Effective Messaging: Communicating Nature’s Benefits

Recent communications research has revealed a growing public awareness of the economic benefits of preserving and restoring key ecosystems to protect water supplies. In the Academy’s April 30, 2013 webinar we discussed how to capitalize on this trend with effective messaging that engages stakeholders on environmental issues with guests Belinda Griswold, Senior Program Director at the non-profit communications firm Resource Media and Mark Jockers, Government & Public Affairs Manager at Oregon's Clean Water Services.

Crafting and Delivering an Effective Message
Communications and messaging are important at every stage of the decision making process. The key to messaging about anything is understanding who you’re trying to reach and what you are asking of them. Consider your audience’s attitudes, values, and concerns and tailor messages that will connect with them using this formula for an effective message:

**MESSAGE = VALUE + THREAT + SOLUTION/CALL TO ACTION**

Resource Media recently conducted a survey to determine what messages about the environment and economics were most likely to resonate with Americans. Some examples of highly rated message components are below.

What *values* are at risk? Values are things that people are actually concerned about.

- Clean water
- Stewardship, protecting America’s lands
- Prosperity
- Frugality
- Wise investment

What’s the *threat*? Threats have to be real, visceral, and true.

- Drought
- Dirty water
- Climate Change

What is the *solution/call to action*? The key is to get specific and be relevant to the audience’s values.

- Preservation
- Restoration
- Conservation
- Partnerships
- New funding mechanisms
- Markets
Resource Media has three recommendations when communicating about the economics of healthy ecosystems:

1. **Avoid Jargon!** – Jargon undermines our ability to convey what is at heart a simple concept.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Instead of…</th>
<th>Say…</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ecosystem services</td>
<td>Nature’s value / nature’s benefits</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Markets, credits, buyers, sellers and transactions</td>
<td>Paying land managers to manage their land in a way that benefits the community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Natural capital</td>
<td>Benefits provided by healthy natural systems</td>
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2. **Beware of the money trap!** – Most American voters and many decision makers have a deeply held belief that nature is worth a lot more than dollars and cents. People have a visceral, negative reaction to the implication that nature is only valuable insofar as it serves our interests. To avoid this reaction, acknowledge that it’s impossible to put a price tag on nature, but because gaps in traditional economic analysis make it difficult to compare nature to built environments, a monetary value can help us make the case for the importance of those irreplaceable natural services.

3. **Lead with tangible benefits!** – Talk about the benefits to the community, instead of the processes behind those benefits. Only mention benefits that are most relevant to your community’s values.

**Top 5 Benefits of Healthy Natural Systems**
- Filter water to keep it clean for drinking and irrigation
- Remove air pollution
- Keep soil fertile and erosion-resistant
- Protect against damages caused by floods and storms
- Pollinate plants and crops to help them grow

**Effective Messaging Helps Restore a Watershed, Save Money in Tualatin River Basin**

Clean Water Services is a water resource management utility for the suburban area west of Portland and services approximately 542,000 residents in the Tualathan River basin. Clean Water Services (CWS) is responsible for wastewater collection and treatment, surface water management, and a regional water supply partnership with water providers that focuses on integrated water resource management.

The Tualatin River. *Photo: Clean Water Services*
CWS has two main communications goals when reaching their widely varied audience members:

- Build trust, credibility and understanding of CWS role in protecting public health, watershed protection and restoration, and water resource management
- Educate residents about how their rate payments are being invested in the watershed and what they can do to protect that investment

Clean Water Services communicates with many different audiences. Source: Clean Water Services

The Tualatin Basin has one of the oldest EPA-mandated Total Maximum Daily Load (TMDL) requirements in the nation. CWS made large-scale investments in advanced wastewater treatment plants in the 1990’s to meet the stringent requirements for effluent contaminants. A subsequent update to TMDL rules in the early 2000’s added temperature restrictions to protect aquatic life, such as endangered anadromous fish populations. CWS engineers examined the issue and pointed toward refrigeration of effluent as the solution. This engineering approach would come at a 20-year cost of $150 million dollars for capital and operations.

Exploring options beyond refrigeration, CWS worked with the EPA and the local department of environmental quality to find another solution. The EPA issued CWS the nation’s first watershed-based permit that bundled multiple treatment plants into one permit and allowed them to trade temperature credits with others in the community. Instead of building the refrigeration plant, CWS paid local landowners to plant trees along waterways, to shade and cool the river. A major restoration initiative launched in 2005 has restored more than 50 miles of streams at a cost of $5.6 million.

While the threat of TMDL non-compliance and the values of frugality and cost savings helped CWS gain traction with their communications, the solutions and other key points were different with different audiences:
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Audience</th>
<th>Solution</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Regulators and officials</td>
<td>Innovation – a different way to look at environmental improvement, clean water, and meeting permit requirements</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agricultural community Community non-profits</td>
<td>Partnerships – over 40,000 volunteer hours by 13,000 volunteers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Customers</td>
<td>Value and results – impact on monthly rates</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This project led CWS to some valuable lessons about communicating the economic and community benefits of restoring and protecting natural, functioning ecosystems:

1. Leverage credible, third-party spokespeople to tell your story
   - Academic and scientific community
   - Historical societies
   - Community leaders

2. Be open and honest. Be the first person to share bad news as well as good news – it builds credibility.

3. Understand your brand, your position, and your audience. Spend money to monitor not just resources managed, but also ratepayer attitudes towards your organization. You can’t communicate unless you know what your audience thinks of you already.

4. Create clear, compelling and unique messages about the benefits – clean water, health, jobs, play/family outings outdoors.

5. Speak in “surround sound”. The media landscape has changed dramatically in the last few years. CWS service district residents get news and information from an average of 7 different sources every day – you need to reach your audience through all media channels, including social media.

6. Have a “ground game”. Have individual conversations with key audience segments – get out of the office and talk to people about what values they have and what messages resonate with them.

**Tools**

**Data Tools:**

*Your Guide. Your Water. Your Decision, Source Water Collaborative.* This tool was developed by the Source Water Collaborative, a group of 23 federal, state, and local organizations focused on protecting drinking water. This tool creates a customized 4-page brief that can be used to start a conversation with local officials and communities about development patterns, budgets, or stewardship. You can choose among several key message to emphasize, including best practices and recommendations; select locally relevant key resources and contacts; and include your own photos, resources, contacts and branding. [http://www.yourwateryourdecision.org](http://www.yourwateryourdecision.org)

**Guide tools:**

*Seeing is Believing, Resource Media.* This guide explains best practices for using images and visual storytelling to convey information in a way that resonates with people and makes messages memorable. [http://www.resource-media.org/visual-story-lab/report/](http://www.resource-media.org/visual-story-lab/report/)
Resource Media Toolbox. Resource Media. This is a collection of tested tools and techniques that can help you improve your strategic communications. Guides, worksheets, and presentations cover specific, discrete topics, including development of communication strategies, using social media effectively (including managing controversy on Facebook), mobilizing effective messengers, working with reporters, and more. [http://www.resource-media.org/toolbox/]