



Communicating Environmentally: Changing Minds, Building Momentum

How we communicate – the words we use, the way we approach those whose minds we want to change, the attitude and passion we express – is vital to getting our viewpoints across, whether the target is an elected official, a local administrator or a next-door neighbor. And when many speak with one voice, it will be heard. Whether you have a long-term goal of building membership for your local organization, or a short-term goal of fending off a development proposal, this tool will help you learn the language and techniques of environmental communication to help you build support and make a difference in your community.

You Got to Have Clout

As noted in Representative Gary Sherman’s guidelines for influencing legislators (PDF), the two most common ways to gain influence are to hire a lobbyist, or organize a grass roots effort. Business organizations seeking to weaken environmental regulations or developers hoping to win approval for projects that can impact the environment know that money in the form of campaign contributions and to hire experienced lobbyists to speak for them can go a long way toward achieving their goals. For the rest of us, we need to build power in numbers to counter the money. A broad range of people representing a variety of viewpoints but all carrying the same message give you the clout that money can’t buy. You’ve got clout when you:

- Speak for large numbers of people
- Are visible in the media
- Represent common viewpoints
- Bring people together

Reach Out to Friends

You likely have a good sense of your natural allies – other members of your organization, friends and neighbors who share your concerns, although they may need motivation to get involved and your help to get on point. If your issue of concern is statewide in nature (a proposed state law that could have far-reaching affects) or could set precedent for activities beyond your community, you can appeal to like-minded groups around the state to lend their support. The River Alliance local groups directory can help connect you with other river groups in your area to build a regional coalition.

Move Beyond Preaching to the Choir

The bigger challenge is broadening your tent to include nontraditional allies, people who may not have the same environmental concerns as you but would benefit in some way from your desired outcome. A few years ago, an environmental organization was fighting a proposed new highway in Salt Lake City, Utah that would have destroyed vast amounts of wetlands. It also would have disrupted a number of farms, an issue the environmental organization recognized would resonate with many in the area. The

environmental advocates and farmers joined together, framed the issue as bulldozers knocking down family farms while downplaying the wetlands impacts, and against all odds scuttled the highway project. It didn't matter that the people fighting the highway had a variety of reasons and motivations, but they all understood how they would benefit, and spoke with one voice. When decision-makers hear from people typically on opposite sides of an issue all saying the same thing, they sit up and listen.

Communication 101 – Speak to Your Audience

A basic rule of communication we all employ, whether consciously or not, is to speak to others in ways we believe will resonate with them. The art of persuasion is all about understanding what sparks interest in the person you hope to convince to take an action. Think about how you ask your kids to eat their broccoli – just how far does “because it’s good for you” get you? Maybe showing them how it looks like little trees, or telling them it will make them big and strong, or that they won’t be getting dessert unless they eat some will do the job. You are appealing to something important to them (eating trees is fun; I want to be big and strong; I really want dessert) to persuade them to take an action.

As environmental advocates, we often rely on science to make our case. Our mantra has been, “If only they knew the facts, surely they’d agree *your cause here*.” We prepare science-based arguments, present the facts in bold bullets, perhaps throw in a bit of gloom and doom (there will be flooding, the fish will die), and expect that logic will prevail. Unfortunately, that tactic hasn’t always served us well. It is of course important to be informed and have useful facts on hand, but to bring someone on board with your cause, whether an elected official or a new foot soldier in your campaign, you’ve got to **appeal to what’s important to them, not what you think they should care about.**

Who Are You Talking To?

Different audiences have different interests and needs; opening their ears and minds to what you have to say depends upon your understanding of what’s important to them. And don’t assume you know what that is - you will need to do some research. If local hunters would make good allies for your issue, find ways to meet a few and learn about their concerns, read their publications, or maybe attend one of their meetings. It’s likely you’ll find some common ground over habitat protection, but research may show you another angle to pique their interest and win support.

