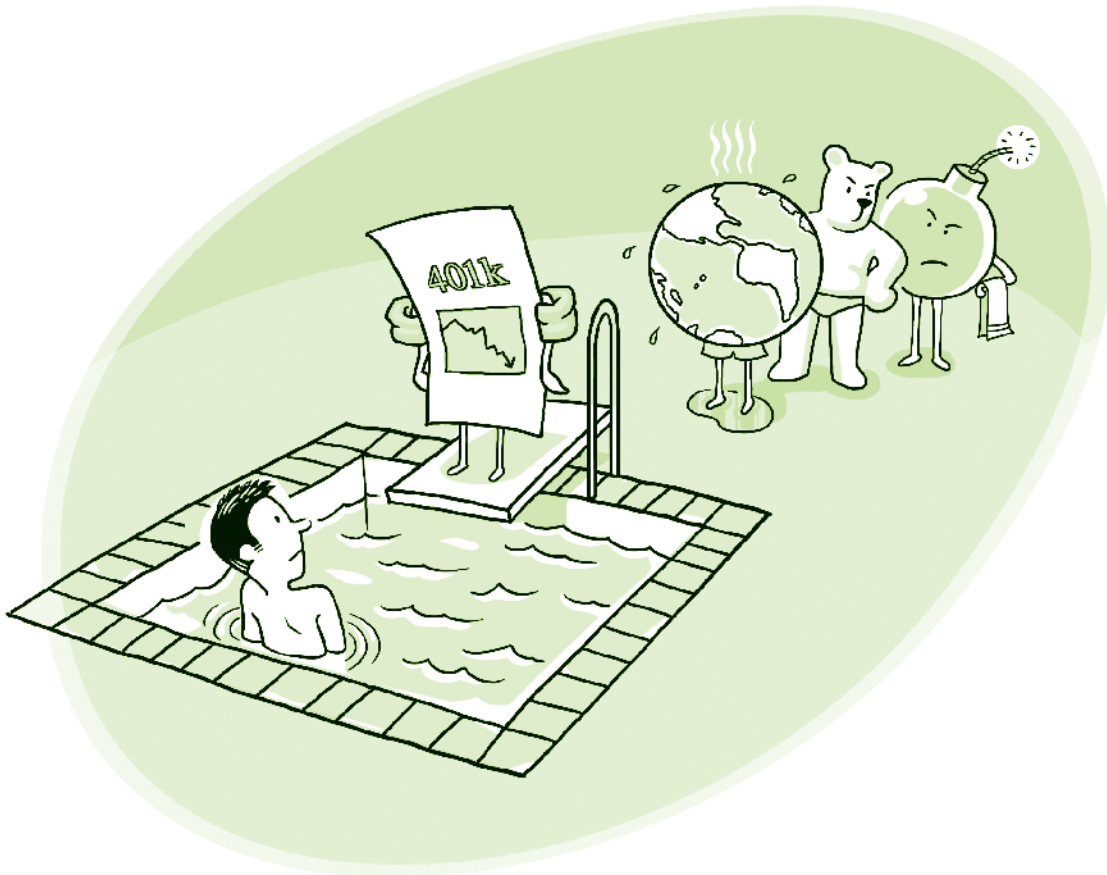


4

Beware the Overuse of Emotional Appeals



It may be tempting to conclude that an effective way to communicate climate change information is to place a greater emphasis on its possible consequences. Some go even further, accentuating the risks by declining to mention the uncertainties involved. Such an approach evokes strong reactions in audiences, including fear of worst-

case climate change scenarios and even heightened interest in what can be done to avoid them. But while an emotional appeal may make people more interested in a presentation on climate change in the short run, it may backfire down the road, causing negative consequences that often prove quite difficult to reverse.

WHAT IS THE FINITE POOL OF WORRY?

Researchers at CRED and elsewhere have discovered that people, even those who might be described as “worrywarts,” have a limited capacity for worrying about issues. Scholars refer to this limited capacity as a **finite pool of worry**,³⁴ and it has three main components that apply to the issue of climate change:

1. Because people have a limited capacity for how many issues they can worry about at once, as worry increases about one type of risk, concern about other risks may lessen. In other words, people tend to pay more attention to near-term threats, which loom larger than long-term ones.³⁵ For example, as anxiety mounted in 2008 and 2009 over the faltering economy, polls showed that many people realigned their list of concerns. The economy vaulted to the top of the list, while environmental issues and climate change fell to the bottom. A recent poll showed that climate change ranked last among the public’s list of top policy priorities.³⁶

In another example, farmers in Argentina were asked to rate how much they worried about political risks, weather and climatic risk, and economic risks. Then farmers were shown a climate forecast for the following spring, predicting less rain than normal. As expected, farmers perceived climate as a greater risk after they had been shown the forecast. Yet, as the concern about climatic risk increased, concern about political uncertainty diminished, even though the political risk had not changed.³⁷

2. Studies show that appeals to the emotional system may work to get someone interested in an issue in the short term, but that it is hard to retain that level of interest. Unless they are given reasons to remain engaged, people’s attention easily shifts to other issues.

