

# the rules of the game

**Evidence base for the Climate Change  
Communications Strategy**

**The game is communicating climate change;  
the rules will help us win it.**

## futerra

Recommendations to the Climate Change Communications Working Group:



# the principles of climate change communication

## **Why were the principles created?**

The game is communicating climate change; the rules will help us win it.

These principles were created as part of the UK Climate Change Communications Strategy, an evidence-based strategy aiming to change public attitudes towards climate change in the UK. This is a 'short version' of a far longer document of evidence that can be found at [www.defra.gov.uk](http://www.defra.gov.uk).

There is plenty of evidence relating to attitudes towards and behaviour on climate change, general environmental behaviour change and the whole issue of sustainable development communication. As we reviewed the research for these principles, one 'überprinciple' emerged:

**“Changing attitudes towards climate change is not like selling a particular brand of soap – it’s like convincing someone to use soap in the first place.”**

At first glance, some of the principles may seem counter-intuitive to those who have been working on sustainable development or climate change communications for many years. Some confront dearly cherished beliefs about what works; a few even seem to attack the values or principles of sustainable development itself.

However, these principles are a first step to using sophisticated behaviour change modelling and comprehensive evidence from around the world to change attitudes towards climate change. We need to think radically, and the Rules of the Game are a sign that future campaigns will not be 'business as usual'. This is a truly exciting moment.

For the full evidence for these rules, and the climate change communications strategy itself, please visit: [www.defra.gov.uk](http://www.defra.gov.uk)

For the new UK sustainable development strategy please visit: [www.sustainable-development.gov.uk](http://www.sustainable-development.gov.uk)

# 1 blowing away myths

Many of the oft-repeated communications methods and messages of sustainable development have been dismissed by mainstream communicators, behaviour change experts and psychologists. Before we go into what works, our principles make a 'clean sweep' of what doesn't:

## 1. Challenging habits of climate change communication

### Don't rely on concern about children's future or human survival instincts

Recent surveys show that people without children may care more about climate change than those with children. "Fight or flight" human survival instincts have a time limit measured in minutes – they are of little use for a change in climate measured in years.

### Don't create fear without agency

Fear can create apathy if individuals have no 'agency' to act upon the threat. Use fear with great caution.

### Don't attack or criticise home or family

It is unproductive to attack that which people hold dear.

## 2. Forget the climate change detractors

Those who deny climate change science are irritating, but unimportant. The argument is not about *if* we should deal with climate change, but *how* we should deal with climate change.

## 3. There is no 'rational man'

The evidence discredits the 'rational man' theory – we rarely weigh objectively the value of different decisions and then take the clear self-interested choice.

## 4. Information can't work alone

Providing information is not wrong; relying on information alone to change attitudes is wrong. Remember also that messages about saving money are important, but not *that* important.

# 2 a new way of thinking

Once we've eliminated the myths, there is room for some new ideas. These principles relate to some of the key ideas emerging from behaviour change modelling for sustainable development:

## 5. Climate change must be 'front of mind' before persuasion works

Currently, telling the public to take notice of climate change is as successful as selling tampons to men. People don't realise (or remember) that climate change relates to them.

## 6. Use both peripheral and central processing

Attracting direct attention to an issue can change attitudes, but peripheral messages can be just as effective: a tabloid snapshot of Gwyneth Paltrow at a bus stop can help change attitudes to public transport.

## 7. Link climate change mitigation to positive desires/aspirations

Traditional marketing associates products with the aspirations of their target audience. Linking climate change mitigation to home improvement, self-improvement, green spaces or national pride are all worth investigating.

## 8. Use transmitters and social learning

People learn through social interaction, and some people are better teachers and trendsetters than others. Targeting these people will ensure that messages seem more trustworthy and are transmitted more effectively.

## 9. Beware the impacts of cognitive dissonance

Confronting someone with the difference between their attitude and their actions on climate change will make them more likely to change their *attitude* than their *actions*.

# 3 linking policy and communications

These principles clearly deserve a separate section. All the evidence is clear – sometimes aggressively so – that ‘communications in the absence of policy’ will precipitate the failure of any climate change communications campaign right from the start:

## **10. Everyone must use a clear and consistent explanation of climate change**

The public knows that climate change is important, but is less clear on exactly what it is and how it works.

## **11. Government policy and communications on climate change must be consistent**

Don't ‘build in’ inconsistency and failure from the start.

# 4 audience principles

In contrast to the myths, this section suggests some principles that *do* work. These principles are likely to lead directly to a set of general messages, although each poses a significant implementation challenge:

## **12. Create ‘agency’ for combating climate change**

Agency is created when people know what to do, decide for themselves to do it, have access to the infrastructure in which to act, and understand that their contribution is important.

## **13. Make climate change a ‘home’ not ‘away’ issue**

Climate change is a global issue, but we will feel its impact at home – and we can act on it at home.

## **14. Raise the status of climate change mitigation behaviours**

Research shows that energy efficiency behaviours can make you seem poor and unattractive. We must work to overcome these emotional assumptions.

## **15. Target specific groups**

A classic marketing rule, and one not always followed by climate change communications from government and other sources.

# 5 style principles

These principles lend some guidance on the evidence of stylistic themes that have a high chance of success:

## **16. Create a trusted, credible, recognised voice on climate change**

We need trusted organisations and individuals that the media can call upon to explain the implications of climate change to the UK public.

## **17. Use emotions and visuals**

Another classic marketing rule: changing behaviour by disseminating information doesn't always work, but emotions and visuals usually do.

# 6 effective management

These principles are drawn primarily from the experience of others, both in their successes and in the problems they faced:

## **18. The context affects everything**

The prioritisation of these principles must be subject to ongoing assessments of the UK climate change situation.

## **19. The communications must be sustained over time**

All the most successful public awareness campaigns have been sustained consistently over many years.

## **20. Partnered delivery of messages will be more successful**

Experience shows that partnered delivery is often a key component for projects that are large, complex and have many stakeholders.

**“First they ignore you; then they laugh  
at you; then they fight you; then you win.”**

**Mahatma Gandhi**

If you are inspired or sceptical,  
have questions or want to know  
more, then please contact:

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