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EVIDENCE-BASED INSIGHTS FOR ACTION-TAKING

from The Climate Advocacy Lab



Getting our volunteers, campaign targets, and communities to take meaningful actions can be difficult. Check out these tips from social science that may make the difference between action and apathy.



Efficacy is essential.

Whether it's persuading new faces to join your cause or mobilizing an existing base, it's essential to help people believe their actions matter. Efficacy is the feeling that "my actions matter and make a difference." This seems obvious but many tactics, improperly framed, may not build efficacy.

Four major forms of efficacy are:

- someone feeling like they are **capable of helping**,
- the belief that their **voice will be heard**,
- believing that **acting together is more effective** than acting alone, and¹
- that the solutions we're pushing for will **solve the problem**.

Instead of this: "Join us at our town hall meeting next week so that we can shut down this pipeline project."

Try something like this: "Your voice matters, so make sure it's heard. Join us at our town hall meeting next week so that we can shut down this pipeline project."



Use language that empowers your base.

We often try to emphasize how "easy" an action will be to encourage action-taking – but research suggests that **might be the wrong approach**. In fact, since many of the actions we are asking people to take are, in fact, challenging, it is better to acknowledge their discomfort. For particularly difficult asks, like meeting policymakers – which can be unfamiliar situations or potentially involve unpleasant interactions – build up your activists with **legitimation rhetoric** that acknowledges their anxieties while reinforcing the importance of the task.

Instead of this: "Please call your Congresswoman."

Try something like this: "I know this is a big request and it can be challenging, but we need you to call your Congresswoman. Each call gets us closer."



We are not logical. We are psychological.

People are not perfectly rational, even if they think they are. For instance, powerful emotions can stoke powerful actions. But simply provoking an emotional response is just the first step. While the academic literature on how emotions in climate change communication is **still evolving**, research has shown that **pairing emotional appeals with clear, understandable, and appropriate actions** is likely the best way forward. In other words, if you want to provoke a fear response in your message, make the corresponding ask a way to reduce that fear.

Instead of this: "Sign this petition to let the mayor know we need to shut down the local coal-fired power plant."

Try something like this: "The local coal-fired power plant puts our children at higher risk of asthma and heart failure, so sign this petition to let the mayor know we need to shut it down."

¹ To fully empower your supporters with a sense of efficacy, it may be necessary to broaden the frame of how we think about climate advocacy – taking into account issues like money in politics or voting rights.



Say it loud.

Public opinion of climate change is plagued by something known as **pluralistic ignorance**, or the false assumption that the people around us are less alarmed than we actually are. This largely stems from the fact that climate change has become so politically polarized that people are afraid to bring it up. Assuming others are not supportive of climate solutions leads to a “spiral of silence” and a social norm of keeping our climate concerns quiet. This silence allows messages from climate deniers and opponents to creep into the void, which deepens the problem. Fight back against the silence by educating people about how truly popular their concerns are, encourage them to **spread the word to their close friends**, and let the **power of peer pressure** work for instead of against you. The Lab’s Yale Climate Opinion Maps for Strategists tool is great for this!²

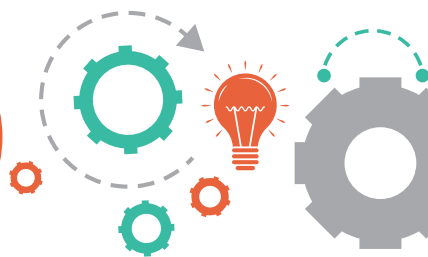
Try something like this: “You’re not alone. A growing number of Texans (now 71%!) agree we should do more to fight climate change, including a majority of Texas Republicans. Please share this post so that others in your community can get involved.”



Understand (and segment) your motivation.

Social science research shows that **human beings want to avoid cognitive discomfort**. We reject information that challenges our identities and worldviews. We rationalize all sorts of things in order to maintain the view we have of ourselves. For climate politics, this tends to boil down into our **political partisan tribes**. But all is not lost. Understanding your audience means really getting a sense of and speaking to their individual and collective identities. Affirm people’s basic identities and let those inform why they should get on board with your mission. Hunters want to preserve beautiful places, conservatives want job creation, and many evangelicals believe God trusted humans to be good stewards of the Earth. Segmenting your messages is more time consuming, but it’s also more likely to work. Otherwise, the worst possible outcome isn’t just a failure, it’s a backfire.

Try something like this: “North Carolina is my home and I must act to preserve and protect the North Carolina I know. Birds and their habitats are already being impacted by climate change across this great state, and I must act to help reverse that impact.”



What we hold dear.

Another way of connecting with your audience is through appeals to shared values, making climate action make sense for them at a fundamental level. This is true for both receptive audiences and those more reticent to your message. However, be careful that values-based messaging must be seen as authentic in order to avoid the perception of pandering.

Try something like this: “The joy of being a grandparent is passing on the world to your grandkids. If climate change goes unchecked, what kind of world are you leaving them?”



² For access to the Yale Climate Opinion Maps for Strategists, a tool unique to the Climate Advocacy Lab, email us at info@climateadvocacylab.org and inquire to join as a member!



Messengers matter.

Your message is only as good as your messenger. The thing to keep in mind is that **source credibility** is not something inherent in a messenger – no matter how qualified you think he or she is – but something conferred by the audience. Look for the two main ingredients in credibility: perceived expertise (or how knowledgeable the messenger appears on the issue) and common interests (such as shared partisanship, ideology, personal background, etc.). This doesn't just mean high-status individuals like scientists or celebrities either – friends, family members, and trusted community leaders can be just as (if not more) effective communicators. To successfully move our audiences to action, we need to select the messengers most likely to break through.

Try something like this: “As a friend, neighbor, and resident of Tampa for three decades, I want to share with you my concern about how climate change will harm Central Florida.”

Peer pressure works.

Even the most diehard supporters had to start somewhere. More likely than not, they were recruited to their first meeting or rally because a friend or family member invited them. It's important to remember that activism is a social activity, so make use of the **social connections** your supporters have and create an atmosphere where people feel useful, fulfilled, and included. They get to hang out with their loved ones and you get to build your movement. Research shows that believing your neighbors, friends, and family are also doing something will pull you in that direction too. We need multiple signals to act and peer pressure is vital for many forms of behavior and attitude change.

Try something like this: “Hey, what are you up to Sunday afternoon? Want to go to this climate meeting with me?”

Moving up the ladder.

You've probably heard about the ladder of engagement and the importance of “upladdering” your supporters, getting them to engage more and more deeply. But how do you actually do that? Research into “spillover” behavior suggests that building your supporters' identity as an activist is key. Supporters may be successfully brought up the ladder by reminding them of their past work for the organization and reinforcing their identity as members of the broader movement. By communicating to your supporters that they are valuable, that their past engagement makes them a leader, and that they are key to your success, you are building their identity as an “activist” and sowing the seeds for greater engagement.

Try something like this: “Based on your past support, you have shown yourself to be a committed climate warrior. Can we count on you one more time for our new campaign?”³



³ For clickable links, see this handout online at <https://tinyurl.com/9actiontaking>.