Connecting with Values

You may not always be able to find a specific shared concern, but framing the issue around a broad value such as clean, abundant drinking water can be a unifying point. Recognizing the need for environmental advocates to broaden their message to appeal to people’s core values, several private foundations funded polls and studies to better understand what they are. The findings are general but universally held, and can be incorporated into powerful messages to help build allies. A summary of these national polls can be found on the [Biodiversity Project website](#), but some key findings are:

American Values

Primary Values:

Responsibility to care for one's family;
Responsibility to care for oneself;
Personal liberty;
Work;
Spirituality/belief in God;
Honesty/integrity;
Fairness/equality

Secondary Values include:

Responsibility to care for others;
Personal fulfillment;
Respect for authority;
Love of country or culture

Environmental Values:

Responsibility to future generations;
Nature is God's creation;
A desire for one's family to enjoy a healthy environment

*Source: Human Values and Nature's Future:
American Attitudes on Biological Diversity by Beldon,
Russenello & Stewart*

Chose the Right Messenger for the Job

While these values may be common among Americans, there are some that we, as environmental advocates, don't get to use. While many Americans believe that nature is God's creation and therefore needs protection, we are not looked to for spiritual guidance and would probably appear disingenuous using that card. There has, however, been a surge in Christian environmentalism in the past few years, and there are likely churches and religious leaders in your area who could deliver that message. As you seek out nontraditional allies, consider how they can be the right spokesperson for certain values and viewpoints.

Creating an Effective Call to Action

A 2008 Gallup poll found that:

- 34% of Americans believe we need to take additional, immediate and drastic action to protect life on earth.
- 52% believe we need to take some additional action.
- 13% believe we should continue the same actions.

Sample Message

"Vote Yes for clean water."

"Protecting the Minnesota You Love"

These are hooks Minnesota's Clean Water, Land and Legacy Amendment used for their campaign after countless hours of research.



An article about their campaign can be found on the [Nature Conservancy's](#) website.

In other words, 86% of the population believe we need to do something more to protect life on earth. People really do want a clean environment, but other findings show that most ordinary people:

- Know very little about how environmental systems work
- Don't trust polarized voices
- Think their own neighborhood is fine
- Think there is not much they can do

Your job is to develop a short, paragraph-long message that appeals to people's values, uses words they understand, describes a threat to their values and who is responsible for that threat, suggests a solution, and provides an action that they can take. The focus should be on who benefits, and why, and instills confidence that they can make a difference. And as tempting as it may be, avoid scare tactics as they tend to be a turn-off. A few other things to avoid:

- Complexity, detailed scientific information, jargon
- Doom and gloom
- Guilt
- Exaggeration,
- One-sided messages
- Abstractions
- Anti-people messages (nature vs. people)
- "You can't win" messages

Your message is the core of your communications: it can be tailored to specific audiences to address their specific concerns; it can be the source of slogans and sound bites; and it can be expanded upon as the base for letters and public testimony at hearings. Most importantly, it is a constant that will be repeated and therefore remembered.

Using Words that Work

More polling has found that certain words resonate better than others. A user-friendly web site, [Water Words That Work](#), lists words to use, words *not* to use, and the research that backs up their recommendations. See *Useful Words and Phrases* below for Water Words That Work's tip sheet, but in general, use everyday words that everyday people use – water, lakes, streams, *not* aquatic ecosystems. You also need to make the consequences real and relevant to your audience. Keep in mind those common American values and include in your message words about how the issue affects:

- Health and safety;
- Children's health and safety;
- Children's future quality of life;
- Money in their pockets (total costs, pay now or pay later)

