

FRAMING

WHY?

When talking about climate change, it's easy to get so wrapped up in new, clever exciting ways of delivering our message that we don't pay enough attention to the message itself, or the words we use to communicate it.

The words and phrases we use to get our message across are crucial, because every word evokes, in our mind's eye, a set of images and related words. The images which a particular word brings up (called a frame) can either back up our overall message- or undermine it. Because of this, how we 'frame' an issue is hugely important. Politicians, business groups and the media know this, and hire advertising execs and language experts to create their own frames which very subtly back up their messages and their interests.

Unwittingly using one of 'their' frames can undermine everything you're trying to say, as you're fighting an argument on their terms. Instead, think about what you're *actually* trying to say, frame it, and say it. Sound complicated? It isn't- try these:

"cheap flights"

Talking about 'cheap' flights plays right into our opponents' hands because they can accuse us of being snobs who are against less wealthy people flying. In fact, statistics show it's wealthier, not poorer people who fly most frequently. Given the environmental cost of flying, 'cheap' flights aren't cheap.

"hidden cost flights"

In reality, flying comes at huge cost to the environment, but, like baggage fees, taxes and other extras, it's hidden and left out of that low advertised price. People are increasingly wary of hidden costs when flying. By talking about 'hidden cost' flights, we tap into their suspicion and make our point.

"clean/new coal power"

Electricity companies are increasingly talking about low/zero CO₂ 'clean coal' technology in order to justify building new coal power stations. In reality, the technology to do this doesn't exist yet. They're just repackaging the same old failed solutions.

"Victorian technologies"

There's nothing clean, modern or exciting about coal power- It's the same stuff that powered the dirty factories back in the bad old days of chimney sweeps, open sewers and the slums. By using the word 'Victorian' we evoke these images and make coal sound decidedly old fashioned and un-sexy.

"alternative energy"

The word 'alternative' implies something a little edgy, unusual, unreliable and ever-so-slightly out of the mainstream. We need to take things like wind and solar power **into** the mainstream, not leave them to the hippies on the fringes.

"modern technologies"

In order to shift the world onto wind and solar, we need to talk about them as the exciting, new, sparkly cutting-edge technology that they are. By talking about them as 'modern technologies' you make them appear to be an inevitable part of our future.

"global warming"

You can get your message off to a good start by avoiding talking about 'global warming'. Although overall the Earth is getting warmer, this will have vastly different effects in different parts of the world, with some even experiencing cooler temperatures. Under-informed smart-alecs may pick you up on this, so don't walk into the trap.

"the climate crisis"

Talking about the 'climate' avoids the mistake of talking about 'warming', and implies more general, varied changes. At the same time, talking about a 'crisis' adds a sense of urgency and danger that isn't always there when talking about 'climate change'.

“saving the Earth”

Talking about ‘saving the Earth’ makes doing it sound a bit like saving money- something which we know is good for us to do, but which is a bit of a chore. It can also sound quite distant and global, rather than linking it to our everyday lives and day-to-day concerns.

“greenhouse effect”

Although talking about the ‘greenhouse’ effect is quite a nice way of describing the scientific concept, surveys have shown that it isn’t always effective because it doesn’t describe the urgency of the situation, and also because a greenhouse isn’t something we all immediately can relate to.

“stopping climate change”

‘Stopping’ something isn’t necessarily the most positive way to present what we’re doing. Instinctively, people like to create new things, and don’t like being told to ‘stop’. By talking in these terms, we present ourselves as a responsive, rather than proactive movement of people.

“climate change skeptics”

By calling people who oppose action on climate change ‘skeptics’, we give them too much credit and make them sound reliable, because it implies that they’ve reached their opinion based on sound arguments and evidence. The fact is, they’re on the wrong side of science.

“a world with no oil”

There’s a limited supply of oil, and even without climate change, sooner or later it’s going to run out. Huge supplies of cheap oil to fuel our cars, grow our crops and heat our homes have made the modern world possible. Talking about a ‘world without oil’, may seem you’re advocating a return to the past.

“public transport”

Fairly or not, many people associate public transport with dirty trains, overpriced tickets, cancelled services and having a generally rubbish time. By asking them to use public transport more, it sounds like you’re asking them to do a chore.

“protecting our homes, families and future”

By talking about protecting our homes and families, you quite literally bring it closer to home. Defending ourselves against climate change isn’t just about doing something nice or good, its about protecting the things which are closest and most important to us from coming to harm.

“the heat trap”

Using a phrase like ‘the heat trap’ might be better because because the word ‘heat’ is much more closely associated with danger and urgency. People value highly their sense of freedom, and are much more likely to take action if they view climate change as something that traps and restricts them.

“building a clean and safe future”

‘Building a clean and safe future’ is a far more exciting and rewarding thing to do, and far more attractive for people to be involved with. To be effective, we need to persuade people to buy into a vision of a cleaner and safer world, which they can help us to create.

“vested interests”

For every individual with honest concerns about climate change science, there are dozens of self-appointed ‘experts’ who are being paid by oil, car and coal companies to spread untruths and create confusion. Say it like it is.

“energy freedom”

In fact, in a world powered by unlimited supplies of free wind, sun and waves, we’d all be better off. We’d no longer rely on unstable countries for our energy, the price of filling up cars wouldn’t go up and down like a yo-yo, and we wouldn’t have to worry about CO₂ emissions or the oil running out either.

“21st century mass transit”

By talking about a 21st century mass transit system with high speed rail, reliable buses and affordable trams, you distinguish between our existing (rubbish) public transport system, and the modern one which we need to build in the coming years. Public transport in itself isn’t a bad thing, it’s just our existing system is old, creaky and underfunded.