

Campaign Strategy Newsletter 57 February 2010

Climate Change Campaigns: Keep Calm But Don't Carry On

This month I've posted a new paper at www.campaignstrategy.org 'Climate Change Campaigns: Keep Calm But Don't Carry On' which looks at strategies for climate campaigners in the aftermath of the Copenhagen climate talks. The paper argues against that strategies which primarily focus on the formal international UN climate talks are now out of date because like the talks themselves, they are being overtaken by events.

Millions of people, businesses and organisations are now taking action consistent with cutting climate change pollution, and this creates potential political space because - through the VBCOP principles (described in Newsletter 49, http://campaignstrategy.org/newsletters/campaignstrategy_newsletter_49.pdf) - opinions adjust to be consistent with behaviours. Yet this plays little or no role in the UNFCCC process which is still umbilically linked to the IPCC as if we were still at the stage where politics depended on resolving major scientific uncertainties.

This is untrue but the out-dated format of IPCC-UNFCCC makes it look as if it is still the case. This in turn provides a playground for sceptics and allows the media to continue to frame 'climate' as a social political question of 'belief', with stories fed by polls. As few people really understand the basis of the scientific consensus, they can only interpret 'debate' about 'climate science' by reflexive, emotional thinking using heuristics and driven by values (symbols, signs, rules of thumb, unconscious drivers).

The paper gives examples of how to escape from this situation. It also notes that change can be much faster than many campaigners and politicians assume (giving examples of the desocialisation of 4x4s in Britain and recycling in England) and the role of the mythical 'Never People'. It shows how we may underestimate or overlook change because people in different values groups pay more attention to theirs than to other groups.

The paper proposes ten practical steps:

Steps In A New Strategy

Government and non government campaigns and communications strategies could involve the following.

1. Create political space for necessary practical changes (eg renewables, efficiency, waste, different transport or food) by matching asks and offers to values, and then capturing and utilising the consequent supportive opinions (VBCOP).
2. Create 'discourses' and dialogues around those changes - distributive, efficacy and risk issues for example - to make news
3. Do not try to sell 'big picture' Pioneer conceptions to Prospector and Settlers eg 'a low carbon society': nobody was ever 'sold' a high carbon consumer society, it just happened and we embraced the benefits.
4. Focus much less attention on the international climate talks, and much more to making changes 'at home' (eg domestic renewables, electric cars, green fashions), and demonstrating that these are happening

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5. Educate the media about science and uncertainty and the basis of the construction of the consensus on climate change - best done as a peer to peer exercise
6. Educate relevant scientists (and politicians and campaigners) about the basics of reflexive communications - framing, heuristics and values for example - so for example, they stop interpreting their progress or lack of through what the media says about opinion polling
7. Government bodies and science institutions should give more scientific-policy attention to responses to impacts which are already happening (eg sea level rise, season change, acidification of the seas, melting glaciers) and explain these in terms which resonate with values, rather than publicising the results of scenarios and models which are trying to push the outer limits of 'climate prediction' (where uncertainties are greatest).
8. Within the UN science-politics system, disengage the outer limits of science from the politics and stop politicians from using the elimination of uncertainty as a metric for taking political action.
9. Campaigners and politicians, and in particular their communications planners and social marketers, need to understand the dynamics of change in terms of values groups.
10. When talking about the 'big picture' of climate change to mixed audiences is unavoidable, use frames that are universal in terms of values. For example 'being a parent' (see Campaign Strategy Newsletter No 50 - 'It's The Children Stupid').

Worth a look:

- * <http://mobileactive.org/> a treasure trove of how-to mobile campaigns and marketing stuff
- * <http://www.novasscarman.org/campaigning/> - some useful campaigning how-to material especially in their document on 'advocacy'
- * <http://www.peopleandparticipation.net/> - run by Involve (<http://www.involve.org.uk/>) and funded by UK government departments this is how-to site for encouraging public engagement and participation, aimed at central and local government officials and community workers but contains examples of over 60 different participation methods and more than 100 case studies which will be of interest to many campaigners. Useful for designing community research.

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