

Climate Communications Playbook:

Behavioural strategies for community action

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We respectfully acknowledge that ICLEI Canada’s work happens across Turtle Island and ORCCA’s work takes place on the traditional and treaty territories of many Indigenous Nations and communities across the province we call Ontario. This land has traditionally been—and continues to be—home to Indigenous peoples since time immemorial. We recognize that reconciliation is a fundamental component to building climate resilient communities and we endeavour to listen to and learn from Indigenous Peoples on an ongoing basis in the process of our work.

We would also like to thank individuals who contributed to this resource and toolkit by sharing insights and lessons learned through their work. In particular, we would like to thank those who provided feedback on the case stories included in the toolkit.

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Foreward



Megan Meaney

*Executive Director,
ICLEI Canada*

“Since we published *Having the Climate Conversation: Strategies for local governments* in 2012, the landscape of climate communications has changed a lot. Effective communications grounded in science and lived experience is needed more than ever to broaden the climate conversation and reach a wider audience across all sectors. But more importantly, climate communications must be more than having conversations. Local leaders and municipal practitioners must strategically incorporate communications in the implementation of local climate priorities in order to build net-zero, climate-resilient communities. We hope this resource will be a valuable tool in achieving this.”



Ewa Jackson

*Managing Director,
ICLEI Canada
Director, ORCCA*

“For people to know about climate change isn’t enough. They need to care, be motivated, and take action whether this is at the household, neighbourhood, or municipal scale. To achieve this level of engagement, the way we talk about climate action needs to resonate on an emotional level. We don’t necessarily need more information—we need to use plain language, storytelling, and engage trusted messengers. We need to make sure people from all walks of life understand how climate change impacts their life, their values, and identities. And we need to present solutions in an accessible, attractive, and actionable way. This primer is designed to help local practitioners do this by approaching climate communications from a behavioural perspective to support the implementation of local climate actions that will ultimately help build better, more resilient communities.”

Introduction

About this resource

Building climate resilience requires ongoing climate conversations. Whether raising awareness about impacts, assessing risks and vulnerabilities, or planning and implementing actions, everyone involved is continuously engaged in discussions. The way we talk about climate change every step of the way is essential for local governments and community organizations to raise awareness, engage stakeholders, and motivate action.

ICLEI Canada has been working with local governments on climate change since 1990 and facilitating climate conversations since 2012. We released *Having the Climate Conversation: Strategies for local governments* to help local governments with the various aspects of communicating climate change with a focus on informing and educating stakeholders. Since then, the way we support local climate communications has evolved—from delivering workshops and presentations to integrating climate communications into projects and developing capacity-building resources including *Talking It Through: A discussion guide for local government staff*

and the *Climate Adaptation and Climate Communications Workshop in a Box*.

Designing products and trainings to inspire action and change at a local scale has led us to behavioural science and the development of a [Climate Communications Toolkit](#).

***Climate Communications Playbook: Behavioural strategies for community action* builds on our ongoing climate communication work with communities across Canada. More specifically, it reflects the reality that it is not enough for people to know about climate change—they also need to care about it, be motivated, and inspired to take action.**

This playbook was developed to help local practitioners and community leaders develop communication campaigns and messaging that support the implementation of local climate actions. It offers strategic ways to approach action-oriented climate communications and integrate behavioural science strategies in the process, in order to bridge the gap from conversation to action.

Part One provides an overview of certain aspects of traditional climate communications as well as ways in which climate communications have evolved in recent years. **Part Two** will expand on climate communications trends and outline how to get started with action-oriented climate communications. Finally, **Part Three** will describe how to apply behavioural science strategies in climate communications to inspire action and drive change.

The content of this resource was informed by a combination of desktop research, interviews, and the lessons we are constantly learning through our ongoing work with local practitioners, elected officials, policy makers, researchers, and thought leaders. A **glossary** is included as part of this resource to define communication terms that may be unknown, or terms that may have more than one meaning. These terms are bolded and linked to the glossary the first time they are used in each section.

Titles that refer to specific sections within this document are also bolded and linked to allow you to easily jump between sections in order to find the information you are looking for. All endnotes can be found in the **reference** section while supporting resources that dive deeper into the elements touched upon in this resource are included on the **[Climate Communications Toolkit web page](#)**.

Goal of this resource

The Climate Communications Playbook: Behavioural strategies for community action is part of ICLEI Canada's Climate Communications Toolkit. It is a practical primer for municipal practitioners, elected officials, and community leaders looking to use communications to support the implementation of local climate action. The playbook introduces actionable approaches and strategies for creating action-oriented communication campaigns that incorporate behavioural science insights.

Communications can be a powerful tool to support local climate action. By practicing the approaches and strategies outlined in this playbook, you can develop the skills needed to develop effective messaging no matter who you are talking to. Whether you are developing public-facing communications or talking about climate change in your day-to-day work, you will be equipped to inspire people to take action.

While this playbook and the other resources included in the Climate Communications Toolkit were developed to support climate resilience efforts, the insights provided can be adapted to other areas such as climate mitigation, biodiversity conservation, and broader sustainability initiatives. The aim is to help you become so skilled in action-oriented communications that you can seamlessly integrate these approaches and strategies into any climate conversation or campaign, regardless of the scale or audience.

What this resource is:

- A summary of practical ways to approach action-oriented communications and integrate behavioural science strategies into climate communications;
- A resource for local practitioners and community leaders involved in climate communications whether they are communication professionals or not; and,
- A starting point for inspiration and strategies to help you develop and deliver effective climate communications.

What this resource is not:

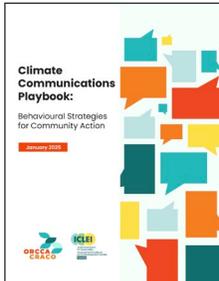
- A business case for integrating behavioural strategies into climate communications;
- A summary of audience segments relevant to climate communications;
- A guide for developing complex communication campaigns; or,
- A comprehensive overview of behavioural science as it relates to climate communications.

Who this resource is designed for:

- Municipal staff and elected officials;
- Conservation Authority staff;
- Public Health teams;
- Community-based organizations and NGOs;
- Educators; and,
- Any community leader.

Climate Communications Toolkit overview

1



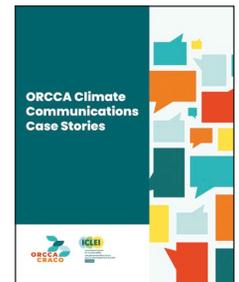
Read the playbook to learn how to drive local action through climate communications.

You are here! Start by reading the [playbook](#), *Climate Communications Playbook: Behavioural strategies for community action*, to learn how communications can drive local climate action. You will review how local governments have changed their approach to climate communications in recent years, how to get started with action-oriented communications, and how to apply behavioural science strategies in climate communications to inspire action and drive change.

2

Read complementary case stories to discover real-world examples of communications strategies that include behavioural insights.

A series of [case stories](#) have been compiled to complement this playbook. Each case story exemplifies how one or more of the behavioural communications strategies presented in [Part Three](#) of the playbook can be applied in the real world.



3

Put insight into action.

The strategies shared in this playbook are meant to be applied to climate communications in order to support the implementation of local climate actions, but this can be easier said than done. Visit the [Climate Communications Toolkit web page](#) to access opportunities and resources to help you put insight into action.

4

Explore additional resources.

It is important to keep in mind that this playbook provides a summary of behavioural science strategies that can be incorporated into climate communications. It is meant to serve as a practical starting point, not a comprehensive guide. For those looking for more detail, we have compiled a list of additional resources which is included on the [Climate Communications Toolkit web page](#).



Climate Communications Toolkit

Visit the online Climate Communications Toolkit web page to find case stories, learn about trainings, and explore additional climate communications resources. icleicanada.org/project/climate-communications-toolkit/.

PART ONE

Climate communications then and now

Climate communications has traditionally been approached as a way to convey information. As a result, climate communications has typically centred around outreach and awareness activities characterized by one-way communication.¹ When specific **calls-to-action** are included in such a traditional approach to climate communications, they often rely on people's self motivation and ability to engage by attending public meetings, responding to surveys, or participating in programs. **Messaging** has also traditionally been developed to reach a wide audience (or what is referred to as the "general public").

There is nothing wrong with traditional climate communications. In fact, this approach to climate communications works very well if the **audience** is already concerned about climate change and motivated to take action. The problem is that type of audience only represents about 15% of the Canadian population.² Of the other 85% of Canadians, roughly 71% are open to taking action and 14% might be described as fossil fuel conservatives or climate change deniers.³ While traditional climate communications effectively mobilizes up to 15% of the population, it fails to engage 71% of people that make up the **movable middle**.

This means that local governments and organizations have to rethink their approach to climate communications if they want to mobilize more people in taking climate action. Planning broad outreach and awareness campaigns with the expectation that sharing information will lead to the kind of change needed in communities is simply not realistic. Instead, an increasing number of local governments and organizations have begun to recognize the need to approach climate communications as conversations with individuals whose feelings, preferences, reservations, beliefs, and values will ultimately dictate how information is received and acted upon.



Traditional climate communications

Targets the “general public” (including climate change deniers)

Traditionally, climate communications has addressed (or targeted) a ‘general public’. This involves developing generic messaging and sharing this through broad **channels** (e.g., municipal social media pages, local media outlets, mailing inserts) hoping that it reaches and resonates with as much of the “general public” as possible. While this generalized approach may engage people who are already motivated to take action, it isn’t very effective with those in the movable middle. Moreover, communicating to the “general public” can unintentionally draw attention from climate deniers, prompting them to respond by spreading **misinformation**. This can create additional challenges, as it requires time and resources to counter false claims, keep the focus on factual information, and continue to advance local action. Instead of trying to reach everyone, climate communications efforts are most effective when they are developed for specific audiences (i.e., subsets of the “general public”) that are already motivated or could be inspired to take action.

Focuses on information and facts

Climate change is now widely recognized as one of the most important environmental issues of our time, but this hasn’t always been the case. Many governments and organizations started to engage in climate communications at a time when there was a need to build general awareness of climate change, its impacts, associated risks and consequences, and the need for mitigation and adaptation.

Information, facts, figures, and graphs were effectively used as part of important education and awareness campaigns that aimed to convince people of the need to take action. Now that the majority of Canadians perceive climate change as an important issue,⁴ we need to shift away from conveying complex information and facts to communicating the path forward, highlighting the benefits (and co-benefits) of climate action, and including clear calls-to-action that go beyond “learn more”. It is important to note that information and facts can and should still be part of climate communications, but these will most effectively encourage climate action when they are used to support **communication journeys** and action-oriented **narratives**.

