2024 September

Best Practices in CLIMATE COMMUNICATIONS

Moving People From Awareness to Action

Executive Summary

TEAM

Melinda Briana Epler

Megan Krause

Svitlana Shynkarenko

Susannah Hill

Lily Rybarczyk

Ben Singer

Dot Levin

Noumon Munir

Elizabeth Audiffred

Lauren Snyder, Ph.D.

Introduction

The communications industry should go down in history for our role in stopping climate change.

It's our role to shift the mindsets of our customers, our executives, our investors to understand, embrace, and accelerate sustainable solutions. Using effective marketing and communications strategies, we have the power to convince customers to buy the most sustainable products, to encourage executives to lead sustainable initiatives, to persuade investors to only choose sustainable funds – and to influence the public in taking climate action.

Right now, many people condemn our industry for exacerbating climate change. Decades ago, oil giants used communications to effectively squash concerns about climate change and sow misinformation. The impact is still being felt today.

The moment is now to educate ourselves and to act: 80% of people want their country to do more for climate change; 53% are more worried about climate change this year than last year.[1] At a time when trust in institutions to address climate change is low and dispute over climate change is high, we have a collective responsibility to shift mindsets toward climate-positive decisions, navigating challenges around greenwashing, disinformation, the environmental, social and governance backlash, and more.

Research shows that sustainability is good for business, for society, and for our communities. Let's apply this knowledge to help our communities and our employers.

To succeed, we need to use all the tools in our toolkit, apply all of academia's research, and implement all of our lessons learned. This report is your toolkit to do so. In it, we'll introduce you to the strategy, tactics, and behavioral research needed to effectively and impactfully communicate about climate change. Later this year, we'll release full chapters deeply exploring each of these topics and providing examples of successful campaigns to emulate.

Let's use our platforms for good.

Let's right the history of climate change and the communications industry's role in climate change.

Let's start today. **The moment is now.**

1. The Essential Role of Climate Communications in Driving Action

Before developing your sustainability narrative, envision the impact you – as a communicator – can have: you can attract new customers, increase profit margins, enable longer employee tenures, and increase audience perception of the company. You can also build momentum in climate action and change public perception. Research has outlined these benefits and others.

In fact, consumers have said that they've changed their buying behavior with effective climate communications that encourage mindful consumption, product longevity, and waste reduction. They are also increasingly prioritizing sustainability when making purchasing decisions: 78% of consumers say a sustainable lifestyle is important to them and 30% are more likely to purchase products with sustainable credentials.[2]

Companies' sustainability work is only becoming more important, especially for Millennials and Gen Z: over half of Gen Zers and Millennials say they research a brand's environmental impact and policies before accepting a job offer.[3]

* Three-quarters of Millennials consider a company's social and environmental commitments when deciding where to work, and nearly two-thirds would not take a job if a potential employer lacked strong corporate social responsibility practices.[4]

2. Centering Climate Justice and Equity

Climate communicators have a powerful role in shaping the narrative and action around climate change. It is our responsibility to avoid harmful language and actions that can perpetuate stereotypes, marginalize communities, or minimize their concerns. Employ the following justice and equity principles in your campaigns:

- **Nothing about us without us** - Develop community-centered strategies where you're co-creating solutions with diverse stakeholders. Involve local communities in building new technologies, developing storytelling campaigns, and engaging their communities.
- **Be in right relationship** - Build authentic and equitable partnerships with historically marginalized communities, embracing a "with, not for" mindset. Adopt ethical data collection methods, where communities (not corporations) own their data. Avoid coercion or imposing solutions "for their own good." Hire diverse team members and equitably compensate them.
- **Do no harm** - Ensure people who have been historically marginalized and on the front lines of climate impact can access important innovations. Consider the potential harm of fear-based messaging that can increase anxiety in populations with an already outsized level of climate anxiety.
- **Build trust** - Many people from marginalized communities distrust institutions due to a history of systemic marginalization and injustice. Spend the time to build trust in these communities.
- **Recognize historical and current cultural context** - Work to understand and acknowledge the disproportionate impact climate change has had on frontline communities. Use inclusive language, images, and storytelling practices in your work.