Useful Words and Phrases

| What are we talking about? | Not: |
|---|--|
| Nature, ecosystem, fish, wildlife | biodiversity, endangered species |
| Pollution, dirty water, not enough water | run-off, non-point pollution, waste, effluent |
| Water, lakes, streams, rivers, drinking water | riparian zones, aquatic resources, watersheds |
| Protection, standards, keep safe | laws, regulations, |
| Natural areas, working farms, habitat | open space, sprawl, undeveloped land |

| What do we want? | Not: |
|--|---|
| Responsible planning ahead | no growth |
| Enough drinking water, fish to catch | habitat protection |
| Hiking, biking and walking trails | trails, new parks, green space, natural landscapes |
| Voluntary land preservation agreements | conservation easements, purchase of development rights |

| Why do we want these? | Not: |
|--|---|
| To keep clean water, clean air | to clean up our water |
| To protect our health | to protect biodiversity |
| So our children can enjoy what we have, so they can learn about nature | for the tourists, for business, for economic development |

| How can we get these? | Not: |
|--|---|
| Responsible action from accountable corporations and communities | regulations, federal solutions |
| Investments (in health, future) | taxes, funding, |
| Strong enforcement (against polluters, corporations, industry) | unfair solutions |
| Making developers pay to cover costs they cause – it's only fair | soak it to em |
| Freedom of choice, balance | (mass transit) only, preservation over development |

The Message

Now that you know the dos and don'ts, it's time to craft your paragraph, your core message. The following example was developed by Dorothy Lagerroos, a recently retired professor of Environmental Communication at Northland College and member of the board of directors for the Bad River Watershed Association in Bayfield County. The Association is concerned about the impacts of unchecked development on the waters of Bayfield County, and wants to raise awareness in the community. Their tack is to engage people in water quality monitoring, and in the process, build membership, create interest in watershed protection and increase their visibility in the region. Here is their message and a commentary on how each carefully thought-out point applies the lessons above:

We are blest to live in this beautiful place and want to be sure that future generations enjoy the same blessings. Future development may bring not only economic improvement, but also more pollution to our rivers and streams. We need good information about our water now, before development occurs, to help us keep it clean. But government agencies do not have information about our area because they have focused on more polluted areas, and now are facing serious budget cuts. You can help by volunteering to sample water in our area.

| Message | Comments |
|---|--|
| <i>We are blest to live in this beautiful place and want to be sure that future generations enjoy the same blessings.</i> | Appeals to people's love of their neighborhood, their desire for their children to have the same quality of life, and uses words to show we're all in this together and all want the same thing. Using the term "blest" is a safe and fairly secular way to appeal to people's need to protect God's creation. |
| <i>Future development may bring not only economic improvement, but also more pollution to our rivers and streams.</i> | Shows two sides to the issue – "we don't oppose new development, but there are downsides." Uses simple words we all know – pollution, rivers, and streams. |
| <i>We need good information about our water now, before development occurs, to help us keep it clean.</i> | There is solution; developers can be bad (the perpetrator) but we can all benefit by guiding development and making it good. |
| <i>But government agencies do not have information about our area because they have focused on more polluted areas, and now are facing serious budget cuts.</i> | The problem: overall, we're in pretty good shape, but change is coming and we need to be ready. |
| <i>You can help by volunteering to sample water in our area.</i> | Here is something reasonable you can do to make a difference. |

Again, the core message is the base for your communications. It may never get used just on its own, but can be expanded and tailored depending upon your audience, be represented with slogans on a brochure, or be turned into an announcement for a monitoring workshop. The key is that used consistently, it will be identified with you and remembered.

A Picture Really is Worth 1000 Words

Whether you are giving a verbal presentation or preparing a brochure or flier to inform and inspire, use visuals that support your message and provide emotional impact. We all love beautiful shots of nature, but put some thought into how pictures or graphics compel an emotional response or inform. People interacting with nature, especially children, helps people put themselves and their grandkids in the picture. Maps help people understand where they fit in the greater scheme. Photos showing people doing the things you want them to do (stream monitoring, swimming in clean water, observing butterflies along a shoreline maintained in native vegetation) provide inspiration and motivation. Pictures that at one glance tell a story (aerial photo of a sediment plume entering a lake from a river) help imprint your message with your audience.