Asks a lot of the audience

Typical engagement activities associated with climate communications have traditionally relied on people's motivation, ability to educate themselves, and get involved. This might require reading complex scientific reports and lengthy strategic plans, attending public meetings, filling out surveys, joining working groups, or signing up to participate in programs—activities that ask a lot of the audience and are not usually accessible or feasible to a large percentage of the population. In addition, the way this type of engagement is typically framed does not clearly define how getting involved benefits individuals. Instead of asking people to “come to us” and make personal sacrifices to “help us”, climate communications efforts are more effective when they are designed to meet people where they are and showcase “what’s in it for them”.



Climate communications now

Developed for specific audiences

Action-oriented climate communications are developed for specific audiences. This allows for messaging to be targeted based on the audience's level of climate concern and motivation, worldviews, values, identities, and priorities. Once a specific audience is defined, this approach also makes it much easier to choose the best **mediums** and **channels** to get messages to that audience.

Approaches climate communications as a feeling

Feelings and emotions play a central role in how people respond to climate messaging and whether they will take action or not.⁵ Approaching climate communications as a way to generate feelings and emotions (both negative and positive as shown in Figure 1) rather than simply as scientific information can be a powerful way to inspire action. It is important to keep in mind that, while negative emotions linked to the climate crisis can encourage concerned and motivated people to take action, their effectiveness depends on how these types of messages are framed and delivered.

Figure 1: The Climate Emotions Wheel from Climate Mental Health Network is based on Panu Pihkala's 2022 paper, *Toward a Taxonomy of Climate Emotions*. Anya Kamenetz led a Climate Mental Health Network team in collaboration with Pihkala to develop the wheel in 2023.⁶



Climate Emotions Wheel



Climate Emotions Wheel © 2024



ClimateMentalHealth.Net

Doom-and-gloom messaging can amplify awareness and drive information sharing, particularly on social media, but it risks generating feelings of helplessness and anxiety, leaving people feeling powerless to take action. As we discuss in [Part Three](#), framing climate messaging to elicit positive emotions (e.g., focusing on opportunities, benefits, and achievable actions) can be an effective way to inspire concerned but disengaged audiences to take action.

Meets people where they are

Relying on people's motivation to take climate action only engages a small fraction of Canadians. As we previously mentioned, about 15% of the Canadian population are highly concerned about climate change and motivated to take action while the 71% that make up the movable middle are open to taking action but not necessarily motivated.⁷ Even within the 15% of Canadians ready to be mobilized,⁸ only 21% say they would definitely join a campaign.⁹

If we want to mobilize more people to take climate action, we have to meet different audiences where they are, especially those who fall in the movable middle. This means developing targeted messaging that resonates with specific **audience segments**. It also means choosing the right mediums and channels to make sure messages get to the intended audience. Whether this is done through unconventional mediums or by partnering with organizations and trusted messengers, local practitioners have to increasingly think beyond open houses.

Equity considerations

Climate action needs to involve equity-deserving groups and communities from start to finish (“nothing without us”), and communications play an important role in this process. While there is a lot to consider for communications to support more equitable climate outcomes, start by tailoring communications to your audience, removing barriers to engagement, and maintaining open communication pathways that support dialogue. As you work through the approaches and strategies presented in this playbook, consider other steps you can take to create a more inclusive and supportive communication journey.



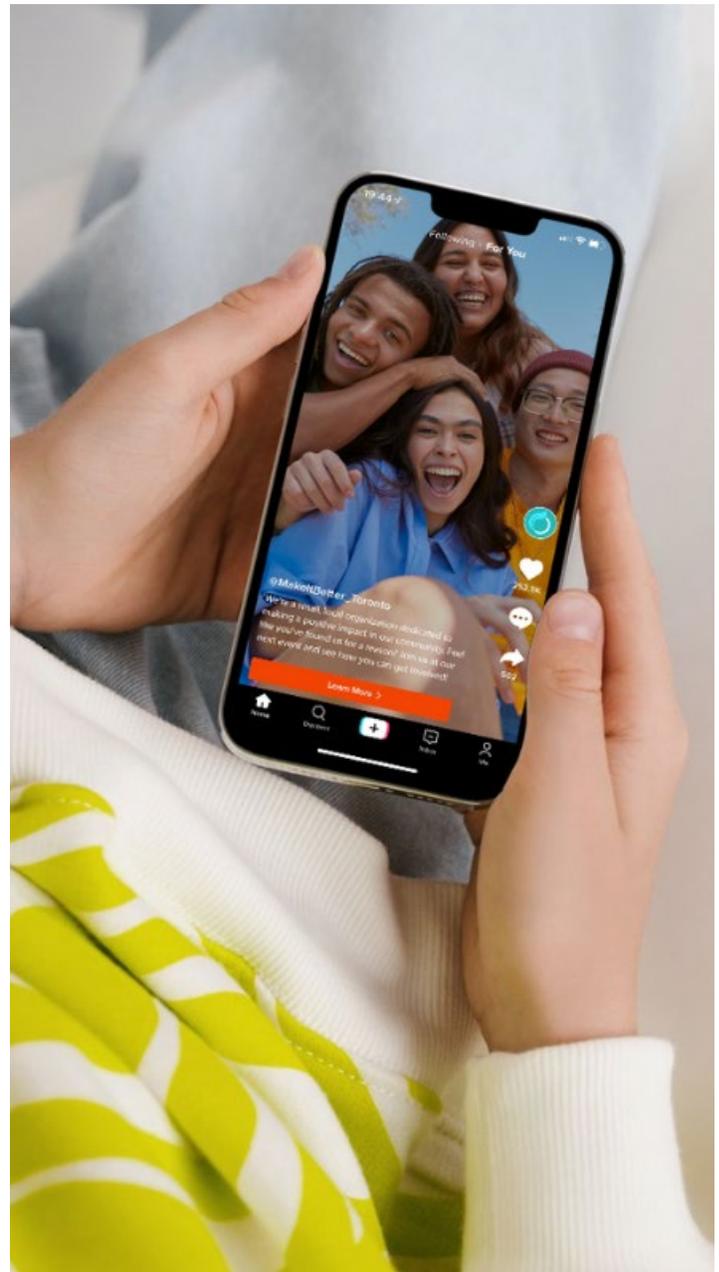
PART TWO

Getting started with action- oriented climate communications

Climate communications is recognized as an important element needed to mobilize wide-scale climate action. But action-oriented communications is quite different from the type of outreach and awareness campaigns that have traditionally been used to communicate about climate change. In this section, we explain how to develop simple yet effective **communication campaigns** to support local climate action.

The approach presented is designed to help you:

- Get clear what you are trying to achieve;
- Define your **audience**;
- Map out your **communication journey**;
- Define your desired outcome;
- Develop **messaging**;
- Get your messages to your audience; and,
- Track results.



Is this for you?

This section is designed to help you develop simple, action-oriented climate campaigns regardless of your capacity or communications experience by outlining a practical approach. This is particularly important for those who may not have access to a dedicated communications team to support the implementation of climate action. Whether you are working for a municipality, an organization, or are a leader within your community, if you are trying to convey climate information for community action, use the following to craft and share clear messages that will inspire your audience to take action.

Get clear on what you are trying to achieve

What climate action will your communication campaign support?

The first step in crafting an effective climate communication campaign is defining what you want to achieve, or your goal. One way to do this is to ask yourself: What climate action will this communication campaign support? Identifying which climate action your campaign aligns with will help you develop a campaign that supports broader strategic goals, fosters long-term change, and contributes to meaningful climate outcomes.

Making a clear link to an existing climate action also ensures that you will be supporting an action that was strategically identified with input from various perspectives and would have taken equity, diversity, and inclusion into account. If you are just starting on the journey of identifying climate actions, your communication campaign could be used to engage people in the process of understanding local impacts and assessing risks—especially those who are most negatively impacted by climate change.

Once you have gotten clear on what you are trying to achieve, keep this goal front and centre as you develop the rest of your campaign. While your goal might evolve as your campaign develops, it is essential to start with a clear sense of direction.

Examples of climate actions

- Increase the number of property managers or landlords involved in neighbourhood heat wave response programs.
- Increase the number of people accessing rebates provided through downspout disconnection programs.
- Recruit volunteers for tree planting programs.
- Increase support for residence relocation programs.
- Engage local businesses in the creation of neighbourhood resilience hubs.
- Promote emergency preparedness week.
- Engage equity-deserving groups in the development of a climate plan.
- Educate neighbourhood residents about the benefits of a climate-resilient park design to build support for new resilient infrastructure projects.

Define your audience

Who is your audience for this communication campaign?

Once you know what you want to achieve, it is time to identify your **audience segment(s)**. It is essential to define who you are communicating with before you start developing messaging so that your messages can be tailored to your specific audience in a way that speaks directly to them and motivates them to act. To do this, you must understand your audience's priorities, concerns, and motivations. Defining your target audience will also inform your communication journey as well as the **mediums** and **channels** you choose to communicate through. To define your audience, consider their:

- Characteristics including geographic location;
- Worldviews and values;
- Level of climate concern and motivation to take action; and,
- Other concerns and priorities including social issues linked to climate change such as housing security, energy security, food security, green spaces, health, local economy, costs of living, etc.

While defining your audience, it is also important to consider who is not part of your campaign's focus. Some groups may never be part of your audience, while others might simply not be part of the audience for a particular campaign. This does not mean

they cannot be engaged in the future—rather, they could be the audience of a different campaign.

Once you have defined your audience, keep in mind no audience is static nor can they fully be defined by the terms presented here. The ways we describe characteristics, worldviews, values, identities, and priorities are constantly changing, especially as we seek to approach climate action to advance truth, reconciliation, and equity.

Questions to define your audience

- What are their demographics?
- Where are they physically located?
- What physical places do they usually frequent?
- What virtual locations do they often visit?
- What worldviews do they hold?
- What are their strongest values?
- What are their priorities?
- What are their concerns?
- How concerned are they about climate change?
- How motivated are they to take climate action?
- What might be stopping them from taking climate action?
- What might motivate them to take climate action?

Get to know your audience

If you already know your audience quite well, chances are that you can define them enough to get started with your communication campaign. However, this isn't always the case, and you should be wary of your own biases or assumptions. If you are working with a new or unfamiliar audience, consult available public opinion survey results (several are listed in the [on the toolkit website](#)), consider conducting your own surveys, and look for ways to start a conversation with your audience to learn directly from them. You can also reach out to an organization or individual who already knows your audience well. For example, if your audience includes new Canadians, you could connect with newcomer or immigrant-serving community organizations and groups.