3. Designing Against Greenwashing and Disinformation

Famously, oil giants Chevron, ExxonMobil, BP, and Shell have attracted criticism for greenwashing, or deliberately misleading stakeholders and the public about their sustainability work to benefit the company while hurting society. Unfortunately, the oil industry is not alone—companies in every industry have done this.

To identify greenwashing, the first step is to analyze the claims made or that will be made in a campaign. Assess your materials to identify if the claims are too vague or broad, if there are important omissions, or if they contain false information. This provides a baseline analysis to identifying greenwashing.[5]

To avoid greenwashing, we analyzed the five most common greenwashing tactics to develop three key steps to avoid greenwashing when creating campaigns:

1. **Ensure clarity, accuracy, and completeness of any environmental claims you make.**
2. **Engage deeply with stakeholders to fully understand any claims.**
3. **Carefully assess any third-party validation.**[6]

Yet, climate communications doesn't happen in a vacuum. When building communications strategies, climate communicators also must consider green hushing—when companies downplay sustainability achievements, the anti-ESG movement, and an upswing in climate disinformation.

For campaigns to challenge climate denial and disinformation, preemptively counter false narratives, emphasize scientific consensus and facts in culturally appropriate terms, and acknowledge emotions without relying on fear-based messaging. Engaging in empathic dialogue, using trusted messengers, and framing climate action in ways that resonate with different cultural values are potential strategies to reach unwelcoming or skeptical audiences.

* The earliest example of greenwashing was in the hotel industry, when field biologist and activist Jay Westerveld first coined the term in 1986. He criticized the hotel industry for encouraging guests to reuse towels to "save the environment," when hotels actually wanted to save on laundry costs.[7]

The Social Marketing Process

4. Building Marketing Campaigns that Drive Climate Action

Marketing and communications have the power to inspire and influence people to adopt new technologies, policies, and lifestyles. Utilizing tested frameworks can significantly increase the effectiveness of a campaign in moving people from awareness to action.

Cause marketing campaigns focus on raising awareness of and concern for an issue to a widespread audience. Cause-related marketing is generally a campaign collaboration between for-profit and nonprofit organizations to promote a cause while improving a brand's image.

While cause marketing can be effective in creating awareness, social marketing and community-based social marketing campaigns drive sustained behavior change. Formalized by Philip Kotler and Gerald Zaltman in the 1970s, social marketing targets a specific "priority" audience, follows a systematic strategic planning process, and relies on research and testing as a part of the process.[8] The social marketing process is outlined in the image on this page.

Where social marketing is focused on individual behavior change, community-based social marketing (CBSM) fosters sustainable behaviors through neighbor-to-neighbor or peer-to-peer engagement. Coined by Doug McKenzie-Moore in 1996, CBSM has been effective in driving sustained climate action within organizations, across industries, and throughout metropolitan areas.[9]

* In 2014, Virgin Atlantic Airways (VAA) piloted a program encouraging their airline captains to adopt fuel-efficient practices through a community-based social marketing program. Over an eight-month period, they saved 7,700 metric tons of fuel and $6.1 million USD (in 2014 prices), with 24,500 metric tons of CO2 abated. VAA expanded the program across their business.[10]

