

CLIMATE ENGAGEMENT



Best Practices for Engaging Communities

Effectively engaging the public is crucial to building support for a low carbon future. To improve our public engagement capacity, the Toronto Environmental Alliance (TEA) examined some of the most successful approaches to public engagement on climate change from across North America. Our findings were distilled into seven climate engagement design principles that act as best practices for engaging the public.

We want to share these design principles with the many groups that are working to create a low carbon future and hope they will help you better engage the public.

CLIMATE ENGAGEMENT DESIGN PRINCIPLES

1. Identify and Build Relationships with Leaders Ready to Act

There is no general public and you don't need to move everyone but identifying and building relationships with the 9-10% of community leaders ready to act can result in significant buy-in and momentum for policy shifts. Investments in "power mapping" efforts, contact management databases that allow for segmentation and tailored outreach, and relationship management processes such as "engagement ladders" are paying off for many organizations, even if it takes some time to ramp up these programs. Supporting a diverse range of community leaders in engaging their networks helps reach new audiences and creates new social norms by illustrating support for climate action and leadership outside of the environmental base.

2. Participatory Design & Execution

Engagement organizing relies on leveraging community leaders to help define and execute social change campaigns, not just be recipients of communications and requests for funding or volunteer hours. Using participatory design tools, groups are involving supporters in helping to set policy/social change priorities and becoming active partners in reaching decision-makers, contacting media, providing representation at policy meetings, achieving behavior change, etc. Canvass programs are evolving thanks to technology that allows for better targeting and tracking of relationships and more creative asks, such as encouraging calls to decision makers or complete a tablet survey right on the doorstep.

3. Co-Explore Risk and Responses

Climate communication research and practice also shows that engagement increases when people co-explore risk and potential responses, rather than having these be prescribed. The use of tools such as visualizations, neighborhood impact and response scenarios, community dialogues, and other tools can support the co-exploration of risk and response as part of a participatory design process.

4. Localize It

Building effective engagement organizing models and climate action campaigns often means localizing issues (e.g. threats and opportunities) where a sense of urgency, relevancy, and efficacy can be generated. Localizing issues can tap into a sense of place and community pride as a motivation for action. While there is evidence that focusing on a threat (e.g. oil tanker traffic) can spark interest and engagement, whether this works over the long term or with stakeholders outside of the environmental base is questionable given fatalism around environmental, climate and energy issues. This places the importance of testing the use of more aspirational and positive frames and approaches.

5. Focus the Ask and Be Bold

Many people care, but don't know how best to engage in a way that will result in meaningful change on scale with the challenge of climate disruption and our dependence on fossil fuels. Articulating a clear goal (eg. targeting the city building that emits the most carbon) helps define the action landscape and provides an entry point for focused calls to action that advance and illustrate progress toward that goal (eg. attend a community meeting to convert your building to 100% clean energy). Focusing the ask is critical yet it is also important to be bold. Aiming for a big goal, such as becoming the 'greenest city in the world' is an aspirational vision backed up by tangible steps to achieve the goal (e.g. becoming 100% renewable in 15 years). Some organizations are finding success by creating "days of action" where supporter bases are mobilized around a common goal at the same time and engaged through both online and in-person activities. These days are often used as a way to create a sense of community and reinforce participation.

6. Values-based Framing

In some cases, organizations are rethinking environmental framing and broadening narratives by focusing on a large suite of community well-being issues. This often coincides with a shift from using technical policy and science information campaigns to values-based communication. Values-based framing can provide opportunities to connect with stakeholders who hold very different worldviews, including those skeptical to the reality of climate disruption. Messengers matter, meaning partners such as real estate boards, business associations who influence municipal decision makers are critical. An effective way to develop values-based framing approaches is through participatory design and co-exploring risks and responses to understand common concerns and values. Developing storytelling skills is part of this as a way to best engage in an exchange of values. At the same time, climate communication research shows people are most influenced by their peers but they aren't talking about climate so media continues to play a critical role.

7. Creativity and Competition

Groups are tinkering with innovative ways to make environmental, climate and energy issues relevant and interesting, and motivate engagement through art-based projects, pop culture tie-ins, gamification, and creative problem-solving/design processes. Encouraging leadership by providing incentives and rewards for action, rather than strictly criticism is one approach that has generated engagement on climate issues.



Thanks to a grant from the Toronto Atmospheric Fund, the Toronto Environmental Alliance (TEA) worked in partnership with Social Capital Strategies (SCS) for this project.