Start a conversation with your audience

Getting to know your audience through conversations is especially important when your audience has a lot to teach you and/or has historically been underrepresented, misrepresented, or left out of decision making. If this is the case, it is crucial to acknowledge past exclusions, be transparent in your communications, and be open to changing your approach.

Starting a conversation with your audience should be approached with care and respect. This is not only a chance to deepen your understanding of their concerns

through active listening, but also an opportunity to build trust and relationships. These conversations should never be approached as a way to extract information or convince anyone, but as a way to establish a mutual understanding. Approaching such conversations with genuine curiosity and openness is vital to set the stage for longer term trust and openness. As you get to know your audience, you can refine your messaging, develop new strategies, and tailor your approach as needed based on what you learn.

Working with more than one audience

While traditional climate communications often involve working with broad audiences or several audiences at a time, keep in mind that if you try to talk to everybody, you end up talking to nobody in particular. Instead, as you define your audience, do your best to get as specific as possible. But identifying a specific audience doesn't mean you cannot have more than one audience—in fact, you might have several or have one audience that includes several sub-groups. If this is the case, develop an **audience profile** for each audience segment.

It is also important to keep in mind that your audience may shift depending on your results or as your communication campaign progresses. For example, you might start by communicating to people living in a specific neighbourhood and move onto a different neighbourhood—or second audience. You might also start by communicating with an audience that includes homeowners and



decide to further define your audience to only include retired homeowners who garden.

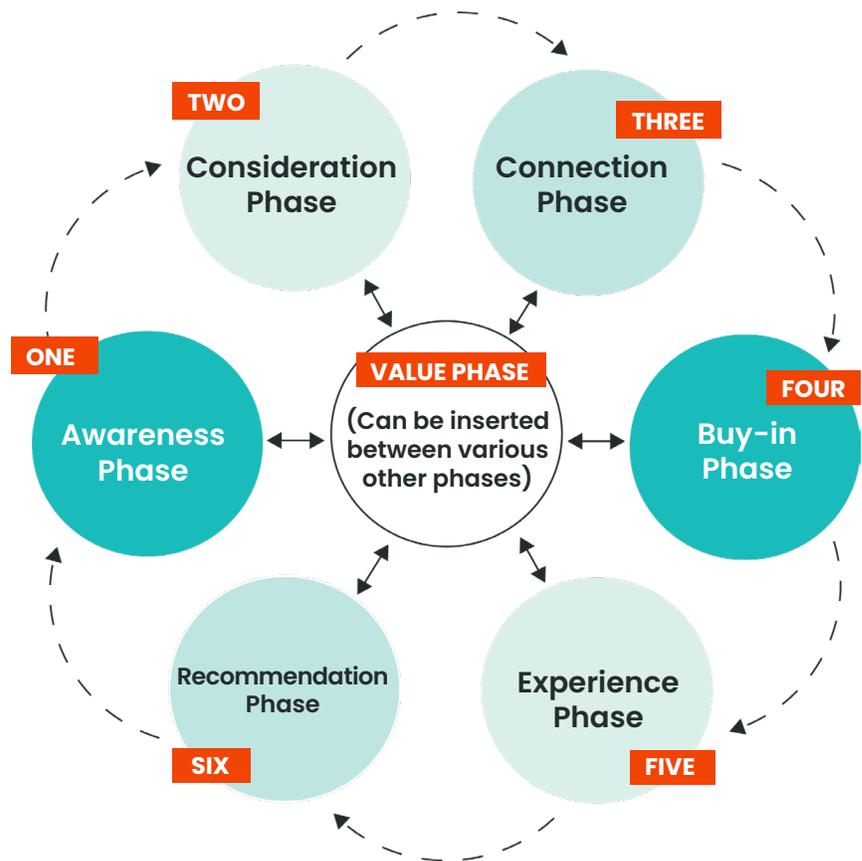
Remember that a single, well-targeted campaign is far more effective than trying to reach multiple, diverse audiences with a one-size-fits-all approach. By narrowing your focus, you increase the chances of motivating meaningful action within a segment of your audience. If you want to engage more than one audience with your campaign, simply repeat the process of developing and delivering targeted messaging for each audience.

Map out your communication journey

How will your audience go from awareness to taking meaningful climate action?

It is now time to break down the steps needed to get your audience to take meaningful climate action. To do this, think of your communications in the context of a communication journey as shown in Figure 2 and described on the next page. A communication journey provides a way to think of communications in terms of the path(s) that someone in your audience might follow as they interact with you and your messaging through communication phases.

Figure 2: Typical phases involved in a communication journey. The arrows represent the many ways to move through a communication journey. Mapping your campaign's communication journey provides a way to identify various touchpoints and develop tailored, action-oriented messaging every step of the way.



Typical phases of a communication journey

Awareness Phase: Your audience first learns about what you are trying to achieve.

Consideration Phase: They assess whether they will take action based on their values, interests, or needs. In this phase, you should aim to proactively address any barriers that might prevent your audience from taking action.

Connection Phase: Initial engagement happens here (e.g., signing up, registering, making contact, etc.) at which point you can start building a relationship with people within your audience.

Value Phase: Your audience receives value (e.g., resource, access to expertise, rebates, etc.), reinforcing their decision to take action.

Buy-In Phase: You start a working relationship with someone from your audience if/when applicable (e.g., in the case of participating in incentive programs, signing up to volunteer, making a donation, etc.).

Experience Phase: Active engagement deepens your relationship with your audience, offering an opportunity to build trust.

Recommendation Phase: People in your audience reflect on their experiences, share feedback, and/or encourage others to get involved.

There are many ways to move through a communication journey. Depending on what you are trying to achieve through your climate communications and who your audience is, not all phases may be applicable. For example, if you want to educate neighbourhood residents about the benefits of a climate-resilient park design in order to build support for a new resilient infrastructure project, your communication journey may only include the awareness, consideration, value, and recommendations phases. In this example, someone might first learn about a local climate-resilient park design project in the awareness phase, learn more about what this entails in the consideration phase, come to understand the value this type of park design would have in relation to their property and/or neighbourhood, and speak positively about the project to neighbours in the recommendation phase.

Another example could be to increase the number of people accessing rebates provided to homeowners through downspout disconnection programs in a flood-prone neighbourhood. For this climate action, the communication journey would involve all phases. A homeowner might learn about the rebate project in the awareness phase, consider signing up in the consideration phase, submit an application in the connection phase, join the project in the buy-in phase, have a positive

experience disconnecting their downspouts the experience phase, receive a rebate and contribute to neighbourhood flood-resilience in the value phase, and speak highly about the program in the recommendation phase.

The purpose of mapping out a communication journey your climate action you have identified is to become aware of the many different communication **touchpoints** you might have with a specific audience. Each touchpoint represents an opportunity to develop unique, targeted messaging to encourage the audience to take a particular action leading to that next step in the communication journey. Examples of the type of action that might be associated with different phases of the communication journey are listed in Table 1.

Mapping the communication journey for your audience will help you identify the various incremental steps involved in taking climate action. By doing so, you can develop a cohesive action-oriented communication campaign that fosters engagement and builds momentum towards meaningful climate action.



photo: Laura Harvey

Table 1: Examples of actions that align with different phases of the communication journey. Many actions can apply to multiple phases, depending on the goals of your communication campaign.

Phase of the communication journey	Examples of related actions
Awareness	Learn more Visit our website Watch now
Consideration	See our work Read our FAQs Meet our partners Read reviews
Connection phase	Contact us Follow us Join our email list Stay informed
Value phase	Download Learn how
Buy-in phase	Apply Register Volunteer Donate Try it now
Experience phase	Get started Contact Us
Recommendation	Share your feedback Share your story Leave a review Help us spread the word

Define your campaign's outcome

What specific action do you want your audience to take?

Once you have mapped your communication journey, it is time to choose the focus of your campaign and define a specific outcome.

While it may be tempting to do so, trying to tackle multiple phases or steps of your communication journey at once is ineffective.

For example, the kind of messaging you develop to build awareness will be much different than the messaging you might use to encourage advocacy. Instead, choose one phase of your communication journey to focus on. For example:

- Raising awareness;
- Answering questions and building trust;
- Inviting your audience to connect with you;
- Demonstrating value;
- Encouraging meaningful action;
- Nurturing a positive relationship; and,
- Seeking feedback.

Once you have decided which part of the journey to focus on, define your campaign's intended outcome, or objective. The outcome you choose should focus on the immediate behaviour or action you would like your audience to take—whether this is signing up for a program, attending an event, or making a specific change in behaviour. Your desired outcome should be specific, measurable, time-bound, and achievable. By identifying a specific outcome, you set the stage for crafting targeted, actionable messaging.

If you want your campaign to focus on more than one part of your communication journey, you can repeat the process of defining outcomes for more than one part of the journey and go on to develop and deliver targeted messaging for each outcome.

Examples of outcomes

- 10 residents in the Waterfront neighbourhood applied to receive rebates through the downspout disconnection program within the next year.
- 20 high school students have signed-up to volunteer for next summer's tree planting program.
- 100% of households in the Creekview neighbourhood have received information about the residence relocation program this year.
- 10 local businesses have signed-up to participate in the creation of neighbourhood resilience hubs by the end of the year.
- 100 new Canadian residents have participated in at least one emergency preparedness week activity by the end of the year.
- Representatives from five community organizations working with equity-deserving groups have joined the community climate plan's advisory group this year.

Part of the big picture

When defining your campaign's outcome, specificity is key. However, it is equally important to maintain a clear connection to the bigger picture and the strategic climate action your communication campaign will support. In addition, think about the co-benefits your outcome might generate. For example, a campaign designed to promote tree planting could also foster stronger community connections, enhance local biodiversity, or improve mental health by increasing green spaces. Recognizing co-benefits provides an opportunity to identify potential collaboration areas and also offers different ways to frame your climate messaging.

Remember that achieving meaningful climate action requires a series of coordinated efforts over time. Each campaign you design will contribute a crucial piece of a large puzzle. By keeping both the immediate outcomes and long-term climate and community benefits in mind, you can ensure that your communication campaign inspires the type of incremental action that will eventually lead to meaningful change. As the African proverb goes, little by little, a little becomes a lot.

Develop your messaging

How will you communicate with your audience in a way that resonates with them?

