



This post was originally published for EEC Subscribers April 2020.

Environmental Communications for Earth Day — and Every Day!



For communicators and marketers, environmental communications tend to ramp up during April, and particularly on Earth Day, which this year falls on Wednesday, April 22. I don't recommend doing a big communications push on Earth Day if your organization is silent on environmental communications (let alone actions!) the other 364 days of the year.

In recent months, clients have asked me to write more content on environmental protection, extreme weather, climate change and sustainability. With each passing year, staking out a commonsense position becomes more challenging if you believe, as many do, that the world is running out of time to contain and reverse atmospheric concentrations of carbon dioxide. Climate change may well be the existential issue of our time, but what can one company (or one person) do that will make a difference?

Environmental Communications: Silence Is NOT Golden

Some energy companies are playing defense, cowed by the climate-shaming of a

vocal minority who assert companies connected to fossil fuels are merchants of poison, death and destruction.

In today's heated public discourse, energy companies don't want to be accused of being a denier of climate science. But neither should they be tempted to inflate their accomplishments and imply that whatever they are doing to lower their carbon footprint will save the planet. Both extremes are wrong.

Since silence is not an option, where should energy companies start? By recognizing reality.

You don't have to be a card-carrying member of **350.org** to recognize that public sentiment on climate change is shifting. A number of colleges and universities have committed to divesting from fossil fuel. One large financial institution — **BlackRock** — and many smaller ones, now apply a sustainability filter to their potential investments. Some financial institutions have stopped lending to or investing in the fossil fuel industry.



Plus, there are so many negative optics around climate change: millions of kangaroos and koalas were incinerated during the recent Australian wildfires. How can an energy company compete for hearts and minds against those optics?

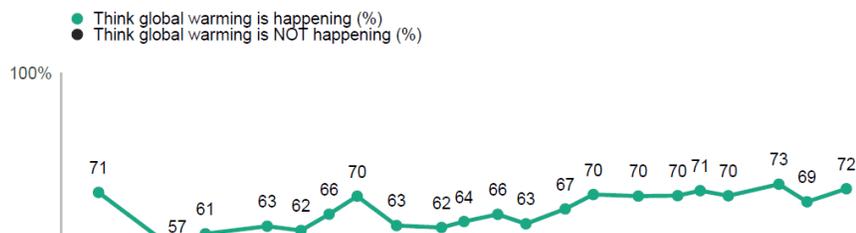
Credit: New York Times

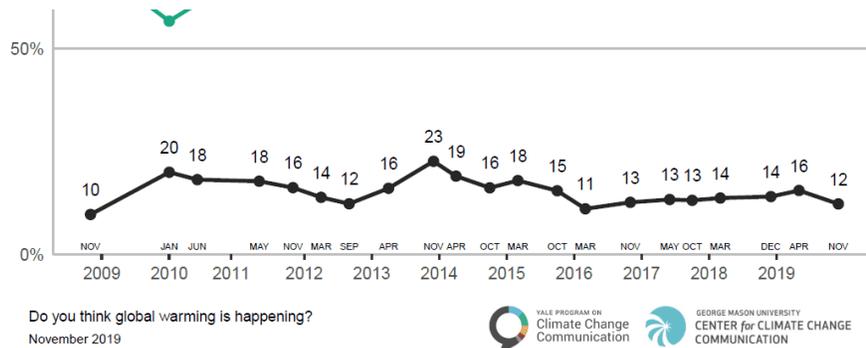
Environmental Communications: It's Not About You

As the chart below shows, roughly seven in 10 American adults believe climate change is real, a number that has held steady for several years, according to a November 2019 survey, **Climate Change in the American Mind**. The study was fielded by two respected academic centers: the Yale Program on Climate Change Communication and the George Mason University Center for Climate Change Communication.

That means energy companies need to communicate about the environment. But what should they say?

About seven in ten Americans think global warming is happening





Credit: Yale Program on Climate Change Communication and George Mason University Center for Climate Change Communication



Shortly after that study was released, I interviewed **Shelby Kuenzli** (left), a research analyst at **E Source** (one of my former employers), about energy company environmental communications. She said E Source’s database of energy-company advertising definitely has more content on climate change and sustainability than it used to.

Credit: E Source

Environmental Communications: What Smart Energy Companies Are Doing

She identified Southern California Edison, DTE Energy, Xcel Energy, Hawaiian Electric and Austin Energy as some of the energy companies that have done a good job communicating on sustainability and climate change, chiefly by making customers part of the solution.

