

## How to craft a climate change communication

By Les Robinson

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It's time to stop arguing the case for human-induced climate change. Even Tony Abbot agrees with it now. The only people who don't believe in it now probably won't be won by rational argument anyway. Instead it's time to decisively shift the story to what people can do, and are doing, about it.

### Why shift the focus to action?

A weakness with much climate change communication is the unstated assumption that it's all about to getting the audience to agree with scientific propositions about climate change. That's a knowledge-based theory of change.

However, as Futerra pointed out in the pioneering *Rules of the Game* guide, communication without agency <sup>1</sup> is a recipe for denial. When people are presented with uncomfortable facts, denial is always the most convenient option *unless* there is an immediately available, credible action, within their perceived abilities, that reduces the discomfort. Notice how GetUp does this beautifully: bad news is immediately followed by an opportunity to join thousands of others in funding high impact advertising campaigns. Sure, it's bad news, but psychological relief is just a few clicks away. That's an example of how important agency is when you have a bad news message.

By arguing the basics of climate change we also create an opening that fossil-fuel advocates, and the media, can't resist.

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<sup>1</sup> Agency is the capacity of individuals to make independent choices and cause action in the world.

It's fantastically easy to confuse a facts-based communication, simply by throwing in contradictory facts that the audience has no way to critically assess.<sup>2</sup>

So let's shift the focus from knowledge to action. "Reframing around agency" has great benefits. It reduces denial and focuses on the ultimate point of communication – action! It lets us tell hopeful stories about optimistic people living their dreams. And when many people act, it's "social proof" that the action is right, safe and desirable.

This is a fundamental shift of mind-set for the communicator. Instead of asking what we want people to KNOW, it's necessary to start with what we want people to DO and then work backwards. Fortunately the explosion of interest in behavioural psychology in the recent years provides us with useful guidance on how to frame communications for maximum impact on people's actions.<sup>3</sup>

Here's an example of how to craft an action-based climate change communication that incorporates lessons from behavioural psychology based on *5 Doors*<sup>4</sup> and *The MINDSPACE Guide*.<sup>5</sup>

**As a starting point: here's a typical knowledge-based climate change message:<sup>6</sup>**

"Climate change threatens the basic elements of life for people around the world - access to water, food production, health, and use of land and the environment."

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<sup>2</sup> For an illustration of the futility of facts-based advocacy, see <http://enablingchange.posterous.com/the-futility-of-data>

<sup>3</sup> Not that communication ALONE can't be expected to change behaviour. Structural changes are vital partners in a behaviour change program. In the example below, the pricing and accessibility of "fuzzy-strips" would be vital program objectives.

<sup>4</sup> *5 Doors* integrates a number of theories of behaviour change into a single model: [http://www.enablingchange.com.au/enabling\\_change\\_theory.pdf](http://www.enablingchange.com.au/enabling_change_theory.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> *MINDSPACE - Influencing behaviour Through Public Policy* is published by the UK Institute for Government: <http://enablingchange.posterous.com/changing-behaviour-without-changing-minds-the>

<sup>6</sup> Taken from the *Stern Review: the Economics of Climate Change*, Executive Summary

Now let's transform it, based on what we know about behavioural psychology.

### **1) First, reframe it around an action we'd like our audience to take**

Start with a specific, concrete action that's relevant to the particular audience and within their capacity. If your audience were householders, the message might be.

“Weatherising your home is an important way to take action to help reduce the impacts of climate change.”

Now the subject isn't a daunting global problem, it's a positive personal action that anyone can do. Notice that one size doesn't fit all – your choice of action will depend on that particular audience's needs and capacity.

Notice also that we've chosen just one action. Choice tends to leave people paralysed and confused unless there is a simple way to resolve the dilemma – the simplest way to do this is by not offering any choice at all!

Weatherisation has another advantage – it's a quick win. People need a starting point on their journey of change and it's best to choose one that offers a relatively quick motivation-boosting success.

### **2) Frame around the immediate personal benefits**

So far the benefits are remote in time and space. Let's refocus on immediate benefits. Notice how the communication instantly becomes make it warm and personal.

And let's also start building agency by reminding people that the action is do-able.

“Weatherising gives you a home that’s *cool in summer, warm in winter and cheaper to run*. It’s one of the *easiest* ways you can to take action on climate change.”