When it comes to messaging, the aim is to develop messages that will resonate with your audience while motivating them to take action on the journey to your desired outcome. So far, we have encouraged you to narrow your focus by defining a clear audience, choosing a phase of your communication journey to focus on, and defining a desired outcome. However, when it comes to messaging, it is best practice to draft several messages that all encourage your audience to take a specific action, but in slightly different ways. For example, you could experiment with wording, frames, stories, and calls-to-action in your campaign's messaging.

To do this, write as many creative message variations as possible. Challenge yourself to draft 20 messages as a start. Once you have several message options, put yourself in the shoes of your audience and choose one to three messages to use in your campaign. You may also want to choose which messages to use through focus groups, surveys, or direct input from your audience or people who know your audience well.

An added benefit to writing many messages is that you can always swap them out. If you notice that a one of the messages you chose to use in your campaign is not generating the kinds of results you were hoping for, go back to your list and choose a different message. It is important to pay attention to the way your audience responds to different messages and be responsive. Don't be afraid to experiment and adapt your messaging based on your audience's response.

Pay attention to the way your audience speaks

Listening to how your audience talks about climate change, their concerns, and their hopes can help you to identify the common ground on which to base your messaging. Paying attention to the words, tone, and expressions your audience uses can also help you write messages that will resonate with them. For example, you might notice that your target audience doesn't talk about "climate change" but does often talk about "increasing flooding" which should be reflected in your messaging.

Frame your messages based on your audience

Framing your messages is a critical part of your communication campaign, especially since you may only have limited opportunities to communicate your message. Frame messages based on your understanding of your audience's preferences, reservations, beliefs, and values so that these resonate with them. For example:

- Elected officials may respond to messages that focus on the financial and legal implications of climate action;
- Municipal staff from the engineering department may need to understand how climate actions fit within their existing responsibilities for asset management; and,
- Community residents in a specific neighbourhood may connect more with messages that emphasize impacts—such as public health, property damage, or costs—on them or people they know.

To frame your messages, do your best to develop messaging from the perspective of your audience. Communicate how taking a specific action will help them solve a problem, fulfil a need, or provide them with something valuable. Better yet, apply the behavioural insights described in [Part Three](#) when framing messages.

Use storytelling

Storytelling is a universal way for humans to share knowledge, communicate values, and describe experiences. For example, traditional Indigenous Knowledge has been passed over generations through word of mouth.¹⁰ When used in the context of climate communications, storytelling serves as a powerful tool to inspire action by transforming abstract concepts and data into relatable, emotional narratives. Rather than overwhelming people with facts and figures, stories tap into shared values and identities, motivating individuals and whole communities to take action.

Storytelling serves as a foundation for many behavioural science strategies including those described in [Part Three](#). While storytelling is a behavioural strategy in of itself, it can and should be used to complement and strengthen other behavioural strategies such as social influence, framing, and personalization. For example, sharing a story about a community that worked together to protect a neighbourhood from forest fires can humanize the issue and motivate action.

Stories featuring trusted messengers—such as experts, community leaders, local celebrities, or staff from respected community organizations—can also make climate action feel more compelling and actionable. In the case of the forest fire story mentioned above, the story can inspire even more action when told by a fire chief. This is because stories told by trusted and respected figures leverage social

influence, social norms, and social prompts that encourage others to take action.

Finally, when framed positively, stories can help make climate issues feel solvable while shifting the narrative from fear to empowerment. By focusing on solutions and the actions people can take, stories highlight the potential for positive change, motivating people to act in their communities, and fostering a sense of collective purpose.

When using storytelling in your climate communications, ensure it is honest, authentic, and ethical. The stories we choose to tell represent an opportunity to repair relationships, increase understanding, and teach one another about the possibility for change.^{11,12} They can also give voice to communities that have historically been underrepresented in climate conversations. Regardless of how you approach stories, make sure they are grounded in truth and that they are shared respectfully and ethically.

Examples of stories to use in climate communications

- Before-and-after stories
- Cultural stories
- Data-driven stories
- Future vision stories
- Legacy narratives
- Local success stories
- Personal stories
- Visual stories



photo: Ramón Vasconcelos

Indigenous Knowledge and storytelling

Indigenous stories in particular can help shift the way we view climate change issues and solutions to a more holistic worldview that recognizes the interconnectedness of the natural world.¹³ To truly appreciate and weave Indigenous perspectives into communications, it is essential to listen, learn, and engage with Indigenous knowledge keepers. As we continue to strive to be more inclusive in our climate communications, it is crucial to provide opportunities for people from First Nation, Inuit, and Métis communities to share stories, and to do so on their own terms.

Organizations like [Indigenous Climate Action](#), the [Indigenous Climate Hub](#), and the [Yellowhead Institute](#) all provide valuable resources and platforms for learning about traditional ecological knowledge and its role in climate resilience. Additionally, resources from the [Centre for Indigenous Environmental Resources](#), the [Climate Atlas of Canada](#), and the *For Our Future: Indigenous resilience report* offer insights into Indigenous-led climate solutions. The [Assembly of First Nations](#), [Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami](#), and [Métis Nation](#) also offer important perspectives through their work on environmental protection, climate action, and climate adaptation strategies that are grounded in Indigenous worldviews.

Include clear calls-to-action

Once you have developed strong messaging, take a moment to make sure your messages include clear calls-to-action. Calls-to-action should nudge your audience to take action towards your desired outcome. All too often, climate messaging shares information and even compelling stories without letting people know what action to take next. To avoid doing this, ask yourself: What next? Once you have communicated your message, what should someone in your audience do next? Refer back to your communication journey and your desired outcome to identify that actionable next step.

Make the most of opportunities

Climate change is deeply intertwined with many aspects of our daily lives, from economic concerns to public health and environmental protection. By framing your messages within the context of current events, local issues, and community priorities, you can make climate messaging more relevant and accessible to your audience, including those who may not typically engage with climate action.

For example, in communities where heavy rainfall and flooding have become more frequent, emphasizing the need for flood-resilient infrastructure, such as natural stormwater management systems or

upgraded drainage systems, can highlight the direct benefits of climate action. Similarly, in cities where urban heat islands are intensifying, you can promote green spaces and tree planting as initiatives that can provide much-needed shade, lower temperatures, and improve air quality—leading to direct health benefits like reducing heat-related illnesses and improving mental well-being.

Linking your messaging to social, political, economical, and environmental co-benefits is a powerful way to make climate action feel more immediate and relevant. By framing your communication around these issues, you can align your messaging with concerns and priorities that matter most to your audience.

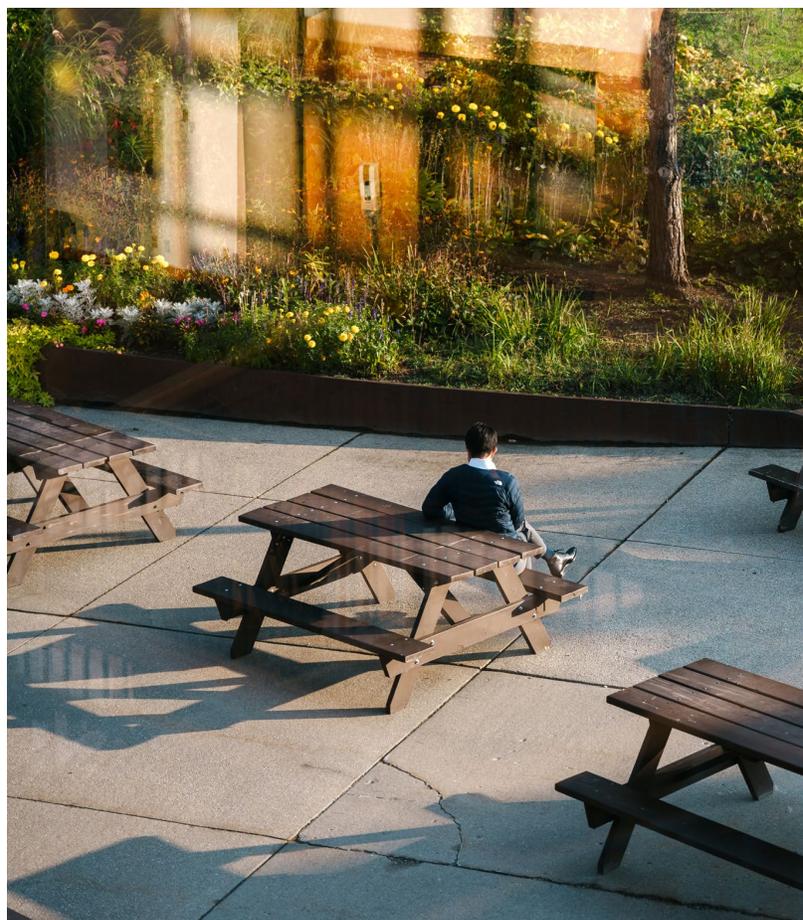


photo: Ramón Vasconcelos



Examples of action-oriented campaign messages

Climate action: Increase the number of people accessing rebates provided through downspout disconnection programs.

Audience segment: Homeowners in the Waterfront neighbourhood.

Communication journey focus: Encourage meaningful action (buy-in phase)

Desired outcome: 10 residents in the Waterfront neighbourhood have applied to receive rebates through the downspout disconnection program within the next year.

Messages:

- Flooding season is coming. Don't wait to protect your home. Apply for a rebate to disconnect your downspouts today!
- Take the first step toward protecting your home from flooding. Apply for a rebate to disconnect your downspouts today!
- Cassey's basement stayed dry this spring thanks to disconnecting their downspouts. They also saved money with our rebate program. You can too—apply today!

Get your messages to your audience

How will you get your messages to your audience?

The final step of your communication campaign involves getting your messaging out to your audience and tracking the results. This involves planning what mediums and channels you will use and identifying corresponding key performance indicators (KPIs) to track your progress and impact.

Choose your channels and mediums

To effectively reach your audience, it is important to select the right channels. Start by considering your audience's preferences and accessibility needs. Different groups respond best to different approaches. For example, municipal staff might prefer direct email or internal newsletters, while community residents may engage more with social media posts, interactive workshops, or local events. Once you know which platforms and delivery methods you will use, choose communication mediums that are both suited to the channel and your audience.

Challenge yourself to go beyond traditional approaches (i.e., think beyond brochures and handouts). A good way to do this is by looking to see what mediums and channels brands and companies that are popular with your audience are using for their marketing. If resources are limited, focus your efforts on delivery methods and content that will have the most impact. Concentrating on a single medium and a well-chosen channel can often be more effective than spreading efforts too thin.