5. Applying Behavioral Science to Catalyze Change

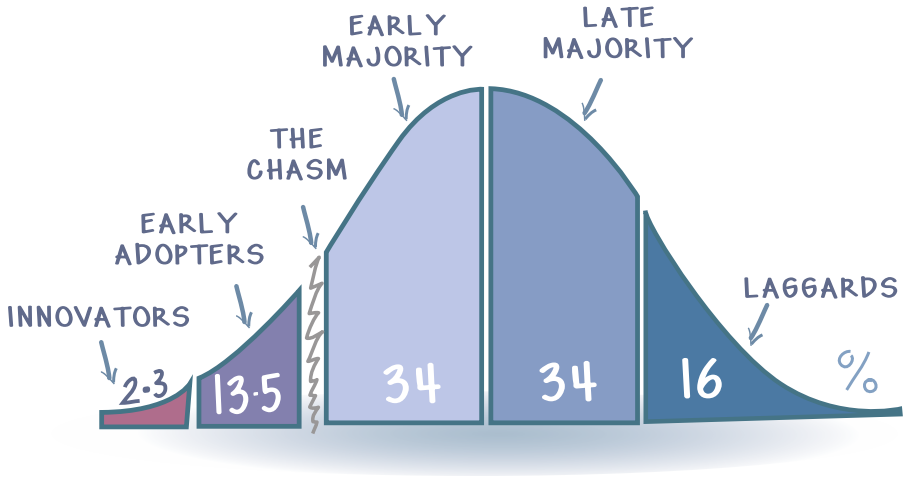
Social marketing and community-based social marketing initiatives are most effective when they integrate behavioral science as a foundation for their campaigns. Behavioral science models help communicators meet people where they are and use storytelling, learning, and other interventions to move them toward taking action.

The Stages of Change for Strategic Communications Model (on the following page) is a modification by Melinda Briana Epler of James O. Prochaska and Carlo Di Clemente's Stages of Change.[11] This model supports strategic communicators in moving individuals from awareness to sustained action. In order to shift people from Unconcerned to Investigating, for instance, focus your communications on building awareness and connecting to a personal need. As an example, when appealing to someone who is Unconcerned, a campaign about home electrification might center on defining electrification and how it can benefit them or their family. Different communications and interventions are needed to move an individual from each stage to the next.