### 3) Remove the pressure

Denial and resistance are our greatest enemies and it’s incredibly easy to inadvertently create them by making people feel pressured to act. So delete the “you’s” – they make people feel we are pointing the finger at them.

“Weatherising gives ~~you~~ a home that’s cool in summer, warm in winter and cheaper to run. It’s one of the easiest ways ~~you~~ can to take action on climate change.”

### 4) Dump the jargon

Hold it a minute, “weatherising” is a technical term that’s not common in Australia. Most people would understand it better as “draft proofing”. So...

*Draft proofing*  
“~~Weatherizing~~ creates a home that’s cool in summer, warm in winter and cheaper to run. It’s one of the easiest ways we can take action on climate change.”

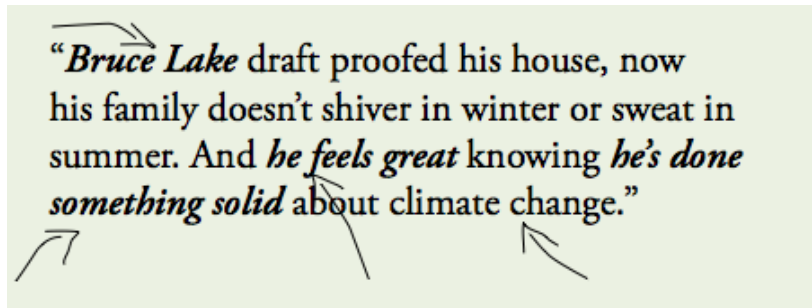
### 5) Tell a story

For lots of reasons, stories are far more powerful communications than claims or facts. Stories allow the audience to imagine themselves in the story, mentally rehearsing the action, and so building their self-efficacy.<sup>7</sup>

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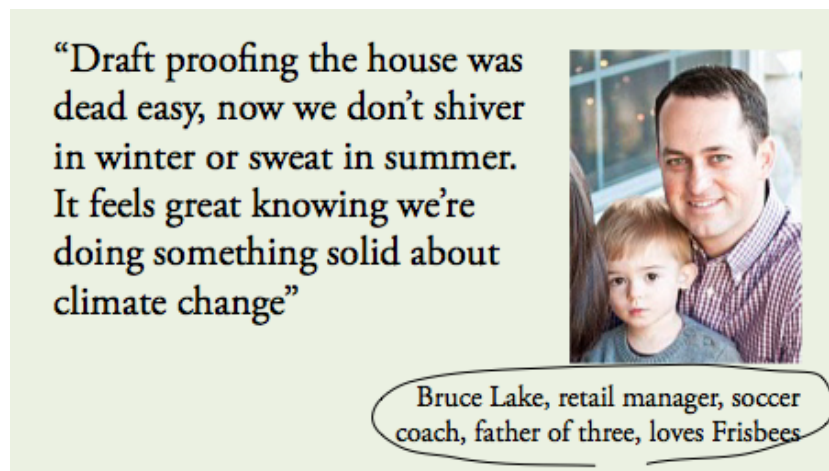
<sup>7</sup> Self-efficacy is much the same as confidence. It’s the belief in your own capacity to perform an act successfully. Self-efficacy is a requirement for agency.

The elements of a story are: a character, an event, and a change that the character experiences as a result.



## 6) Now add a credible voice

Who's the voice? It's an important question, because the audience judges the credibility of a communication by whether they believe the speaker. Currently this message comes from the disembodied voice of government. Sorry, but that's not very credible. Better for it to come from the mouth of a real person who's living the dream. It forces the audience to wonder: If Bruce Lake is living the dream, why not I?



## 7) Link it to the audience's identity

Humans observe the world through the lens of a virtuous self-image or identity. We imagine we are courageous leaders, innovative businessmen, trusted friends, respected farmers and so on. Our journey through life is really a quest to make our lives add up to those hopeful self-images.

Linking a climate change action to virtuous identity, in this case being a good parent, is motivating because it says "weatherisation is something good parents do". Weatherising becomes a way not just to improve your house, but to boost your ego as well!

“Draft proofing the house was dead easy, now we don’t shiver in winter or sweat in summer.

*I reckon the kids are healthier.*

It feels great knowing we’re doing something solid about climate change”



Bruce Lake, retail manager, soccer coach, father of three, loves Frisbees

## 7) Now delete “climate change”

OK, now take a breath...this will be hard. Do you even need to mention climate change? It’s a cold technical abstraction, emotionless and remote from daily life. As a result it has little power to motivate. Who cares exactly why people act, as long as they do the right thing. Afterwards, they’ll rationalise the action as being, at least in part, about the climate. There’s no need to frame it around climate change if climate change is not a motivator.

