

Communicating about Climate Change in the time of COVID-19

Guidance from the FrameWorks Institute

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As climate communicators, we have a long-standing, deep appreciation for a concept that the pandemic has brought into sharp relief: interconnection. The global COVID-19 outbreak has highlighted how all our lives are intertwined, how our governments and social systems are interdependent, and that our future is one.

It has also accentuated and accelerated the need for us to coordinate around shared, strategic framing. To inspire action on climate in this moment, we need to amplify our vision for the future—but it is a noisy, uncertain time. We need to respond to a rapidly evolving situation, yet steer clear of framing traps that will fall flat, backfire, or cause harm.

This moment calls us to lift up our values, explain how our fates are shared, and show how we can work through this moment to build a healthier, greener, and more just world.

Here are ways we can maximize the positive impact of climate communications during the pandemic:

1. Take time to survey the landscape—and navigate it thoughtfully.

COVID-19 looms large over public life right now, and will for some time. Daily life has been upended by stay-at-home measures, and our worries about health, finances, and the future have been heightened.

When we pause to consider how a climate-related message may land with those who have been directly affected by the virus—or who are tuned into a news cycle full of sobering developments—we take a step to ensure that we *do no harm*.

To decide whether and when to share a message about climate disruption, we can try to anticipate its effects.

If the communication emphasizes a big idea that needs to flourish right now, then it's worth sharing. But if it will primarily add to people's sense of distress or fear, it needs to be reframed—or not shared at all.

Timing also matters. If your communication could influence decisions that are being made right now, get it out there. If it's on a theme that is evergreen, consider holding it until a new season arrives.

2. Make a powerful case for what public institutions can and should do.

To come through both the pandemic and the climate crisis, we need governments to act. If government responsibility goes off the radar, we fail to get the action we need.

But government responsibility is also a topic we must navigate carefully. When people see governments as wholly useless or corrupt, it perpetuates inaction and drives disengagement. When we talk about what governments must do, we should always be clear that government action is do-able, and in line with how our society can and should function.

Put another way: If we start and end with how awful it is that pandemic relief packages are subsidizing fossil fuels, we reinforce the idea that change isn't possible. But if we call on government to act in line with our values, like responsible management and protection, we help people imagine what an active, accountable public sector looks like. In this way, we set the context for what people expect from government after this moment of crisis.

3. Be careful not to pit the climate crisis against the COVID-19 crisis.

We shouldn't risk appearing opportunistic.

It may be tempting to search for “silver linings,” (or, as some have put it, “green linings”) by showing how stay-at-home measures have slowed human activity and benefited the environment. These stories are dangerous. They reinforce the harmful myth that economic security and environmental harmony are fundamentally at odds.

It may also be tempting to point out how the world has mobilized quickly to address the threat of the virus, yet has been slow to act on climate change. We've even seen stories that compare the death toll of the pandemic to the eventual loss of life that climate disruption could cause. This kind of crisis-vs-crisis framing is also dangerous. Messengers who appear to be self-interested or “grinding the same old axe” are unpersuasive, easily dismissed, and often vilified.

We need to make it clear that we are responding to the moment—not taking advantage of it.

4. Show how this moment highlights our connections with each other and the natural world.

We are seeing just how much we rely on each other and how badly we need thriving, connected societies to deal with huge and overwhelming global threats. And we're seeing how much we all depend on healthy environments to get us through the toughest times.

We can build on this. Talk about how this moment highlights our connections to each other and the planet. Tell stories about how these connections work, how they are disrupted, and how they can be restored. Give examples.

5. Balance urgency with efficacy.

When we paint too vivid a picture of impending doom, we may push people to disbelieve it or conclude that nothing can be done to forestall it. They either tune out, or turn inward, tending to their own security.

This is always true, but is especially true now. With stress levels already high, an emotional appeal is unlikely to prompt a spike in public concern—and any bump will inevitably be followed by a much steeper fall.

We need to motivate urgent action and inspire a far-sighted, science-informed response. To do this, balance “we can see a problem ahead” with “there’s a way to steer around it.”

Offer solutions, but don’t forget a sober assessment of the problem. An overly optimistic tone always risks being dismissed as utopian—but in this moment, it will sound particularly out of touch. When we acknowledge the severity of the situation and move quickly to the potential to address it, we build realistic hope.

6. Frame the future.

We need to energize and mobilize people to support a big vision—without leaving the impression that we’re asking for the impossible.

We can do this by emphasizing how much we can achieve despite difficulty—not how much people have to abandon or sacrifice. Balance “bold and necessary” with “feasible and possible.” Show that real and lasting change can be made to work—and what the shared benefits will be.

When we show concretely how an aspect of the pandemic offers a lesson that applies to climate policy, we align our issue with the moment.

And we need to help people see that we have choices: we can ensure that stimulus packages boost sustainable businesses, or we can miss the opportunity and make matters worse.

For example, people are seeing public infrastructure, like bicycle paths and pedestrian walkways, in a new light. They have become symbols of community and essential resources for physical and mental health. This is an opportunity for us to tell a story about the future we imagine: one in which we build and maintain the structures we need for a healthy, vibrant, balanced world.

Highlight collective actions that can alleviate both COVID-19 and climate concerns.

This guidance is drawn from social change communications research conducted by the FrameWorks Institute over the course of 20 years.



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