

# COMMUNICATING CLIMATE

HOW TO TRANSMIT  
YOUR CLIMATE  
MESSAGE AND AVOID  
GREENWASHING

ELEANOR ROSS

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How to Transmit Your Climate  
Message and Avoid Greenwashing

BY

**ELEANOR ROSS**



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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

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# INTRODUCTION

Even for the seasoned professional, climate communications can be a head scratcher. Why is engagement low? Why does nobody seem to care?

The climate crisis is one unlike any other – it affects all of us, from multinationals down to newborn infants, whose carbon footprint and impact on the planet is as yet unknown but will be tracked from birth. Communicating a business’s climate strategy is certainly not a one-size-fits-all approach. So much of communications work is about protecting the reputation of a Company, but given today’s climate emergency, it is also about communicating the importance of climate action and inspiring others in the sector to take action too.

Perhaps you picked up this book because you personally want to work out how to do more to propel your business, brand or organization to new heights in the climate space. Perhaps you and your exec team are paralyzed by fear when it comes to being accused of greenwashing. Perhaps you are just interested in learning how to frame your climate action so that it inspires others along the way.

I have written this book because I believe sustainability needs to form a significant part of a business’s internal and external strategy. I have worked with many companies where sustainability feels like an afterthought. This can cause confusion throughout the business as colleagues are bombarded by devastating media images when they leave work, but at their desk see only business as usual. This can confuse and also demoralize colleagues, who might expect their exec to be moving faster across critical issues. Similarly, communicating climate change to the general public and from a corporate perspective should be taken into consideration to build confidence in a brand, person or company.

As a comms person, one of the worst situations you can find yourself in is watching your exec die on stage as they come under fire from journalists about their climate action plans. Journalists will always keep pushing, and

these efforts, especially in a time of severe climate crisis, must be applauded. They are an integral part of the process, and journalists and activists keep businesses grounded in place. They must never be seen as the enemy – instead, we are all on the same team, living on the same planet that is heating up at an incredible rate.

Instead, what is key is working out how to be as transparent and collaborative as possible. Sharing pain points, discussing the challenges openly and then trying to come up with solutions are all critical parts of the climate communication process.

The most common question around the comms table is: ‘How can we avoid greenwashing?’ When this question comes up, I always think of one of the world’s most dominant cyclists, Fausto Coppi, and his response to a journalist. Active during the 20th century, Coppi was a brilliant road racer and climber. When asked if he had any tips for training, he simply said: ‘Ride your bike. Ride your bike. Ride your bike.’<sup>1</sup>

It is simply put, and the same is true of good sustainability communications. If you are trying, you are doing.

You need to be walking the walk before you can talk about it. Keeping things simple is critical – the only way you can avoid greenwashing is to ‘ride your bike’. It is not about supplements or weird training programs or, in sustainability terms, offsets and complicated report fiddling. It is simply about doing the right thing again and again and again. It is one of the key reasons why good climate communication, coupled with sensible and actionable climate action, is so important. And of course, simply making pledges and committing to action does not mean anything – unless it is followed with genuine action. Communicators are not often in the driver seat. They are there to pass on knowledge and pass information onto the public. But one thing those employed in your comms team (whether that is you, reader or a colleague) is understand what will land. Communicators understand risk like no one’s business. Questions from journalists may start to revolve around lack of climate action. Colleagues might discuss absent climate plans on Slack channels and questions or resentment may build.

Revenue losses are on the horizon. Over the next five years, suppliers predict a 1.2 trillion dollar loss in revenue due to climate factors, many of

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<sup>1</sup>Missel (2022a)

which may be passed down to their buyers.<sup>2</sup> Continuing with the status quo will have catastrophic consequences – and businesses are beginning to realize this.

A joint study by Arup and Oxford University has found that the green energy transition could be worth 10.3 trillion USD by 2050.<sup>3</sup> There is plenty of opportunity for businesses to continue growing in this new era. It is important to promote this message to those who control the purse strings if real change is going to happen. It is for this reason that so much current climate communications revolve around fear and fear for our hypothetical children's and grandchildren's futures. This can be alienating – fear rarely works in climate communications, especially if these scenarios are presented without tangible solutions or plans. At the heart of all climate action is the knowledge that it is not about making profit or building up a good reputation, it is about protecting the planet that has sustained us for millions of years and enabling it to sustain us for millions more.

Communicating a message everyone thinks they have heard a million times is hard. Finding new narratives that resonate with your audience, whoever they are, can be difficult in the climate space. Flagging risks and potential future concerns is one way to move the conversation on – what profit risk and reputational damage may exist if no action is taken. In the same way that traditional communications take different audiences into account, it is extremely pertinent that climate communications consider a myriad of audiences too. Consumers, stakeholders and the general public want to know that as a company you are doing everything within your power to remedy the situation, what risks are involved and what solutions and actions you are taking to solve the problem.

To ensure a safe future below the 1.5° mark (as addressed in the 2015 Paris Agreement) requires us all, as a planet, to cut 30 gigatonnes of greenhouse gas emissions each year by 2030. That's a lot of gigatonnes. It is roughly the mass of all land mammals but multiplied by three.<sup>4</sup> We are well behind that target, but there are ways to do this that do not simply involve purchasing offsets and crossing our fingers.<sup>5</sup> We need to look at ways our

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<sup>2</sup> *Transparency to transformation: A chain reaction* – CDP

<sup>3</sup> Arup (2023)

<sup>4</sup> *Gigatonne – Energy education*

<sup>5</sup> UNEP Copenhagen Climate Centre (UNEP-CCC). (2020). Emissions Gap Report, 2020

cities are built – and invest in smarter ways of reducing congestion, air pollution and food and energy waste.

