

From photos to video:

10 principles to communicate climate change

Climate Visuals, a Climate Outreach program, and Resource Media have partnered up and combined our research to highlight the top 10 principles to keep in mind when selecting effective climate change visuals. Whether you're producing a short video or putting together a social media meme or presentation, these principles will help guide you in producing impactful visuals for your audience.



1

Hook people at the beginning. Humans are biologically wired to be attuned to surprise. You must engage the viewer right off the bat for them to want to continue watching a video or dig deeper into your report.

2

Choose a credible main character to whom the audience can relate. The audience should see the main character as a credible voice on the topic. Stories about people whose livelihoods are impacted by climate change are immensely powerful. Or someone using low-carbon technologies, or a scientist at work. Who does your audience trust? Whose fate would they care about?

3

Show real people. Staged photo shoots or representations, those people you see in classic stock business photos, come across as gimmicky and inauthentic. Showing real people also reduces the spread of harmful stereotypes or generalizations—climate change is something that affects everyone, so make this clear through authentic, relatable people in imagery and film.

4

Identify what emotions you are trying to evoke. Elicit an emotional response to get the viewer off their couch and inspire them to take action. Curate images to stoke the right emotions for your goals, whether it is anger over social injustice or inspiration around scientific discovery. There's nothing to be gained from downplaying the seriousness of climate risks, and imagery of climate impacts will cut through and get people's attention, but always couple or follow potentially overwhelming images with ones evoking hope and a personal sense of agency to avoid creating fatalism and despair in the minds of your audience. Solution-oriented images will do the trick.

5

Tell new stories. Overtold or cliched stories no longer contain an element of surprise, and can trigger feelings of skepticism or cynicism. Be familiar with the stories that have been told too many times to your audience, so you can tell new, more diverse stories that bring a fresh and deeper perspective. Encourage photographers to take new types of climate images—go beyond polar bears, and put people back into the picture. From people's health, to the way we eat, travel or power our homes—there's literally dozens of untold stories to capture.

6

Surprise, humor and authenticity are the secrets to going viral. Show your audiences something really unique, unexpected, or delightful. Low production value does not matter if these qualities are present. Think of what you share online with friends.

7

Show local impacts of climate change and impacts at scale. Find the balance between showing how climate change impacts individuals in their particular geographies, and how climate change plays out on a broader societal scale. Melting ice caps are not locally relevant for most people, but don't give the impression that trivial behavioural changes are all it will take either. Authentic communication about climate change means striking a balance between the global and the local.

8

Tap into the universally-held values of your audience. Determine your audience's values and use those values to drive your narrative. What are the worldviews, aspirations and life-guiding principles that most (if not all) members in your target audience hold, such as valuing family, health, safety and prosperity or food security? Research their core concerns.

9

Include a healthy amount of tension. Think about your favorite stories from books, films and TV; drama, conflict and suspense are what keeps you watching until the very end. Audiences want to know what will happen to the main character. Tension in a story keeps us glued to our seat as we need to find out what happens to the character in the story—and hear the call to action at the end.

10

Be clear about the message and call to action. Be specific with your ask, and share a link to resources where people can go to learn more. Repeat and reinforce your message and call to action across all of your platforms, from the caption of your photo to your website landing page.

Watch our video 

Find out more about the research:

Resource Media's [Seeing is Believing](#) and [other image-testing reports](#) uncover why visuals are as essential as the words we write when creating an effective communications strategy and walk us through image testing, best practices and more.

Climate Outreach conducted a [multi-method research study](#) in 2015 to analyze what works and what doesn't when it comes to communicating climate change via visual imagery. This study led to the creation of www.ClimateVisuals.org, a growing evidence-based library of diverse and compelling images of climate change.

Please contact us with examples of how you're incorporating these principles:



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