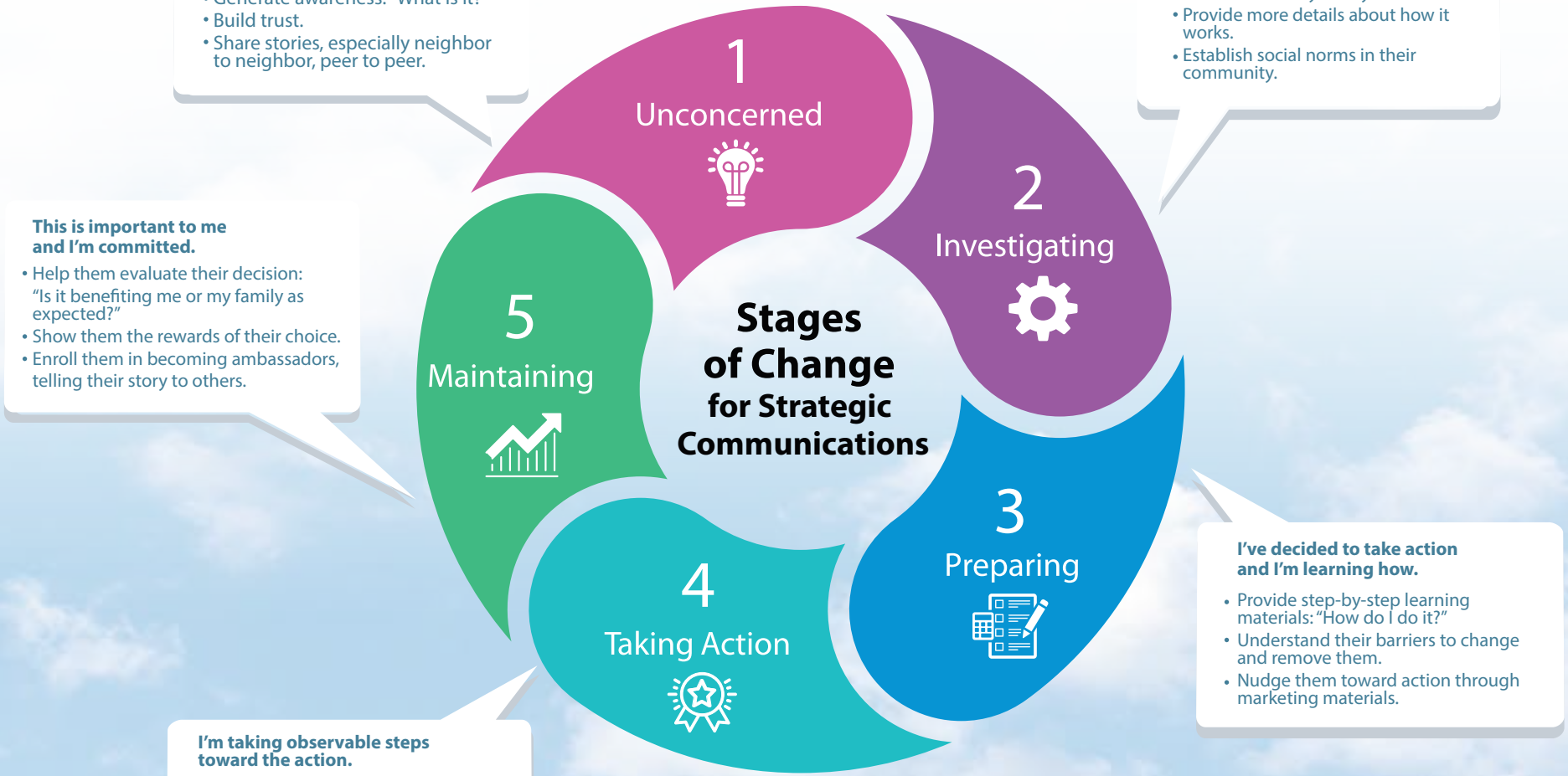
The Diffusion of Innovations Theory was popularized by Everett M. Rogers in 1962 to explain how an innovation is communicated through channels over time among members of a social system.[12] Building upon this theory, Geoffrey Moore popularized the concept of a "chasm" or adoption gap between early adopters and the mainstream, in which many innovations fail.[13] To be successful, marketing and communications strategies should be recalibrated for these distinct audiences who may have very different lifestyles and motivations.

Other effective behavioral models include social psychology models addressing social norms, cognitive psychology theories addressing self-efficacy, community change models, and organizational change theories. These and other theories are important for designing effective messages and programs across communities, organizations, and industries.

The Diffusion of Innovations Theory



The Stages of Change for Strategic Communications Model



6. Developing Powerful Messaging Using Climate Psychology

Developing powerful messaging that moves people to action requires understanding your audience's beliefs and attitudes about an action, appealing to their needs and motivations for taking action, and removing any barriers that might keep them from taking action. The following are common barriers and motivations for climate action.

Common Barriers to Climate Action

"It's not who I am or who I want to be"
"I am not allowed or able to"
"I don't have time"
"I don't want to"
"I can't or won't"
"I'll lose too much"
"I don't trust the messenger"
"I don't know how to"
"I can't afford to"
"I like things the way they are"

Common Motivations for Climate Action

"It's who I am"
"It gives me freedom"
*"Later is too late"**
"It's the right thing to do"
"It matters to my kids"
"If I don't, I'll risk my family's future"
"It's important to my community"
"It will improve my family's health"
"It will cost less"
"It will keep my family safe"

Using Emotional Framing to Drive Climate Action

The new field of climate psychology provides some important considerations for using emotional framing to drive climate action. Many people take climate actions because we have some level of fear of climate change and guilt about contributing to it or not doing enough about it. At the same time, using messages that motivate people to use products or change behaviors based on fear, guilt, or shame can cause anxiety, depression, despair, denial, and avoidance. Climate anxiety is rising globally, especially in frontline communities. Develop messages that evoke these emotions judiciously and compassionately, and couple them with those evoking courage, hope, and clear action as an antidote.