Drive it Home with Stories

Once you've got your core message, stories and anecdotes that involve real people provide an illustration, making it personal and appealing. The best stories come from the elders in your community – the ones who have lived through it and remember how it used to be. Invite them to tell their stories at community forums, or interview them and include stories in your brochure or newsletter. Tell stories with a who and a why, and highlight successes: “I planted my shoreline with native plants because I love the butterflies that flock there, and my grandkids love that they can always catch frogs there when they come to visit.” Stories create the picture and help people relate to the issue you want them to understand, encouraging action, inspiration and confidence that they can act too.

Repeat, Repeat, Repeat

Once you've got your message down, use it early, often and in multiple formats. It is the tool in your communication toolbox you always reach for first; through repeated use, its familiarity defines your cause. Distill it into a slogan and use it for media and signs. Embellish it with stories and bend it to target different audiences, but keep the essence consistent in all your messaging.



Video (click image above for video): Hear Dorothy Lagerroos explain the message creation process during our May 2009

Meet the Press

To broaden the audience for your message and pique the interest of people you don't have direct access to, the media can be a tremendous asset. But it's important that you frame the issue for them, and your message can help you do that. And always stay on message. Always. The [Citizen Based Stream Monitoring Network](#) has a webpage that provides tips on how to work with your local newspaper.

Recap and Practice

This tool is based on a presentation Dorothy Lagerroos, J.D., Prof. of Gov. and Env. Studies, Northland College, Ashland, WI, presented at River Alliance's 2008 Communication Workshops. Her quick review of all of the tips in the tool follows, as well a helpful worksheet she prepared to help you create your message.

Communicating Environmentally Quick Review

1. Approach your audience by connecting with their values.
 - a. Research their values (don't assume you know – you might be wrong)
 - b. Methods for research:
 - a. National opinion polls (for general audiences)
 - b. Focus groups and interviews (for specialized audiences)
 - c. Study their literature.
2. Who are you talking to?
 - a. Communication is a tool, not a goal. What is your goal?
 - b. Who must do what for you to succeed? (This is your target audience.)
 - c. Who or what will influence them? What is important to them? Can you reach them directly or must you reach them indirectly?
3. Develop your message (a paragraph from which you develop slogans and sound bites).
 - a. Appeal to values
 - b. Describe a threat and who is responsible
 - c. Provide a solution with appropriate action to take
4. Use words that work.
 - a. Use everyday words that everyday people use.
 - b. Make the consequences real and relevant to your audience:
 - i. Health and Safety
 - ii. Children's health and safety
 - iii. Children's future quality of life
 - iv. Money in their pockets (total cost, pay me now or later)

5. Repeat. Repeat. Repeat.
 - a. Deliver your message early and often.
 - b. Use a variety of channels and a variety of (appropriate) messengers.
 - c. Stick to the same message
 - d. Rely on visuals – they say more.

6. Support your audience with:
 - a. Specific things they can do
 - b. Encouragement and empowerment
 - c. Models, mentors,
 - d. Success stories, stories about people, more stories

Now you are ready to create your message. We have provided a worksheet, [Developing Your Message \(PDF\)](#) to walk you through the steps.

Additional Resources

[“Communications Primer for Great Lakes Habitat Advocates”](#) (2005) A 35 page guide. Go to “Tools” then “Great Lakes Communication Toolbox”

[“Americans and Biodiversity: New Perspectives in 2002”](#) A summary of a national research poll by Belden Russonello & Stewart for the Biodiversity Project.

[Fostering Sustainable Behavior: An Introduction to Community Based Social Marketing](#)
By Doug McKenzie-Mohr, Ph.D. A book-length, how-to guide for getting communities to actually change their behavior. New Society Publishers, \$14.95

[Water Words That Work](#) a user-friendly web site with useful words and the research that backs them up.

“The Language of Conservation” (PDF) (2004) A 7-page memo from professional communication advisors, based on nationwide survey and focus group research, suggests words and approaches for The Nature Conservancy and the Trust for Public Land.

[“The Power of Effective Communications”](#) (2007) A 3 page article in the Land Trust Alliance’s newsletter for member land trusts.

[River Talk – Communicating a Watershed Message](#) A 75 page “how to” guide for environmental advocates available for \$15 from River Network.