If using multiple platforms, ensure they complement each other and align with the steps you mapped out in your communication journey. For instance, a digital ad could direct people to a website where they can sign up for a local event. Table 2 lists a few examples of communication channels and mediums that generally work well for the phases of a typical communication journey to help you get started.

Table 2: Examples of communication channels and mediums that can be used for the different phases of a typical communication journey. Note that several channels and mediums can be used for multiple different phases.

Communication journey phase	Examples of climate communication channels	Examples of related climate communication mediums
Awareness phase	Social media Traditional media Podcasts Influencers, partners, and/or other trusted messengers In-person events	Catchy content Print material Branded gifts Ads Video Audio Images and/or art Graphics Presentation slides Communication toolkits
Consideration phase	Web pages Social media News platforms Online review sites	Informative content News articles Free resources Positive testimonials
Connection phase	Web pages Social media Email list	Valuable content
Value phase	Web pages Social media Email list	Valuable content
Buy-in phase	Web contact page	Custom onboarding content
Experience phase	Direct communication Email list segment Dedicated web page	Custom engagement content
Recommendation phase	Direct communication Surveys Online review sites	Custom follow-up content Survey questions



photo: Ramón Vasconcelos

Work with trusted messengers and allies

When choosing your channels, you should also think about who will deliver the message. Will it come from a channel you manage, or could you partner with another organization or individual to deliver your messages? Consider partnering with individuals or groups who can help amplify your messages. Trusted messengers—such as community-led organizations and trusted individuals including experts, community leaders, and celebrities—can also have a significant impact on how your message is received. For example, partnering with teachers to integrate climate resilience lessons into classrooms can help engage students and their families, fostering awareness and action at a grassroots level.

When working with messengers, also consider reaching out to less obvious allies who can access specific groups you may not typically engage. These could include local sports teams, cultural organizations, neighbourhood associations, or professional associations. Collaborations with unusual allies can open doors to new conversations and help you connect with underrepresented or hard-to-reach audiences. For example, when the City of Toronto partnered with the Toronto Area Interfaith Council, they leveraged the influence of faith leaders to discuss climate change with diverse congregations across the city, fostering a deeper community connection to climate resilience efforts.¹⁴

Identify performance indicators

Once you have identified the channels and mediums for your communication campaign, choose corresponding KPIs for each. Refer back to your desired outcome, calls-to-action, and ask yourself: What would be the best KPI to track in order to measure if people are taking action? Surveys are another way to measure impact and the success of your communication campaign in a qualitative way. For example, surveys could be used to:

- Measure changes in perceptions, attitudes, and behaviours;
- Measure the level of understanding participants have before and after an event or program; or,
- Measure the likelihood of taking action.

Typical communication KPIs typically include:

- # of networking and in-person events attended;
- # of website users or specific pageviews;
- # of resource downloads;
- # of event registrations or participants;
- # of contact forms, email inquiries, or phone calls received;
- # of email subscribers or social media followers;
- # of communication products or content created and shared;
- # of impressions, clicks, or other content engagement metrics;
- # of media mentions; and,
- # of positive reviews.

Repeat

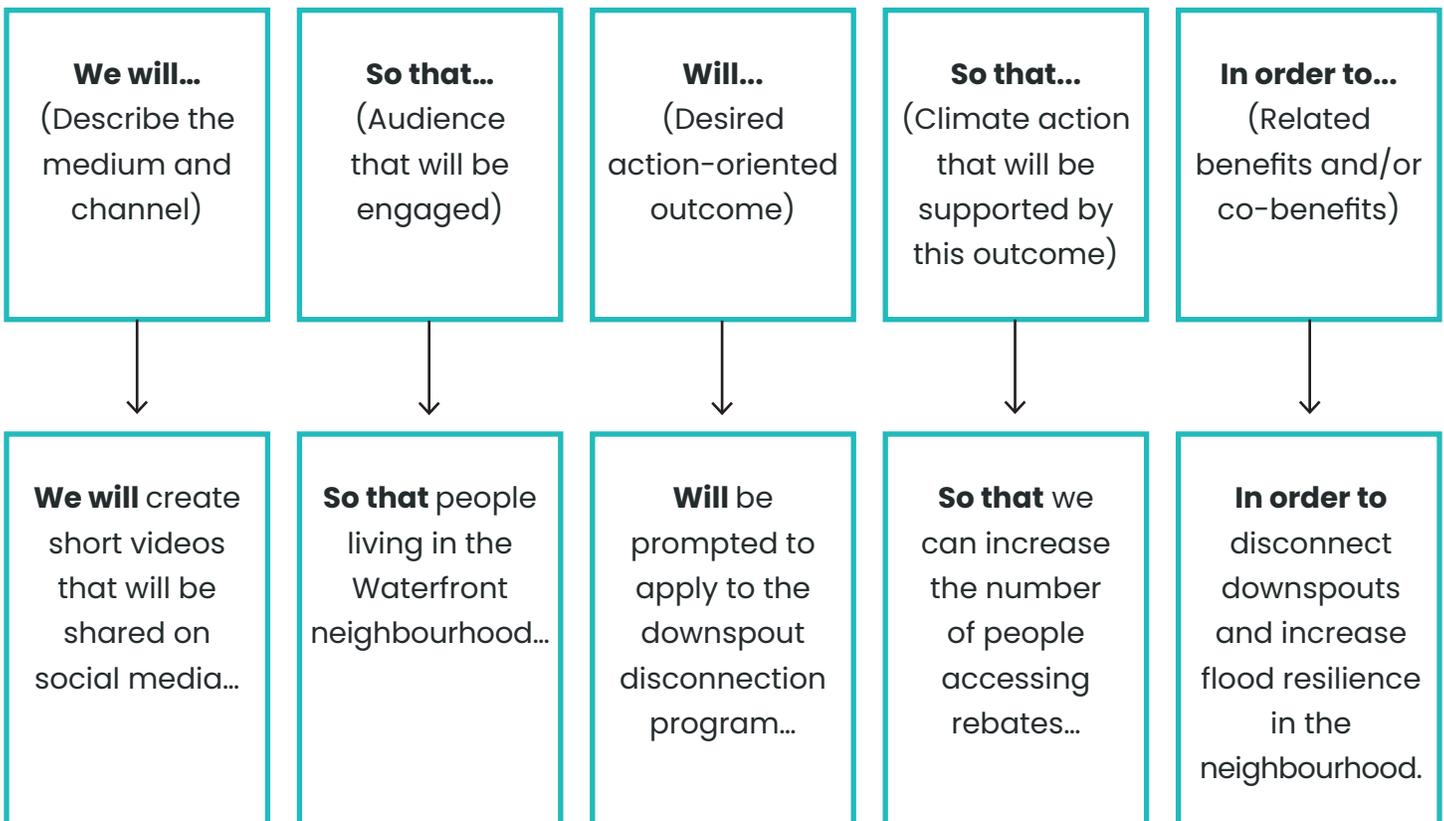
You are likely relying on climate communications to implement multiple climate actions, each with several unique audiences, audience journeys, communication campaign goals, desired outcomes, and a slew of different messages. While it can be tempting to reuse the same message for different audiences, this can drastically reduce the effectiveness of your communications. Instead, aim to create as many communication campaigns as you have actions and audiences. You will undoubtedly find that the more you repeat this process, the easier it will become, and the better the results will be.

Remember that this is not a one-off activity. Over time, you will develop and refine several campaigns to support specific actions. Each time you do, you will be building momentum toward meaningful long-term change.

Try This: Write a climate communication purpose statement

While your communication efforts should aim to get your audience to take action and that next step in a communication journey, they also contribute to long-term goals whether that is raising awareness, building support, or inspiring a specific behaviour. If you want to define your communication campaign in a broader context—such as in a funding application, report, or strategy—consider using the structure outlined in Figure 3 to write a communication purpose statement. This can easily be done once you have identified the essential elements of your communication campaign.

Figure 3: Use the following purpose statement structure to develop a purpose statement you can refer back to as you continue to develop your communication campaign.





PART THREE

Behaviour- based climate communications strategies

Behaviour-based climate communications strategies

In this section, we share strategies that can be used to take your **climate communications** to the next level thanks to insights from the field of behavioural science. We have curated the following list of behavioural strategies and will provide a brief overview of how each can be incorporated into climate communications to encourage local action and ultimately increase climate resilience.



- Accessibility



- Behavioural contracts and goal setting



- Carrots and sticks



- Cognitive dissonance



- Feedback



- Gamification



- Intrinsic value framing



- Personalization



- Positive framing



- Social influence



- Social norms and prompts



- Timing and tipping point



- Visual storytelling

We have also put together a series of complementary **case stories** that exemplify how each of the behavioural communications strategies can be applied in real world situations. Case stories corresponding to different behavioural strategies are included here—we encourage you to refer to these as you read about each behavioural strategy.

What is behavioural science and why use it in climate communications?

Behavioural science is a multidisciplinary field that combines psychology, sociology, economics, neuroscience, and other disciplines to understand human behaviour and decision-making.¹⁵ It seeks to identify patterns, tendencies, and biases that influence how individuals and groups think, feel, and act in various situations. In practical terms, behavioural science can help design strategies to promote positive outcomes and address challenges in areas like public policy, healthcare, and education. In the context of climate communications, behavioural strategies can be used to develop messaging that goes beyond raising awareness and directly support the implementation of climate actions. Combining best practices in communications with knowledge of behavioural science can increase engagement, encourage participation, and help individuals see climate action as a part of their everyday lives.

We are behavioural beings

Human beings are behavioural, meaning that we are driven to action based on different factors that shape our decision-making. These factors go beyond surface-level knowledge, shaping how we respond to and process information. They are influenced by a complex interplay of systems and interactions rooted in social, political, and historical contexts. Recognizing these dynamics is essential when it comes to using climate communications to drive action.

A common misconception is that providing information alone leads to action; however, information-loading creates barriers to effective climate communications. Sharing complex, jargon-heavy content that focuses on the immensity and complexity of climate issues rarely motivates change. While information or data-driven climate communications is effective in some circumstances, it is only one way people make sense of the world. Climate data and information exists in relation to other factors such as values, emotions, social constraints, and more. For climate communications to effectively encourage action, it needs to do more than provide information and this is where behavioural strategies come in.

Ethical considerations

It is impossible to talk about behavioural strategies to encourage people to take a specific action without asking the question: Is this ethical? Unfortunately, there is no simple answer to this question. It depends on the type of actions you are encouraging people to take, who is in your audience, and how you approach your communications. In order to use behavioural strategies ethically, consider:

- Only supporting the implementation of actions that were identified through an equitable, inclusive, process and reflect the perspectives of those who will be directly affected by the action;
- Getting to know your audience by building trust, relationships, and engaging in

conversation to learn from them, especially if your audience has historically been underrepresented, misrepresented, or left out of climate planning processes;

- Changing your climate communications approach based on what you learn from your audience; and,
- Being open and transparent throughout the process.