Fear & Climate Anxiety

The climate crisis is creating a new form of *climate trauma*, especially for frontline communities.[14] *Fear*-based messages can provoke initial climate action but also lead to *ecological grief* and *climate anxiety*, which risks stress-related health issues and climate inaction.[15, 16]

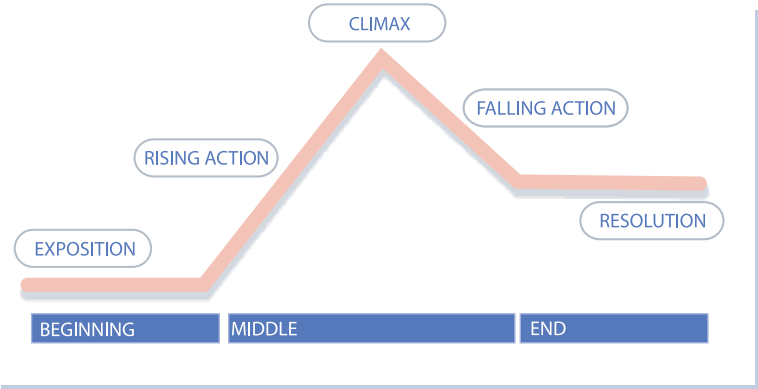
Climate Guilt & Shame

Shame challenges our sense of identity and self-worth. *Guilt* threatens our sense of community and perceived social norms. Appealing to these emotions can drive behavior change if framed in terms of personal responsibility and coupled with action.[17]

The Antidote: Hopeful Action

There are antidotes to the paralysis of fear. *Compassion* can improve our sense of agency.[18] *Hope* can manage fear and propel action.[19] Evoke these feelings in your campaign and become a guide that supports people to attune, reveal, convene, equip, and sustain climate action.[20]

Narrative Arc



NARRATIVE PARTS	APPLE'S STORY
Exposition	In the first minute, the Apple team is gathering and discussing what they want to say. The ad touches on Apple's carbon-neutral offices to provide context.
Complication, or rising action	Mother Nature's arrival cues rising tension, nervous looks, and unvoiced concerns around the table. She responds with thunder when Apple CEO Tim Cook asks how the weather was.
Climax	Mother Nature questions Apple's sustainability plans, showcasing skepticism and disbelief. The Apple team begins to share how Apple is on track for its climate goals and its work in removing plastic from its packaging, using 100% recycled aluminum for its products, and phasing out leather among other examples. However, the tension remains with Mother Nature's continued skepticism.
Reversal or falling action	Mother Nature finishes grilling with Apple team, and they share their very first carbon neutral product with her.
A dénouement, or moment of release	Mother Nature approves of the work the Apple team is doing and heads out. The entire Apple team relaxes. The relief is palpable.

7. Using Narrative Structures to Create Lasting Impact

The root of effective communications is storytelling, also called the narrative approach. The majority of information humans store in our consciousness is in stories. Listening to stories requires and activates more parts of our brain than other types of information, and can more effectively persuade people.[21] The most successful Super Bowl commercials follow the same five-part narrative arcs as Shakespeare plays. Narrative ads can increase awareness of abrand, improve perception of the services or product quality in the ad, raise shopping intention, and more.[22]

To create lasting impact, climate communications campaigns need to use the narrative approach and pair it with transmedia storytelling, which is the telling of a single story across multiple platforms. Apple does this well in its Mother Nature ad, showcasing the work toward its sustainability goals and its first carbon neutral product.[23] The ad follows the narrative arc used by Shakespeare. The campaign leverages transmedia storytelling—the ad was shared on multiple platforms, drove dialogue and resulted in more curiosity about Apple's sustainability work—to expand the reach, effect, and durability of its message.