“Successful messages don’t brag about the level of carbon dioxide reductions,” she said. “Communications need to bring customers into the story and invite them to join the fight.”

Shelby shared some other ideas for energy company sustainability communications in an E Source research report and blog post from last year. “Climate change is a hot topic and customers, especially millennials, are alarmed about it,” says a summary of the report, ***Utilities’ Role in Addressing Customers’ Concerns About Climate Change***. “Learn how empowering these customers to address their environmental concerns through utility offerings can improve not only your brand image but also your profitability.”

Shelby was good enough to point me toward some effective **climate change communications** from a variety of energy companies.

“Energy companies can’t reach their sustainability goals without customers’ help,” she continued, chiefly in the form of participation in programs to more efficiently use energy or shift energy use to off-peak hours.

She advised companies to use **future-oriented messages**: “You want to showcase how you are contributing to a better environment and economy while not letting reliability and affordability slip.”

That’s getting easier as the costs continue to decline for renewable electricity.

“Communicating about what a company is **doing** to fight climate change boosts your brand perception among your customers, particularly millennials who want the companies they do business with to take a stand on climate change,” Shelby noted.

Environmental Communications: Start Small, Gain Confidence, Get Better

Many companies started off unsure of their environmental communications, but their efforts got better with practice, she continued. But some still barely talk about sustainability or climate change at all.

Even those **companies** that do it well say they have trouble with climate change communications. “It’s not so much a question of ‘why?’ but rather ‘how?’ ” she commented.

In a prior **blog post**, I shared recommendations on energy company environmental communications from practitioners and consultants. In a separate **blog post**, I offered these recommendations for energy companies seeking to up their environmental communications game:

- **Stop Focusing on Cost per kWh**
- **Shift the Emphasis From “Price” to “Customer Preference”**
- **Create Memorable Copy Points and Art Elements**

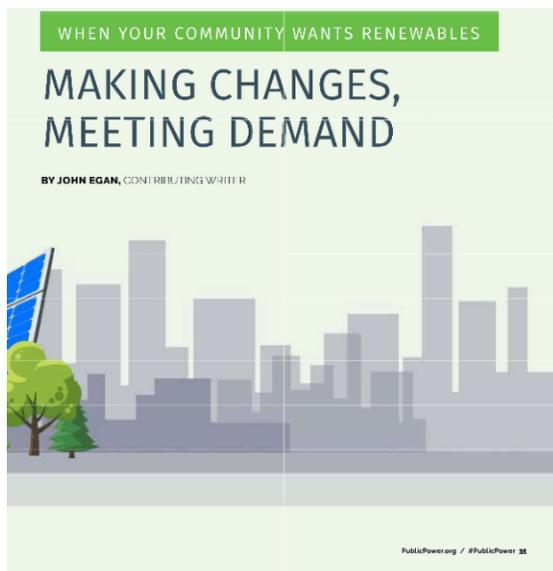
Here are some added ideas:

- **Acknowledging the problem and showing how you are working to fix it are staples of crisis communications**, about which I have **blogged** frequently. It’s not necessary to have all the answers, but it is necessary to show you are concerned and are acting on that concern.
- **Energy companies that have a community advisory group could ask that panel for input on sustainability communications.** Companies also could set up an online portal and recruit customer volunteers willing to keep draft communications materials confidential and provide constructive criticism.

- **Don't get trapped in the curse of knowledge.** Yes, we as a nation still burn coal. Yes, natural gas still emits carbon dioxide when burned, so it is not a panacea. Yes, renewables only generate about 20% of the country's electricity. Yes, battery energy storage is still in its early stages. Yes, carbon capture and sequestration (CCS) is not economic yet.

Difficult optics and inconvenient facts do not absolve energy companies from communicating with their customers about what they are doing to shrink their environmental footprint. As the world prepares to celebrate Earth Day on April 22, energy companies need to make their voices heard on what many say is the defining issue of our generation.

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When Your Community Wants Renewables: Making Changes, Meeting Demand

Stakeholder engagement is an essential first step for any public power utility considering a move to 100% renewable electricity.

Read John's **article** in *Public Power* magazine to see how some public power utilities are working to figure out how pursuing or committing to increased renewable power can be viable for the communities they serve.

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