Behavioural science likely already influences your communications work, whether through the deliberate application of strategies or through subconscious biases. Being aware of the ways in which behavioural science influences our perceptions, choices, and actions could actually make communications more ethical.



photo: Ramón Vasconcelos

Behavioural strategies



Accessibility

Meet people where they are physically, digitally, and in terms of language and cultural references you use.

Accessibility in the context of climate communications involves removing hurdles and leveraging existing touchpoints to engage your audience. It includes the strategic placement of communication messages in physical locations and/or on digital platforms that are already frequented by your audience based on their daily routines and preferences. The goal of meeting your audience where they are is to reduce barriers to access, making climate action information not only accessible but also engaging and actionable. By thoughtfully placing climate messages where they are most likely to be encountered by your audience, you can weave climate communications into the fabric of everyday life.

Related case stories

- [Building Strong Neighbourhoods through Community Events](#)
- ["Climate Science Translated" Video Series](#)
- [Landlords as Communications Partners: Extreme heat alerts](#)
- [The Art of Change](#)



Behavioural contracts and goal setting

Leverage the power of public commitments and personal goal setting to enhance accountability and motivate action.

Behavioural contracts and goal setting are powerful strategies that harness the human inclination to follow through on commitments—particularly those declared publicly—due to a desire for consistency between their statements and actions. In the context of climate communications, this behavioural strategy involves asking people to make a pledge to take a particular action. Public or even private commitments can foster a shared sense of responsibility and momentum towards achieving broader climate goals.

Related case stories

- [Pledge to Stop Invasive Species](#)
- [Small Acts of Conservation](#)



Carrots and sticks

Motivate action with rewards (carrots) and penalties (sticks).

A combination of carrots and sticks is often used to motivate action and can be applied in a climate context. This strategy acknowledges the complexity of human behaviour, using both encouragement and deterrence as a way to achieve a desired outcome. A key psychological principle at play here is loss aversion—the tendency for people to be more motivated to avoid losses than to pursue gains. For instance, penalties, fines, or other costs can discourage behaviours that contribute to climate challenges. Positive reinforcement, such as incentives, rebates, or rewards, can be equally powerful. These strategies are particularly effective when implemented as part of a long-term approach and combined with tipping points strategies to make action easier and/or more appealing.

Related case stories

- [Green Corporate Grounds](#)
- [Metis Nation of Ontario Fish Monitoring Surveys](#)
- [Persistent Communication to Homeowners](#)



Cognitive dissonance

Highlight inconsistencies between your audience's daily activities and their values as a way to motivate action.

Cognitive dissonance arises when there is a clash between our actions and our values, leading to psychological discomfort that can drive us to change. In the realm of climate communications, this concept is particularly poignant. Since many people engage in daily activities that don't align their values and identities, bringing this inconsistency to light can lead individuals to reconsider their actions—but this must be done with care. When using cognitive dissonance to motivate change, it is important not to force a direct confrontation that might provoke defensiveness or distress. Complementing this approach with other strategies such as intrinsic value framing, personalization, positive framing, and social influence can gently and positively highlight these inconsistencies and lead to positive outcomes.

Related case stories

- [Big Oil Satirical Video Series](#)
- [How Content Creators Talk About Climate Change](#)



Feedback

Provide timely feedback on the result of a specific climate action to create a positive loop and encourage continued engagement.

Feedback is a behavioural strategy that provides immediate or near-term insights about the outcomes of specific actions. This strategy can be used to communicate the positive impacts of climate action and foster a sense of accomplishment. This can motivate individuals or groups to continue taking action while contributing to bigger picture climate objectives. By showcasing real-time results and highlighting the collective benefits of these actions, feedback creates a positive reinforcement loop that inspires ongoing engagement and action.

Related case stories

- [Love Your Lake](#)
- [Saskatoon Home Energy Map](#)
- [Whitby: ISeeChange](#)



Gamification

Incorporate elements of play, competition, and achievement to engage and motivate your audience towards action.

Using games is a fun and effective way to motivate action and engage people in climate issues. The idea is to make taking a specific action enjoyable and rewarding. This can be done by incorporating game-like elements such as points, rewards, challenges, and leaderboards in communication journeys. It is also a way to achieve widespread participation in climate action and can even influence social norms.

Related case stories

- [Educational Resources on Flooding in Canada](#)
- [Get Ready Game](#)



Intrinsic value framing

Align climate actions with deeply held values for greater engagement.

Intrinsic value framing can be used to effectively align climate actions with deeply held personal values, such as community well-being, family safety, environmental stewardship, and the desire to leave a positive legacy for future generations. This approach leverages the internal satisfaction and fulfilment that come when the actions you ask your audience to take are in harmony with their values. Using intrinsic value framing in communications can increase the likelihood that your audience will take action.

Related case stories

- [Climate Stories, North Carolina](#)
- [Educational Resources on Flooding in Canada](#)
- [Neighbourhood Heat Wave Response](#)
- [Protecting Hockey While the Climate Changes](#)



Personalization

Tailor your climate communications to reflect the characteristics (e.g., geographic location, age, occupation, etc.) and past behaviours of your audience.

Personalization involves tailoring communication journeys, messages, and the channels you use based on the characteristics and demographics of your audience. Although similar to intrinsic value framing, this behavioural strategy is context-specific rather than value-specific. Both strategies can significantly enhance the effectiveness of climate communications by making it relevant, personal, and actionable for the intended audience.

Related case stories

- [Building Resilient Neighbourhoods: Connect and prepare](#)
- [Emergency Preparedness for Older Adults](#)
- [Green Corporate Grounds](#)
- [Love Your Lake](#)



Positive framing

Highlight the positive outcomes and benefits of taking action.

Unlike common doom and gloom narratives, positive framing focuses on the beneficial outcomes of climate action, such as health improvements, financial savings, and the creation of better community environments. Highlighting the positive aspects and opportunities associated with taking climate action is a great way to bolster public support¹⁶ and can effectively motivate action.¹⁷

Related case stories

- [BroomBusting Parties](#)
- [Depave Paradise](#)
- [From Here to There Podcast](#)
- [Solastalgia: Eco-Anxiety digital zine](#)



Social influence

Work with respected and admired figures such as community leaders, influencers, celebrities, or experts to motivate others by example.

Leveraging social influence to encourage climate action is based on the premise that people often emulate the behaviours and practices of those they admire or respect. This can involve working with people in positions of power and prestige—like community leaders, influencers, celebrities, or experts—or well-respected community members to inspire and motivate others.

Related case stories

- [#BackyardBiodiversity: Enhancing urban canopy cover](#)
- [Climate Science Translated Video Series](#)
- [How Content Creators Talk About Climate Change](#)
- [Protecting Hockey While the Climate Changes](#)
- [Stories from the Field](#)



Social norms and prompts

Refer to social norms and/or use social prompts to encourage people to adjust their actions to align with those of their peers.

Social norms and prompts are a powerful tool in motivating action. This strategy leverages the power of community influence by highlighting certain behaviours as both common and expected. Unlike social influence, which focuses on the actions of influential individuals to spark change, social norms rely on the collective adoption of behaviours that are seen as widespread and accepted within a community. Strategically promoting climate action as social norms and using prompts or social cues can mobilize collective action and frame it as a shared responsibility and a community-wide identity.

Related case stories

- [BroomBusting Parties](#)
- [Building Resilient Neighbourhoods: Connect and prepare](#)
- [Changing for Climate Video Series](#)
- [Love Your Lake](#)



Timing and tipping point

Strategically time your communications to build on existing momentum and encourage action.

This strategy is about identifying and capitalizing on specific moments that naturally predispose people towards openness and receptivity to a certain action. Strategic timing involves aligning your communication efforts with environmental events (e.g., local extreme weather events), societal shifts (e.g., approval of new strategic initiatives, funding, or plans), seasonal milestones (e.g., Earth Day, spring floods), or teachable moments (e.g., trending news stories) that have the potential to draw heightened awareness to climate issues. Aligning your communications with these types of moments or tipping points¹⁸ gets your messages in front of your audience when they are most likely to be attentive and motivated to act.

Related case stories

- [How Content Creators Talk About Climate Change](#)
- [Landlords as Communications Partners: Extreme heat alerts](#)



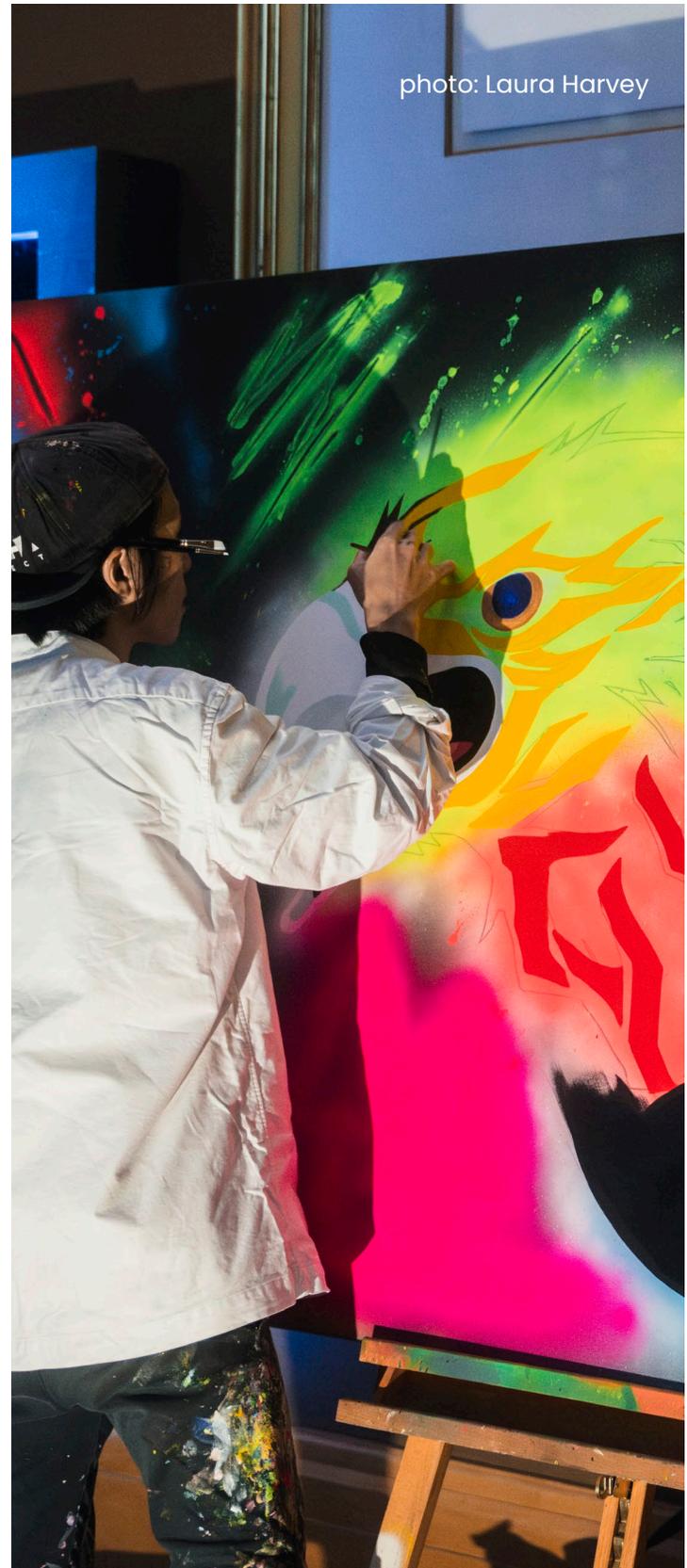
Visual storytelling

Leverage images, videos, infographics, and other interactive media to convey complex climate information and stories in an engaging and accessible manner.