However, understanding your audience's perspective on climate can make or break how your story resonates. Review the climate audiences from the Yale Program on Climate Change Communication (alarmed, concerned, cautious, disengaged, doubtful and dismissive) to create more resonant climate narratives.[24]

8. Engaging Employees in Climate Strategies

When a company shares their sustainability goals clearly with employees, employees are more likely to adopt sustainable behaviors and take psychological ownership of corporate efforts. This effect is stronger when employees are given higher autonomy to include sustainability in their decisions at work.[25] In fact, employees rate both themselves and their company more favorably when they see ESG reports reflecting their environmental efforts.[26]

Employees need to be part of any company's climate communications for the most impactful result.

We recommend five actions to maximize your climate work with employees:

1. Provide employees with clarity on sustainability goals. Use the same tactics to avoid greenwashing internally as externally.
2. Designate forums for employee discussions on sustainability, including opportunities for them to respectfully question your corporate sustainability impact.
3. Outline how employees can be part of the sustainability process and reward their contributions.
4. When asking employees to shift their behaviors, use behavioral science techniques to meet them where they are and move them from awareness to action over time.
5. Create, distribute, and uphold clear codes of conduct prioritizing employee safety and security. This helps create a safer environment for contribution and can prevent negative experiences and distrust.

9. Integrating Climate Communications in Corporate Disclosures

Corporate sustainability disclosures publish otherwise confidential information about a company's climate actions and impacts. Regulators and third-party organizations around the world require and publish corporate sustainability information based on standards and accounting frameworks. Climate disclosures often start life as an unavoidable task for the CFO and Investor Relations, yet they are an opportunity for building a company's reputation through public trust-building and transparency.

Understanding the details of mandatory and voluntary disclosures and their audiences can guide how and what you disclose to investors, consumers, employees, or other audiences.

To prepare for climate disclosures, make sure to learn about the data to be disclosed, ensure cross-functional collaboration is in place, and prepare a marketing communications strategy. In addition, plan for the possibility that your company will need to correct inaccurate data or communicate a failed target. When this occurs, address the problem as quickly as possible, discuss the progress made toward climate targets, and follow up as you make that progress.

Conclusion

Together, let's right the history of climate change. Let's lead the change as a communications industry.

What have you learned? How will you make a difference?

In our research and work, we found that the most lasting, impactful communication campaigns about climate and sustainability tell stories, evoke emotions, prioritize collaboration, deeply understand their audience, leverage all platforms, anticipate challenges, and encourage dialogue.

Add these strategies to your toolkit and share them with your peers. Test different emotional framing in your campaign messages, and analyze your results. What works best? Collaborate with a community and increase the durability of your strategy and storytelling. Find even better techniques and share them with your peers.

We've seen incremental progress on climate change so far. We need to cross the tipping point, rapidly accelerating progress and changing behaviors. We are on the right path: in 2023, renewables were 86% of new power capacity worldwide, and $57.5 trillion in assets are managed under frameworks that exclude oil and gas investments.[27, 28]

Let's use our platforms for good.

The communications industry should go down in history for our role in stopping climate change.

Let's start today.