3. Studies also show that the effects of worry can lead, paradoxically, to **emotional numbing**. This occurs after repeated exposures to emotionally draining situations and is a commonly observed reaction in individuals living in war zones or dealing with repeated hurricane threats in a short period. The danger of overexposure to threatening issues is especially high given the modern media environment where people confront

a bewildering number and diversity of emotional experiences every day, ranging from news stories to sensational movies.³⁸

HOW TO AVOID NUMBING AN AUDIENCE TO CLIMATE CHANGE

Climate change communicators should:

- Decide what portfolio of risks they want to make the public more aware of and then demonstrate the connection between those risks, such as the relationship between climate change and disease.
- As described in Section 3, balance information that triggers an emotional response with more analytic information to leave a mark in more than one place in the brain.
- Acknowledge that the audience has other pressing issues. Create a balance between pre-existing concerns and the climate change issues to be discussed.
- Gauge an audience’s degree of numbing (i.e., ask them questions about their levels of media exposure to climate change, show them well-known images associated with climate change and note their reaction), make them aware of the various effects of numbing, and encourage them to briefly consider their level of worry and potential numbness to climate change.

WHAT IS THE SINGLE ACTION BIAS?

In response to uncertain and risky situations, humans have a tendency to focus and simplify their decision making. Individuals responding to a threat are likely to rely on one action, even when it provides only incremental protection or risk reduction and may not be the most effective option. People often take no further action, presumably because the first one succeeded in reducing their feeling of worry or vulnerability. This phenomenon is called the **single action bias**.³⁹



For example, although recycling is important, it should be but one activity in a series of behavior changes aimed at reducing climate change. Switching to wind or other renewable energies, consuming less meat, conserving daily energy use, and eating locally grown food are other effective ways to mitigate climate change, to name but a few. However, if individuals and institutions participate in recycling programs, they may be prone to the single action bias and feel like they are already doing enough to protect the environment.

CRED research provides additional evidence of this phenomenon. One study found that, to adapt to climate variability, many farmers in Argentina engaged in only one activity to protect against the impact of drought on their livelihoods, despite having numerous options available to them. For instance, farmers who had the capacity to store grain on their farms were less likely to use irrigation or crop insurance although these measures would have added up to even greater protection against the impact of drought.⁴⁰

Interestingly, recent polling may have found evidence of a mass single action bias—the election of President Barack Obama seems to have shifted Americans’ attitudes about whether or not the state of the environment is improving. Nate Silver, of the polling blog *FiveThirtyEight.com*, argues that Democrats increasingly believe the environment is improving simply based on Obama’s election, whereas the number of Republicans who say the environment is improving has remained about the same since 2008.

“Because of Barack Obama’s election,” Silver wrote, “many Americans assume that the environment is getting better, whether or not it actually is.” Silver cited a Gallup poll from February 2009 that showed 41 percent of Americans think the environment is getting better, compared to just 26 percent in 2008. He argued that such perceptions could prove detrimental to legislative efforts to address global climate change and other environmental problems.⁴¹

HOW TO COUNTERACT THE SINGLE ACTION BIAS

It is human nature to fall prey to it and it is difficult to avoid, but there are steps that communicators can take to counteract the single action bias:


- Make an audience aware of the phenomenon. To demonstrate the single action bias, try the following exercise: Ask your audience how many of them have replaced their light bulbs with compact fluorescent lights—typically a large amount of people raise their hands.




- Then ask how many of them turn off their computer at night—again, a fair number of people will likely raise their hands. But if you ask who does both, the count will go down dramatically. Feel free to insert a third, fourth, or even fifth action to create a portfolio of energy saving and climate change mitigation behaviors.
- Provide energy-saving checklists that people can place in a prominent spot in their home or office. The checklists will remind and encourage people to go beyond just one tip. More people should take a diversified approach as a result.

The example below highlights a different but equally effective approach to defeating the single action bias.

EXAMPLE

The Simple Steps Campaign and Tiered Environmental Action

May 06  Invest in Energy Efficiency

 <p>Got a Minute?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Look for the ENERGY STAR label when buying new appliances. 	 <p>Got a Morning?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Learn how to heat and cool your home more efficiently on the ENERGY STAR website. Then grab your utility bills and use the online tool to evaluate your home's energy use and get recommendations for energy-saving home improvements. 	 <p>Got a Month?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sealing and insulating your home is the most cost effective way to reduce your energy bills. Seal cracks, gaps and holes and add insulation. New ENERGY STAR doors, windows and skylights use the latest technology to save energy and protect your home.
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simplesteps.org

The Natural Resources Defense Council launched Simple Steps, a how-to campaign that divides environmental advice into three tiers based on the commitment level of its audience. Those interested in participating can select information based on whether they want to invest a minute, a morning, or a month adopting a more environmentally responsible lifestyle.

This campaign inherently acknowledges the influence of the single action bias and other psychological phenomena that prevent people from taking effective action to solve complex problems. The campaign sought to counteract the single action bias by encouraging participants to increase their commitments incrementally.