So let’s delete climate change, and replace it with a more general appeal to his children’s environment. This builds on the ego-boosting we did above.

“Draft proofing the house was dead easy, now we don’t shiver in winter or sweat in summer.

~~I reckon the kids are healthier.~~

*It’s one thing I could do to give them a better environment.”*



Bruce Lake, retail manager, soccer coach, father of three, loves Frisbees

## 8) Add social proof

If a lot of people are doing it, it must be a good idea and it must be safe. That’s called “social proof”.



“Draft proofing the house was dead easy, now we don’t shiver in winter or sweat in summer. And I reckon the kids are healthier. It’s one thing I could do to give them a better environment.”

Join the 65% of Australians who’ve draft-proofed their homes, and saved money on their electricity bills.



Bruce Lake, retail manager, soccer coach, father of three, loves Frisbees

### 9) Appeal to loss aversion

People are more motivated to avoid losses than to make gains, so reframe the content around loss avoidance.

“Draft proofing the house was dead easy, now we don’t shiver in winter or sweat in summer. And I reckon the kids are healthier. It’s one thing I could do to give them a better environment.”

Join the 65% of Australians who’ve draft-proofed their homes. *It’s one way to help dodge big rises in electricity prices due in the next 12 months.*



Bruce Lake, retail manager, soccer coach, father of three, loves Frisbees

### 10) Add a surprise

Unexpected turns of phrase or twists of plot grab peoples’ attention as the try to figure them out. This makes your communication stand out from the noise.

*"Fuzzy-stripping* the house was dead easy, now we don't shiver in winter or sweat in summer. And I reckon the kids are healthier. It's one thing I could do to give them a better environment."

Join the 65% of Australians who've draft-proofed their homes. It's one way to help dodge big rises in electricity prices due in the next 12 months.



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### 11) Add positive emotions

People are attracted to positive emotions. So let's add some good feelings, by using value words like love and happiness.

*"I love* my fuzzy-strips Fuzzy-stripping the house was dead easy, now we don't shiver in winter or sweat in summer. And I reckon the kids are *happier*. It's one thing I could do to give them a better environment."

Join the 65% of Australians who've draft-proofed their homes. It's one way to help dodge big rises in electricity prices due in the next 12 months.



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### 12) Build self-efficacy

Weatherising is an unfamiliar activity for a lot of people. Unfamiliarity creates anxiety. What if they do it wrong, make a mess, or suffer loss or embarrassment?

To help overcome people's fears of starting an unfamiliar activity, it's essential to communicate a model of action that people can visualise and mentally rehearse.



So, add one or two photos showing HOW to weatherise. And link to a visual step-by-step guide.

**“I love my fuzzy-strips.**  
Fuzzy-stripping the house was dead easy, now we don’t shiver in winter or sweat in summer. And I reckon the kids are happier. It’s one thing I could do to give them a better environment.”

Join the 65% of Australians who’ve draft-proofed their homes. It’s one way to help dodge big rises in electricity prices due in the next 12 months.



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The easiest way to start weatherising your home is putting weather strips around doors. See [www.howtoweatherise.com](http://www.howtoweatherise.com) for a step-by-step guide.

### **What a transformation!**

Notice how the message has changed from fact-based, global, gloomy, abstract, and helplessness-inducing to action-based, personal, inspiring, concrete and empowering. That’s the journey we need to take if we are going to craft climate changes messages which really prepare people for action.

## **Some valuable guides for the climate change communicator:**

### **MINDSPACE – Influencing Behaviour Through Public Policy**

The Institute for Government, UK

<http://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/content/133/mindspace-influencing-behaviour-through-public-policy>

### **Rules of the Game** by Futerra

The evidence base for the Climate Change Communication Strategy

<http://www.futerra.co.uk/downloads/RulesOfTheGame.pdf>

### **The Psychology of Climate Change Communication**

Centre for Research on Environmental Decisions

<http://www.cred.columbia.edu/guide/guide/intro.html>

### **Changing the Carbon Conversation** by Republic of Everyone

<http://www.republicofeveryone.com/republications/ChangingtheCarbonConversation.pdf>