By making the invisible visible and the intangible tangible, visual narratives can play a crucial role in mobilizing action. Visual storytelling can bridge the gap between abstract concepts and tangible understanding. Images, videos, and visual representation of information and data captures attention, evokes emotions, and communicates messages more quickly and memorably than text alone. Visual narratives are also effective in making the global phenomenon of climate change personal and relatable, leading to deeper emotional engagement with the issue.

Related case stories

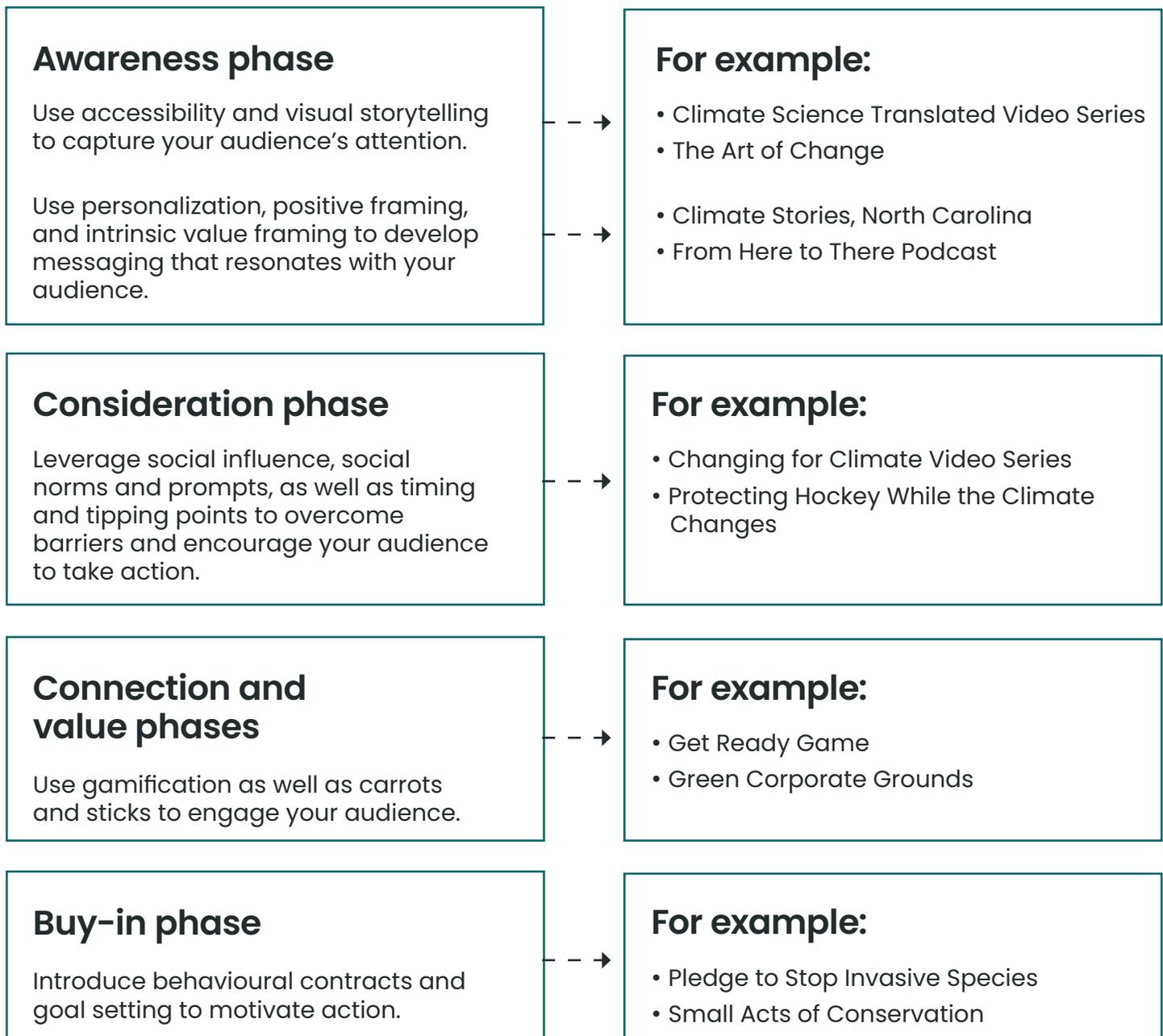
- [Depave Paradise](#)
- [Extreme Weather Can Hit Quickly](#) [Video](#)
- [Solastalgia: Eco-Anxiety digital zine](#)
- [Whitby: ISeeChange](#)



Try This: Integrate behavioural strategies in your communication campaign

Figure 4: Examples of behavioural strategies that can be integrated into different phases of the communication journey

Behavioural science insights can be integrated into communication campaigns in various ways. For example, personalization, positive framing, and intrinsic value framing can be used to develop messaging that resonates with your audience. You can also consider how various strategies could be used throughout your communication journey as shown in Figure 4.



Overcoming common climate communications barriers

Motivating individuals to take action sometimes requires addressing barriers. Through the use of behavioural strategies, addressing these challenges can be turned into opportunities for greater impact. Below, we outline some common barriers in climate communications and provide practical ways to overcome them using behavioural science.

Concerned but disengaged audience

Becoming overwhelmed by climate information and emotion overload can lead to detached or disengaged audiences. Fear, anxiety, and a sense of helplessness can be barriers to climate action—especially when confronted by the magnitude of a crisis where solutions are unclear.¹⁹ Crisis fatigue, a reliance on inconsistent and science-heavy information, and buzzword-heavy communications can also contribute to this sense of overload.²⁰

There are some ways to approach climate communications that can help audiences move beyond this disconnect. As a starting point, keep your climate communications short, compelling, and use positive framing. Explaining climate change and why it matters every time isn't necessary—instead, use storytelling and intrinsic value framing to reflect your audience's concerns while offering tangible ways to take action. Using clear calls-to-action is another great way to provide a way forward.

Additionally, consider moving beyond text-heavy communications to account for different ways of learning and processing that may be more accessible to your audience. Methods for accessible engagement can include accessibility, visual storytelling, and other forms of storytelling like art-based interventions, videos, podcasts, and more.

Try using these behavioural strategies

- Accessibility
- Intrinsic value framing
- Positive framing
- Visual storytelling

Concerned but skeptical audience

One way to address doubt and uncertainty is to use intrinsic value framing and positive framing to emphasize the co-benefits of climate action. Lack of certainty, especially scientific certainty, should not be the cause for postponing climate action when the outcomes will be positive for the community regardless of climate change impacts and risks. The precautionary principle is also a helpful consideration that can be brought up in these cases and framed as a carrot and stick issue.²¹ Skepticism should not be the cause for postponing climate action when the possibility of irreversible harm and damage is present and where the threat of inaction is greater than the costs of risk-reducing measures.

Try using these behavioural strategies

- Carrot and stick
- Intrinsic value framing
- Positive framing

Climate change as a distant issue

The idea that climate change is too far away (both spatially and temporally) or that its impacts “won’t happen to me” is a common barrier to climate action.²² When considered against many of the immediate and pressing challenges that individuals and communities face in their day-to-day lives, climate change just may not seem like a high priority issue.

Finding gentle ways to point out cognitive dissonance can help to address this barrier. One way to do this is by focusing on local climate issues, conversations, and efforts to help underscore the relevance of climate action to the here and now—that climate change is impacting community well-being in the present, not in a distant place and future. This type of personalization can help to create a sense of urgency that, in conjunction with actionable next steps and opportunities for engagement, can help to drive action forward. Providing these next steps or calls-to-action is essential to ensuring that urgency messaging does not lean too heavily into fear-based communications—rather, it should focus on taking action in the present to build hope for the future.

Similarly, using intrinsic value framing to link climate actions to other priorities can help motivate people to get involved. An audience which prioritizes economics may be swayed by cost-of-inaction framings



photo: Laura Harvey

that look at the long-term financial impacts of climate change. Seniors may be mobilized to action through framings which consider the well-being of future generations. Tight-knit communities may connect more with climate change solutions that are led by familiar faces, and which emphasize neighbour-to-neighbour action. Additionally, multi-solving approaches that recognize how a single investment can respond to multiple issues at the same time—such as the housing crisis and climate crisis—can provide valuable framing for individuals and organizations that tend to focus on single-issue efforts. This approach can go hand-in-hand with communications that facilitate greater awareness of how current actions already connect to climate change response.

Try using these behavioural strategies

- Accessibility
- Intrinsic value framing
- Positive framing
- Visual storytelling

Climate misinformation

When responding to climate misinformation, using intrinsic values to frame climate conversations within a context that resonates with the specific group you are addressing can be an effective strategy.²³

To do this, find ways to address the misinformation by linking climate change impacts directly to the group's concerns, experiences, and values. As you reframe the climate conversation:

- Use positive framing to focus on solutions that include benefits and/or co-benefits in alignment with the audience's values and priorities to establish common ground (such as improving community health and well-being, strengthening local economies, reducing risks and costs associated with extreme weather events, preserving natural beauty and resources, and building vibrant communities for current and future generations to enjoy);
- Use personalization when it comes to climate information and data to make the conversation compelling to your audience;
- Use future vision as a form of storytelling to tap into the individual's natural inclination to improve their circumstances and work towards a better future; and,
- Work with trusted messengers and allies whenever possible.