But to get people invested in sustainability, to encourage companies to throw resources at these problems, communications may need to do a lot of the heavy lifting.

Communications play a role in informing leaders, the general public, industry heavyweights and governments on the risks and reality of life if temperatures are not kept below 1.5°. A successful climate communications strategy should encourage others to turn to each other and admit they should be doing more. Good communications is celebrating that word-of-mouth recommendation to recycle more. Inspirational communications work – seeing what other businesses are doing in the climate space can encourage others to pull their socks up and crack on.

Fear does not work. Nor does throwing lots of scary looking stats about CO<sub>2</sub> tonnage into the ether. For people and companies to act, for the most part, it is about showcasing the small differences that can be made to create a more sustainable future and keep the planet's total warming below 2°C. Communicating well can also be seen as an education piece – communicators should think about why anyone want to save mangroves if they do not understand the vital role a mangrove plays?

That said, we're moving in a positive direction. The desire to communicate sustainability *has* become a key consideration for businesses, and it has very much entered the mainstream.

Recently, 100 companies wrote to warn the 2023 British Prime Minister Rishi Sunak not to 'back off the climate agenda'.<sup>6</sup> Companies are worried about Britain's over-reliance on gas, but the very fact that 100 companies have come together to publicly express their support for the green energy alternatives is not something that would have happened even 15 years ago. The world is changing. The climate crisis is no longer seen as a 'lefty' problem, it is an everyone problem.

Most large companies now issue sustainability reports, while many go a step further and commit to net zero by 2050 or other climate action plans.<sup>7</sup> Environmental, social and governance (ESG) strategy is common – and many companies have set metrics on how they can improve their ESG ratings. Over

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<sup>6</sup>Helm and Harvey (2023)

<sup>7</sup>Winston (2022)

Two thousand globally companies have set net zero targets<sup>8</sup> and around one-third of Europe's companies have pledged to achieve net zero by 2050.<sup>9</sup> In 2021, oil giants Exxon Mobil and Chevron lost board seats to activist investors, after the company failed to set a strategy for a low-carbon future.<sup>10</sup> This happened concurrently to a case in the Netherlands, where campaigners won a legal battle to force Shell to reduce their emissions by 45% by 2050.<sup>11</sup>

There are exceptions of course: former US President Donald Trump put a climate denier in charge at the White House and said things like 'actually the world is getting cooler'. He actually u-turned on most of Barack Obama's environmental policies. But Brookings Institute, an American think tank, has found that Republicans in congress are actually out of step with even Republican survey respondents.<sup>12</sup> More and more of us are living in a climate crisis reality – from extreme heatwaves that kill thousands due to nights that never cool so respite from long hot days never come, to storms that rip entire communities to shreds.

The wildfires that ripped through wealthy areas in New York, California and Australia over the past few summers have drawn attention to the impact of climate change in a way that is never been experienced before by the world's rich. Luxury holidays scuba diving to bleached coral reefs or skiing on mountains devoid of snow is bringing the climate crisis to the doors of the wealthy and influential. Change is happening. People are more receptive to the crisis and to the reality of what happens if we do not act now.

It is our duty, whether as communicators, teachers, business leaders, parents, friends or simply citizens of this planet, to act now. Make changes. And tell other people about the changes we are making, the impact we can have and the future that we want. It is only when we have done that, that we'll be able to reap the rewards from the right sort of communication.

It is also vital to ensure the way we tell the climate story or provide sustainability solutions that we understand the outsize role business plays. The latest Edelman Trust Barometer (2023)<sup>13</sup> compounds the trend that consumers trust corporates more than governments or journalists. At a time

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<sup>8</sup> *Companies taking action – Science based targets.* (n.d.)

<sup>9</sup> Accenture (2021)

<sup>10</sup> Ambrose (2021)

<sup>11</sup> Boffey (2021)

<sup>12</sup> Pew Research Center (2021)

<sup>13</sup> *2023 Edelman trust barometer.* (n.d.)

when British Prime Minister Rishi Sunak is talking about u-turning on net zero policies and cancelling high speed rail projects in the north of England, it is easy to see why trust in politics to solve the climate crisis might be broken.<sup>14</sup>

I started researching this book after an email which featured the phrase ‘running out of time’. The exhaustion compounded as I began to see fearful and panicky comms everywhere I looked. If even I was feeling disenchanted and tired, how would people who had little to no interest in climate be feeling?

It was like a lightbulb had switched on. People are preserving themselves in the face of real panic when it comes to the future of the planet. Others are trying to learn as much as they can about the climate crisis. That is why it is important to explore how small things, from tone, language and even images can shape the way we communicate the climate crisis.

Climate action may not (directly, at least) bring in revenue. But it will do two things. It will boost your reputation (saving money on people retention and reduction in crisis-planning costs), but it will also give your Business legitimacy as a future player in a sustainable world. Those who act now will survive longer. Those who fail to change will fail to thrive.

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<sup>14</sup> Allegretti (2023)

# Part One

## FOUNDATIONS

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