



WOODS INSTITUTE  
FOR THE ENVIRONMENT  
STANFORD UNIVERSITY

# CALIFORNIA CLIMATE CHANGE PROJECT BRIEF SUMMARY



## Strategies to Encourage Public Support for Initiatives to Combat Global Warming

Deborah L. Rhode, Professor, Stanford Law School and Director, Stanford Center on Ethics  
with Lee Ross, Professor, Stanford Department of Psychology

*This summary explores research on public values and behaviors on environmental issues, particularly global warming. It discusses strategies for encouraging the public in general and Californians in particular to make global warming a more central personal and political concern.*

### Motivating Action

The likelihood that individuals will behave in environmentally responsible ways reflects a number of factors. It depends on the effectiveness of information they receive, the credibility of the information source, and how the problem and proposed solutions relate to their values and self image. In addition, individuals will be influenced by how they perceive others responding to the challenge and by how costly or inconvenient the problem and the solutions will be.

Getting people to care deeply about adverse climate change is a task that faces major obstacles. Conventional media coverage can get such matters onto the public agenda, but it is less effective in producing strong commitments and prompting effective action. Such change requires that media presentations be a part of a broader, coordinated public education and influence strategy—one that emphasizes not only information, but also motivation and the challenge of converting positive motives and intentions into individual and collective action. Focusing on proven tactics for sustaining behavioral change should be part of the process.

### Behavioral research suggests that:

- **Information should be available in multiple forms from multiple sources, targeted to particular audiences' circumstances and concerns.** Given the diversity in consumer circumstances and motivations, multiple appeals from multiple sources are necessary. In the context of residential home improvements, for example, different households have different levels of concern about energy bills, uncomfortable drafts, environmental preservation, and related factors. Knowledge about specific customer priorities is critical in shaping effective communication.
- **Sources should be credible and include celebrities, local officials, community organizations, and social networks of friends, neighbors, and colleagues.** To overcome complacency, lack of interest, or ignorance, the most effective communication strategy is to present easily understandable material from credible sources in inviting, vivid formats. Celebrity and familiar spokespersons can attract popular attention, donor support, and access to policy circles. The most important role models for most people, however, may lie closer to home. In residential improvements, people are most persuaded by personal stories: seeing what friends and neighbors have done, finding out exactly what was involved in doing it, and hearing them recount the benefits and sources of satisfaction they derived from the experience. Such personalized accounts are apt to prove more effective than information available from more official sources.
- **Visual images should be used to enlist media and public attention and evoke concerns about environmental preservation and stewardship for future generations.** Compelling visual images shape individual values directly and indirectly through replication by the media, and do so more effectively than text. They convey, in uniquely powerful form, the global, local and personal implications of climate change.

- **Messages should be concrete, vivid, and dramatic; they should also be personalized and responsive to the core audience's values and experiences.** Individuals tend to be more responsive to concrete, vivid, and dramatic information than to general warnings or appeals. Changes in monthly energy bills or in the cost of filling one's gas tank heighten motivation and provide timely occasions to step up campaigns. Values also play an important role in encouraging conservation behaviors. Research suggests that ethical commitments are more likely to promote sustained, environmentally responsible behavior than short-term financial incentives and that certain measures, such as solar panels on roofs and hybrid purchases, are often adopted out of commitment to environmental preservation and the sense of personal environmentalist identity, even when they yield little or no financial savings.
- **The risks of global climate change are best conveyed in ways that underscore urgency but that do not evoke doomsday scenarios that may result in denial and perceptions of futility.** Research suggests that people generally overestimate the likelihood and seriousness of threat posed by vivid, readily visible or imaginable, catastrophic threats that have low probability while underestimating the likelihood and seriousness of less visible, cumulative, long-term risks. Problems like global warming that lack incontrovertible villains and are partly attributable to policy and lifestyle choices provoke more resignation than indignation. Individuals are also apt to feel that it will be fruitless and quixotic to change their own behavior if others do not change.
- **Highlighting environmentally responsible behavior by peer groups is especially important.** Research suggests that perceptions about the behavior of one's peer group may be the most critical factor in determining whether those beliefs and values get translated into action. In one study, utility customers reduced energy consumption most when they learned that the vast majority of their neighbors were conserving, rather than when they were told about environmental benefits or personal cost savings. As a result, opt-out programs are more effective than opt-in ones. They convey the sense that other citizens are also doing their part to deal with the problem.
- **Messages that emphasize opportunities to avoid losses or negative changes are particularly important.** Individuals are more willing to act to prevent losses than to achieve gains. Research suggests they are more likely to be persuaded if choices are presented in a way that emphasizes unnecessary costs and risks and the savings and other opportunities that will be lost if they fail to act.
- **The focus of any campaign should be on behavior change rather than information, attitudes, or values alone.** Specific behaviors should be targeted, and, where possible, specific opportunities should be created for individuals to commit themselves to those behaviors. Giving people concrete, convenient strategies to reduce risks is the best way to reduce feelings of anxiety and helplessness.
- **The behavior change initially sought should be made as easy, convenient, and inexpensive as possible. More significant behavior change can be achieved more readily after individuals have made climate concerns a source of personal identity and self-esteem.** Once individuals have agreed to small behavioral changes and taken those steps, they tend to identify with the relevant goals and become more likely to undertake more substantial changes in behavior.
- **Getting people to act on positive environmental values and intentions can be best achieved by face-to-face encounters and requests for personal commitments.** A Canadian study of strategies to reduce summer use of water on residential lawns found that simply providing information on efficient use actually *increased* consumption by 15 percent. However, when residents in the study received a home visit and were asked to commit to reduced usage, the results were dramatic. Three-quarters of those visited made the commitment in question, and overall water consumption was reduced by more than 50 percent.

To achieve a global sustainable future, individuals must make climate change a priority in both their personal and political behavior. For that to occur, policy makers - government, business and individuals – will need a coordinated strategy informed by the type of behavior research summarized. Careful planning with involvement from researchers and target audiences is necessary to achieve the fundamental behavior and policy changes that reduction of global warming requires.

*This summary is based on "Environmental Values and Behaviors: Strategies to Encourage Public Support for Initiatives to Combat Global Warming" by Deborah L. Rhode and Lee Ross available at <http://environment.stanford.edu/ideas/cccp.html>.*