Framing the conversation around positive, local, future possibilities can inspire hope and motivate change rather than fuel

polarizing debates. This optimistic framing can also help build public support for the implementation of climate actions that address shared goals. Storytelling is a particularly powerful tool to use when responding to misinformation because it engages people emotionally, making complex issues more relatable and understandable. Through storytelling, scientific data and other accurate, factual information can be brought forward in a local and relatable narrative framework.

Try using these behavioural strategies

- Intrinsic value framing
- Personalization
- Positive framing

Final Words

From the traditional approach of broad awareness campaigns to the more nuanced, action-oriented strategies of today, the field of climate communications is evolving to meet the urgency of the issue. The shift from one-way communication to engaging in dialogue, rooted in an understanding of individual values, preferences, and beliefs, is essential for mobilizing the wider community—especially the 71% of people in the movable middle who are open to taking action.

This resource outlined how action-oriented communication campaigns and behavioural science strategies can be used as tools to do just that and inspire individuals to take tangible steps on the journey towards a climate-resilient future.

This resource is designed to be a practical guide you can come back to time and again as you implement climate actions with the help of simple yet effective action-oriented communications. We encourage you to revisit the concepts, strategies, and case stories outlined in this playbook while you develop and hone your climate communications skills.

Develop your communications skills

The more you practice using the communications concepts outlined in this playbook, the easier it will get. One way to do this is to start working behavioural strategies into the way you communicate with co-workers, peers, or even with friends and family members. Start small by developing simple messaging you can use in your day-to-day and develop your repertoire from there. Reading case stories, talking about challenges and successes with peers, and learning from experts are other effective ways to strengthen your climate communications skills.

Keep your communications simple

Communication campaigns can quickly become overly complicated. When approaching climate communications to support the implementation of tangible actions, remember to keep things as simple as possible as you get started. You don't need elaborate communications strategies to support local climate action. Take things one campaign, one audience, and one message at a time, and repeat this process as many times as needed.

Work with professionals

Whenever possible, work with communications professionals to support your work. Engaging with experts early—particularly during the planning or procurement stages of a project—can ensure that your communications efforts are aligned with your goals and more likely to achieve the desired outcomes. Professionals can also help define communication objectives, develop compelling messaging, and craft effective strategies. This expertise is especially valuable when addressing complex communication needs.

Explore the full Climate Communications Toolkit

Visit the Climate Communications Toolkit web page to find related case stories, worksheets, and explore additional climate communications resources.

icleicanada.org/project/climate-communications-toolkit/

CLIMATE COMMUNICATIONS TOOLKIT

EVERY CHILD MATTERS

DON'T WAIT, TAKE ACTION!

STRENGTHS BASED assessments

always ASK:
Who is being heard?
Who is benefiting?
Who is being harmed?

NEIGHBOURS KNOW THEIR NEIGHBOURHOODS BEST

IN ALL PROJECT DESIGNS, WE NEED EQUITY!

IT'S ABOUT **PROCESS** NOT PRODUCT

START LOCAL VOLUNTEER RESILIENCE GROUPS

GO WHERE PEOPLE ARE AT! PARTNER EARLY

your TIMELINES are NOT NECESSARILY EVERYONE'S TIMELINE

CLIMATE CHANGE IS A people Problem!



CLIMATE CHANGE is a SYMPTOM of the HUMAN CONDITION

GREED
CAPITALISM
COLONIALISM

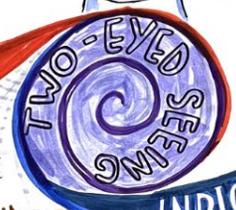
if we SHIFT OUR CONDITION, WE SHIFT CLIMATE

SINCE TIME IMMEMORIAL

BASED IN THE NOW, GRANULAR

SCIENCE

LIKE A SPIDER'S WEB, WE ARE ALL CONNECTED



INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE

FUND INDIGENOUS CONSULTATION ON PROJECTS

STOP BROADCASTING

START engaging!

USE DIGITAL for HEALTHY DEBATE!

RELATIONSHIPS TAKE TIME

TRUST

move at the speed of

Conversations FOR AN **INCLUSIVE FUTURE**

WHAT ACTION can you DO TODAY TO BUILD AN INCLUSIVE Future?

HAVE LOTS of FUN and INFORMATIVE PUBLIC EDUCATION

WE TRUST LISTEN

ENGAGE and Re-ENGAGE in DURABLE, DIGITAL CONVERSATIONS!

LISTEN · LEARN · ACT!

CONVERSATIONS with PEOPLE with DIVERSE PERSPECTIVES, LIVED EXPERIENCES

ADVOCATE in YOUTH and SOCIAL COMMUNITIES

SPEAK and GOV and ACCESSIBLE CITIES!

TALK to MY BOSS ABOUT CLIMATE ACTION

VOTE in ELECTIONS COMMITTED to TIMELY and EQUABLE CLIMATE ACTION!

CHALLENGE the CONCEPT of GROWTH

IDENTIFY ORGANIZATIONS NOT TYPICALLY engaged in CITY BUILDING

APPLY RESOURCES SET ASIDE & NOT ZERO to MY CITY!

engage YOUTH on INCLUSION... they are tomorrow's FUTURE!

BIG FUNDERS, look on rise A lot of talk and NO ACTION!

INCREASE the URGENCY

PERSEVERE

BE KIND

VOLUNTEER

MANY ACTIONS MAKE WAVES OF CHANGE

Glossary

Accessibility

A behavioural climate communications strategy that involves choosing communication channels to make messaging easily accessible, visible, and convenient for specific audiences.

Audience

A group of people a message is intended to reach. This group can be defined by characteristics such as demographics, interests, needs, behaviours, values, and motivations.

Audience Journey

Also referred to as a communication journey. An audience journey maps the path an individual takes from first exposure to a message to eventual action, considering their motivations, barriers, and decision-making process along the way.

Audience segment

The process of finding strategic subgroups of your target audience, based on shared behaviour, interests, or attributes that indicate how they may respond to marketing.²⁴

Audience profile

A detailed description of specific audience segments based on demographics, characteristics, and past behaviours. Detailed audience profiles also include preferences, values, identity, and other information about the audience.

Behavioural Contracts and Goal Setting

A behavioural climate communications strategy that involves leveraging the power of public commitments and personal goal setting to enhance accountability and motivate action.

Calls-to-action

Calls-to-action provide clear and direct instructions or requests to the audience, prompting them to take a specific action.

Carrots and Sticks

A behavioural climate communications strategy that involves motivating behaviours through rewards (carrots) and penalties (sticks), based on loss aversion principle where the desire to avoid losses motivates behaviour more than the desire to gain.

Channels

The various communication platforms or methods (e.g., social media, email, websites, face-to-face interactions) used to deliver messages to a target audience, chosen based on where the audience is most active and receptive.

Climate communications

Communicating climate information using systems, tools, and strategies.

Cognitive Dissonance

A behavioural climate communications strategy that involves highlighting inconsistencies between your audiences' daily activities and their values to motivate change.

Communication

Transmitting information to an audience to convey meaning and understanding.

Communication campaign

A series of messages developed and delivered to achieve a specific goal or outcome (which is usually time-bound) by engaging a target audience. Communication campaigns usually involve multiple channels, mediums, and messages but they can also be quite simple depending on the desired goal or outcome.

Communication journey

Can also be referred to as an audience journey. In the world of marketing, this type of journey is often associated with sales funnels where the objective is to make sales. However, in the context of climate communications, this type of journey is best approached as a means to build awareness and trust, make connections, provide value, and gain support that will help build awareness.

Engagement

Organizing to act in support of achieving your desired change. Two-way interaction, getting people involved.

Framing

A behavioural climate communications strategy that involves shaping how information is presented in order to influence how it is interpreted and acted upon, often by highlighting specific aspects of an issue to align with audience values or emotions.

Feedback

A behavioural climate communications strategy that involves providing real-time or near-term feedback on the result of one's actions creating a positive loop and incentive to continue to act.

Gamification

A behavioural climate communications strategy that involves incorporating elements of play, competition, and achievement to engage and motivate individuals towards action.

Intrinsic Value Framing

A behavioural climate communications strategy that involves aligning climate communications messaging with people's values and sense of identity for greater engagement as well as the audience's personal fulfilment.

Mediums

The specific formats or tools (e.g., print brochures, digital graphics, video, audio) used to deliver messages within chosen communication channels, each offering different ways to engage audiences and convey information effectively.

Messaging

The strategic content of a communication effort, crafted to convey meaning and ideas in a way that resonate with the target audience.

Misinformation

Information that is false but is created or spread by someone who thinks it is true, without the intention of causing harm (e.g., someone posting an article containing out-of-date information but not realizing it).²⁵

Movable middle

Those whose demand for climate action is much lower than their stated concern, representing an overall lack of support for individual and/or collective action.²⁶

Narratives

Telling a story or creating a cohesive message that connects information and emotions in a way that engages the audience, making the issue more relatable and motivating action.

Outreach

Communicating to engaged partners or gathering info/data from an audience. Mainly one-way communication to generate attention, give out information.

Personalization

A behavioural climate communications strategy that involves tailoring climate communications to an audience based on characteristics and past behaviours, ensuring messages are relevant within a specific context.

Positive Framing

A behavioural climate communications strategy that involves highlighting the positive outcomes and benefits of taking action, such as health improvements and cost savings, to inspire and motivate

proactive behaviour, contrasting with fear-based messaging.

Social Influence

A behavioural climate communications strategy that involves collaborating with respected and admired figures, such as community leaders and celebrities, to deliver messages and inspire or motivate others by example.

Social Norms and Prompts

A behavioural climate communications strategy that involves encouraging individuals to adjust their actions to align with those of their peers either by emphasizing long-term social expectations and/or by providing social cues.

Timing and Tipping Points

A behavioural climate communications strategy that involves leveraging strategic timing and momentum to enhance the effectiveness and reception of messaging.

Touchpoint

A moment of interaction or exposure between an audience and a communication effort where messaging can influence attitudes, behaviours, or decisions.

Visual Storytelling

A behavioural climate communications strategy that involves leveraging visuals like images, videos, infographics, and interactive media to convey complex climate information and narratives in an engaging and accessible manner.

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CLIMATE COMMUNICATIONS TOOLKIT

