

EUKI Academy Web Seminar Report

Smart Climate Communication – Why Communicators need to go beyond Facts

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Facts or fiction? Science or stories? How can we communicate climate action effectively? In order to deep dive into the logics and key factors of smart climate communication, the [EUKI Academy](#) invited Carl Mohn, who is editor in chief at [klimafakten.de](#), the leading German-language online resource on climate communications, as well as program director at [Clean Energy Wire \(CLEW\)](#).

Everyone is concerned with global warming, climate policy or even climate change adaptation. However, despite the overarching worrying, the action that is taken to tackle the climate crisis is not enough by any means. Communication is key when it comes to climate action - whether in companies or civil society, in politics or science, in authorities or the media, it is necessary to listen, write and discuss about climate action. So, how can we talk about climate in a way that motivates people to act?

Why the information deficit model of communication has failed us

Our communicative intuition is typically shaped by the **information deficit model**, a theory dating back to the Age of Enlightenment. According to this theory, people have a deficit of knowledge which is why you need to give them facts and arguments and then *something* happens, ideally climate action. The problem is that according to research it doesn't work that way – because facts and information are not the only factors that motivate people to act.

Instead of only talking about facts, accompanying efforts to appeal to people's **values** is a more promising strategy. Humans are driven by their respective ideas of how the world should look like and most people have a deep yearning to be seen as "good". Talking about shared values builds a strong basis for collective action. Every value can be useful for climate communication – it is the challenge of the communicators to find out the most important values of their audiences and then explore ways how these values can go hand in hand with climate policies.

Navigating disinformation: how to find a sober strategy on tackling discourses of delay

Discourses of delay are resonating with specific segments of the public (e.g. statements like "Our carbon footprint is tiny compared with USA/China/India.") – when communicating climate issues, it is helpful to be aware of these discourses of delay in order to tackle them with the following approaches:

In a political context, countering wrong arguments with the right argument alone usually won't win the battle. A more promising strategy is using the **insider's approach** by telling people why you know what you know (this is also applied in the IPCC process). It does not just suffice to say what the science says, it's also important for the audience to know why we can rely on science, how science works and how the process behind certain insights functions.

Disinformation can also be countered with the **vaccination approach** by exposing and talking about the methods of disinformation. This way, the audience can understand the mechanisms behind disinformation.

The key role of cognitive dissonance

People undergo feelings of unease when their actions and their ideas of “who they are” are diverging – because by nature people don’t like to feel split up between their values and their actions. Cognitive dissonance is therefore perceived as a dangerous threat to our identity and there is a strong impulse to avoid the negative sentiments associated with it. People want to protect their integrity and in doing so, three modes of reaction may surface:

- 1) We adapt our actions to our beliefs and values.
- 2) We adapt our beliefs and values to what we do.
- 3) We learn to cope with ambivalence and ambiguity.

Oftentimes, people who are skeptical when it comes to climate action are people who have chosen to adapt their beliefs and values to their actions. Knowing this mechanism is helpful for developing counter-strategies.

Why communication can’t fix everything: the limits of communication

Even though communication is incredibly important, communication can’t do magic – for example, it cannot turn a bad product into a quality product. Also, cognitive dissonance may be triggered by appealing to do “the right thing” in an environment that does not reward doing that right thing. People may even resort to resistance, defiance, dismissal, denial or shifting the blame. In the end, climate communication has to go hand in hand with changing the political framework.

How to smart climate communication: Recommendations and best practices

- ✓ Don’t think that facts will do the trick. While experts can provide knowledge and slogans like “follow the facts” feel very plausible, providing facts is not enough to motivate people to act.
- ✓ Forget the denialists. Studies clearly show that people in Europe are generally in favor of meaningful climate action. The majority of people is concerned about climate change – don’t let people indulging in discourses of delay stop you from communication climate issues.
- ✓ Don’t be afraid of mentioning what’s right and wrong: Talk about values.
- ✓ Always make an effort to know your audience. Do your own social research – set up a focus group and find out people's thoughts, feelings and values. This is not about statistical quality, but more about getting a feeling for your audience.
- ✓ Always test your messages. Nuances will decide whether your audience is listening in or turning off. Before starting your communication, find people willing to be your test objects.
- ✓ Study what brings about societal change and aim for the social tipping points.
- ✓ Factor in cognitive dissonance as a source of opposition.
- ✓ Be aware of the limits of communication. While communication is in general undervalued and important, there are certain limits.