

Communicating Environmental Messages

NIEL Members' Meeting 9 December 2009

Take Home Messages

Roy Nelson

- Increasing knowledge changes attitudes which (can) lead to changing behaviour
- Conflicting evidence discourages change
- Risk should be a measure of fact; safety based on this calculation is a judgement
- People perceive risk based on their beliefs, experience and attitudes
- Selective attention; people seek information which supports their existing views
- People determine their views with very little evidence
- People interpret risk on the basis of:
 - Dread, control, natural/homemade, choice (related to control), children, awareness, newness, can it happen to me (optimistic bias), risk/benefit trade off, trust
- UK is more sceptical than other countries in every area of 'trust' – government, NGOs, companies
- Optimism bias – people see their personal risk as *less* than society in general or other people
- Attitudes formed from direct experience and social learning
- To elicit change recipients must: Attend the message, Comprehend it, Yield to it, Retain it and Act on it
- The more expert the source the more we attend to it; so good to change opinion of 'expert figure' to lead his peers
- Trustworthiness of the source of information relate to his: motives, overheard more effective than direct, reject if trying to persuade; most effective if message is counter to speaker's self interest
- Messages: non-verbal support for messages, confidence in their message, explicit messages
- Level of emotional appeal; get most with moderate degree of 'fear' – too much, too little, don't get engagement
- Internal factors – likely to occur, fear, obvious and known – more likely to cause change than external (new, preventable, less well known)
- Need to move by increments; big changes resisted
- Resistance to messages which run counter to people's self interest/comfort
- Communication Messages:
 - Concise (max 15 words, no jargon), positive, address underlying public concerns, repeated, provide source for more information, plain English, memorable, include analogies/personal experience, qualitative rather than quantitative, avoid vague terms, acknowledge major uncertainties (which reinforce the message)
- Communicating Risk:

- Chronic vs acute risk, early intervention to change behaviour, use positive role models, use analogies, clear positive messages, clarity of message, positive, build trust in source, involve public and media, coping behaviour, evaluate intended and unintended changes

Brian Black

The Arctic Ocean forms a sink for the pollutants we discharge into our rivers and seas. These find their way into the food chain and contaminate the micro organisms that eventually work their way up through fish and seals to the higher mammals especially the Polar Bear. At the same time air-borne pollutants go into the atmosphere where they are also absorbed into the ocean. This toxic mix of pollutants is also causing scientists to consider the possible acidification of the Polar Seas. The combined effect of all this has profound implications for people living in more temperate latitudes - what happens when the glaciers melt and increase the volume of fresh water in the seas? What impact will all this have on the Gulf Stream that keeps us warm in winter? What will happen to creatures like the Polar Bear that we claim to be so concerned about? I have experienced all this at first hand and try to bring back the message in my films and articles about what is happening out of our sight and beyond our thoughts.

Points for Communications:

- Direct evidence of major impacts of climate change in last 10 years; glaciers moving 10 times faster than a decade ago
- People don't see it, so don't accept it's happening – out of sight out of mind; we just don't care
- People are uncomfortable being challenged
- Keep it Simple Stupid – and repeat often
- TV is a tabloid medium – not built for complex messages
- Our lifestyles are impacting on others' lives

Ivor Whitten

- Lobbying – to affect or prevent change in order to achieve your aims and objectives
- Lobbying involves: research, message, delivery
- Know who you are and what you want
- Research: political, government, social contexts
- Who will be affected, who will take decisions, who needs to be influenced?
- Message: relevance (to those you want to influence), responsiveness (2 sides to every story! Acknowledge opposition points and address those points), repetition (lots of information comes in and is lost)
- Message context: political, legislative, policy and cultural/social/electoral environments; tailor message to suit these, recognise needs of politicians
- Be explicit re benefits to people, decrease costs, improve popularity/votes
- KISS – Keep it Short and Simple
- Target Messages; Clear on what want them to DO, Who is being targeted (word message appropriate to that target), Level of message – language, NO jargon or acronyms; be solution oriented – problem AND what want done about it

- Be Early, Be Persistent, Be Patient
- Consultations necessary; best to get in at pre-consultation stage
- EVALUATE – assess, learn, improve – vital, demonstrates accountability

Discussion Session

- Using celebrities can be effective, but only if they're passionate, keen, knowledgeable – and don't undermine your case by personal behaviour!
- Don't underestimate the knowledge and experience of the environmental NGO sector – respected and capable
- Problem of people not even caring about local issues they see, how can they care about the bigger ones? – keep at it!
- Need for government to lead, set the legislative framework within which people must act
- Past decades marketplace was central; society very convenience oriented and need major shift, as will need people to do inconvenient things; legislation enforcing behavioural change required (but will get backlash)
- All politics is local; use local examples to grab politicians' interest
- Education of youth is key, much is being done but more needs to be done
- Most people are aware of the issues, but don't see (or won't act on) relevance to themselves
- Have learned a lot about communicating complex messages, often from food issues; there is hope
- Need different messages for different people, targeted to their interests
- Pick your battles, and pick winnable ones; incremental change will lead to mass change over time
- Problem of enforcing change vs freedom of choice; conflict of societal benefit vs individual preference/benefit; government lead required
- How you say things is important – 'friends do things for friends' – works for MLAs too. Be a trusted source of information.
- Balance your effort to get things done on consultations, committees, etc; select the key point and really hammer it home; if you don't respond you can't ask supplementary questions, so get something in
- Don't grumble amongst yourselves, complain directly to the relevant MLA, Councillor etc.; use lots of pressure points!