» **Our moment is now.**

Melinda Briana Epler: melinda@empovia.co

Megan Krause: megank@highwirepr.com

Svitlana Shynkarenko: svitlanashynkarenko@gmail.com

Susannah Hill: susannah.hill@gmail.com

Designed by
Olga Kostrzhytska: artkosolga@gmail.com

Endnotes

1. Flynn, Cassie, Silvia Tovar Jardon, Stephen Fisher, Matthew Blayney, Albert Ward, Hunter Smith, Paula Struthoff, and Zoë Fillingham, "The Peoples' Climate Vote 2024," United Nations Development Programme (June, 2024).
2. NielsenIQ, "Sustainability: The New Consumer Spending Outlook" (October 1, 2022).
3. Cone Communications, "CSR Study" (January 1, 2017).
4. Ibid.
5. Carlson, Les, Stephen J. Grove, and Norman Kangun, "A Content Analysis of Environmental Advertising Claims: A Matrix Method Approach," *Journal of Advertising* 22, no. 3 (1993): 27-39, doi.org/10.1080/00913367.1993.10673409.
6. Berrone, Pascual, "Green Lies: How Greenwashing Can Destroy a Company (And How to Go Green Without the Wash)," CreateSpace (March, 2016).
7. Moodaley, Wayne, and Arnesh Telukdarie. 2023. "Greenwashing, Sustainability Reporting, and Artificial Intelligence: A Systematic Literature Review" *Sustainability* 15, no. 2: 1481. doi.org/10.3390/su15021481
8. Kotler, Philip and Gerald Zaltman, "Social marketing: an approach to planned social change," *Journal of Marketing*, (July 1971) 35(3):3-12, PMID: 12276120.
9. McKenzie-Mohr, Doug, *Fostering Sustainable Behavior: An Introduction to Community-Based Social Marketing*, 3rd Ed. (New Society Publishers, 2011).
10. Kassirer, Jay, "Virgin Atlantic's Airline Captains Improve Fuel Efficiency," Tools of Change (December 16, 2021).
11. Prochaska, J. O., & Velicer, W. F., "The Transtheoretical Model of Health Behavior Change," *American Journal of Health Promotion*, (1997) 12(1):38-48, doi.org/10.4278/0890-1171-12.1.38
12. Rogers, Everett M., *Diffusion of Innovations*, 5th Ed. (Free Press: 2003).
13. Moore, Geoffrey A., *Crossing the Chasm: Marketing and Selling Disruptive Products to Mainstream Customers*, 3rd Ed. (Harper Business: 2014).
14. "Climate Trauma Overview," *Ecopsychepedia*, accessed September 19, 2024.
15. Woodbury, Zhiwa, "Climate Trauma: Toward a New Taxonomy of Trauma," *Ecopsychology* (2019) 11:1, 1-8, doi.org/10.1089/eco.2018.0021.
16. Ro, Christine, "The harm from worrying about climate change," *BBC* (October 10, 2019).
17. Obradovich, N. and Guenther, S.M., "Collective responsibility amplifies mitigation behaviors," *Climatic Change* 137, (2016): 307–319. doi.org/10.1007/s10584-016-1670-9.
18. Climate Psychology Alliance, "Handbook of Climate Psychology" (August 29, 2022).
19. Naidoo, Kumi, Marcy Franck, and Ann-Christine Duhaime, "Revolutionary Hope and Optimism" in *A New Era in Climate Communications: A System Change Approach to Climate Communications*, New Zero World and Global Commons Alliance (March 21, 2024).
20. Lertzman, Renée, *Be A Guide: Our Guiding Principles*, Project Inside Out (2020).
21. Peterson, Lani, "The Science Behind The Art Of Storytelling," *Harvard Business Publishing* (November 14, 2017).
22. Zatwarnicka-Madura, Beata, and Nowacki, Robert, "Storytelling and its Impact on Effectiveness of Advertising," 8th International Conference of Management (October 26, 2018).
23. Apple Inc., "Mother Nature Needs a Status Report," accessed September 19, 2024.
24. Yale Program on Climate Change Communication, "Global Warming's Six Americas," accessed September 19, 2024.
25. Bhattacharya, C.B., Sankar Sen, Laura Marie Edinger-Schons, and Michael Neureiter, "Corporate Purpose and Employee Sustainability Behaviors," *Journal of Basic Ethics* 183, 963–981 (2023), doi.org/10.1007/s10551-022-05090-5.
26. May, Amy Yeo Chu, Gan Soong Hao, and Steve Carter, "Intertwining Corporate Social Responsibility, Employee Green Behavior, and Environmental Sustainability: The Mediation Effect of Organizational Trust and Organizational Identity," *Economics, Management, and Financial Markets*, Vol. 16, Number 2 (June 2021), ceeol.com/search/article-detail?id=963241.
27. U.S. Energy Information Agency, "Short-Term Energy Outlook" (September 2024).
28. Net Zero Asset Managers Initiative, "Home Page," accessed September 19, 2024.