our lives depend on a stable climate. Climate change is the ground shifting under our feet.
- **Energy-climate connection:** We need to move away from dirty, outdated fuels that contribute to the heat-trapping blanket effect. Using clean energy like solar and wind will get the climate system back to functioning the way it should.

Reinforcing the scientific community's consensus on climate change using simple pie charts or descriptive sentences increases understanding and helps inoculate against misinformation. Explain that 97% of climate scientists have concluded that human-caused climate change is happening. Communicate exactly what uncertainties exist and why. Acknowledge that disinformation campaigns exist and explain the role they seek to play.

Developing messages that resonate

Use frames that evoke self-transcendent and intrinsic values – those that speak to motivations beyond one's self and the inherent value of an idea. Values to evoke include minimizing wastefulness, strengthening community, protecting other people and nature, addressing injustice, ensuring fairness and freedom, and promoting health.

Tell a story about how the world is not keeping up with our values and aspirations, and we need to work to resolve that tension and create a better world that matches our ideals and desires. Talk about collective action, as people are more likely to believe that *we* can make a difference, rather than *I* can make a difference.

Frames that have proven effective to engaging people in climate change issue and action include:

- **Personal and local:** Focus on local impacts, local solutions, tangible benefits, the need to prevent damage, and the opportunity to build strong communities
- **Avoid negative emotions and guilt:** Explain how solutions create a positive, not just avoid a negative and use messages of empathy, freedom, and choice

- **Future full of opportunity and innovation:** Focus on how climate solutions are the next big thing, express a can-do attitude to evoke values of opportunity, fairness, hard work, and patriotism, and present an aspirational choice to invest in a better future
- **Moral responsibility for future generations:** Emphasize the moment of choice we are facing and the need to act now, and describe how the practical steps we take today are in the best interest of future generations
- **Connect to health:** Elevate connections to higher quality of life, personal wellbeing, better health, and increased sense of community
- **Avoiding wastefulness, risk, and future losses:** Explain what we will lose if we don't act, frame certain actions as a way to avoid risks, and evoke need to protect people and places we care for
- **Explain the consequences for polluters:** Explain fines and rules for polluters to evoke value of fairness

Delivering your message

- **Use effective visuals:** Use real images of people showing emotion and taking action, show solutions on a societal scale, use less familiar images to tell a new and thought-provoking story, and show local impacts and solutions
- **Find trusted messengers:** Sources that the audience views as trusted, authentic, reputable could include public figures (celebrities, activists, religious leaders, elected officials), health care professionals, scientists, media, local leaders, and peers
- **Include both data and emotional stories:** Emotional stories inspire urgency, while data increases knowledge and informs decision-making
- **Tell your story:** Use narratives, communicate your vision and the urgency to act now, collectively, toward creating that vision, explain how the world is not keeping up with our values and aspirations, evoke the benefits beyond ourselves, repeat your message, describe how your audience fits in, and promote collective, systemic actions

Helping your audience figure out where they fit in

Engagement around climate change often ends with the question, "So, what can I do?" Instead of offering your audience a list of actions that they can take that they might find overwhelming while also questioning the true impact, encourage them to ask themselves some questions to help figure out where best to focus.

Ask yourself:

- What brings you joy? Focusing on something you are passionate about will keep you interested and motivated to help avoid burnout.
- What are you good at? Knowing what special skills, networks, and resources you have can help you figure out how you can uniquely contribute.
- What is the work that needs doing? Addressing climate change requires many people doing work on many solutions, so consider the wide range of climate solutions and what work you can contribute to.

The intersection of the answers to these three questions represents a good place to focus.

And also ask yourself: What can *we* do?

Think about the organizations you are involved with and the systems you can influence. Addressing climate change requires many people working on many different solutions at many different levels, so you don't need to completely change what you are doing to make a difference. Focusing on where you have influence is a good place to start. Also consider who is your team – who are the people that you can work with to help you bring about this change. We can accomplish more by working together.

Resources

The following sources informed this research and are important resources for learning more.

Yale Program on Climate Communication

Conducts a variety of research and projects to understand public opinion and behavior related to climate change.

Access all of their information at https://climatecommunication.yale.edu/

Specific resources that may be helpful:

- Yale Climate Opinion Maps include local data on climate change beliefs, concerns, and policy support: https://climatecommunication.yale.edu/visualizations-data/ycom-us/
- Global Warming's Six Americas is an audience segmentation approach https://climatecommunication.yale.edu/about/projects/global-warmings-six-americas/
- Identifying climate messaging that works https://climatecommunication.yale.edu/about/projects/identifying-climate-messages-work/
- Publications includes all of their public reports, articles, and peer-reviews journal articles, with ways to filter the information https://climatecommunication.yale.edu/publications/
- Understanding and countering misinformation about climate change https://www.climatechangecommunication.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/Cook_2019_climate_misinformation-1.pdf

ecoAmerica

Conducts annual research on American climate perspectives and have conducted message testing research. This research provides key recommendations on tested words, phrases, and messages to use when talking about climate change impacts and solutions.

Access all research at: https://ecoamerica.org/research/

Specific resources that may be helpful:

- Let's Talk Climate Messages to Motivate Americans: https://ecoamerica.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/eA-lets-talk-climate.pdf
- 15 Steps to Create Effective Climate Communications: https://ecoamerica.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/5_ea_15_steps.pdf

Climate Outreach

Conducts research and produces resources on engaging audiences, having conversations, and using visuals for climate change outreach and communications.

Access all resources at: https://climateoutreach.org/

Specific resources that may be helpful:

- #TalkingClimate Handbook provides eight principles for having effective conversations on climate change based on a citizen science research project with participants from around the world. https://climateoutreach.org/reports/how-to-have-a-climate-change-conversation-talking-climate/

- Climate Visuals includes seven research-support principles for climate visuals and a library of climate images. https://climatevisuals.org/ and https://climateoutreach.org/reports/climate-visuals-seven-principles-for-visual-climate-change-communication/
- Mainstreaming low-carbon lifestyles https://climateoutreach.org/reports/mainstreaming-low-carbon-lifestyles/

Frameworks Institute and the National Network for Ocean and Climate Change Interpretation

Offer resources for making climate science communications clearer and more effective by using metaphors to explain the science. See their flyer that briefly explains metaphors and framing that have been tested to be effective when explaining the science of climate change.

Access at: https://climateinterpreter.org/sites/default/files/resources/nnocci_recommendations_flyer_2016.pdf

Climate Communications and Behavior Change: A Guide for Practitioners

Includes tips for creating tension to motivate action on climate change and understanding and connecting with audiences. Access at:
https://scholarsbank.uoregon.edu/xmlui/bitstream/handle/1794/10708/ClimCommBehaviorChangeGuide.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y

The Psychology of Climate Change Communication from the Center for Research on Environmental Decisions

Includes tips for engaging and communication with your audience about climate change. Access at
http://guide.cred.columbia.edu/index.html