

Making the Case

Winning Messaging for Energy Efficiency

Americans love energy efficiency. Poll after poll shows that overwhelming majorities of Americans have positive feelings about energy efficiency. So why aren't there more policies in place to support this popular clean energy strategy?

The answer also lies in those polls: While energy efficiency is viewed positively, people generally think it should be an issue of personal responsibility—not an objective of government mandates. Moreover, relative to other pressing national energy issues, increasing our energy efficiency is not seen as an urgent priority.



Photo: Dennis Schroeder NREL

You have to look hard to find anyone who opposes energy efficiency, on principle. But ask people to pay for it? To change their lifestyles to become more efficient? To support mandatory regulations to promote energy efficiency? That's another story.

So despite the strong poll numbers, energy efficiency isn't an automatic home run. But, by crafting messages and communications strategies designed to overcome the barriers identified by public opinion research, we can leverage Americans' positive views of energy efficiency to advance policy and programs.

Drawing on recent focus groups, polls and other research, this memo charts a path to promote energy efficiency, through language and imagery, in ways that tap public enthusiasm for energy efficiency.

THE GOOD NEWS

First, some good news.

People understand energy efficiency...

Recent focus groups demonstrate that people generally understand what energy efficiency is (though that understanding could be deepened), and they think about it in very positive, aspirational, and personal terms.

...and want to learn more

A recent national poll found that 65% of Americans are either “interested” or “curious” about energy efficiency, demonstrating a desire to learn more about it.

Support for energy efficiency spans the political spectrum

People of all political persuasions support energy efficiency. Compared to other energy topics, the conversation around energy efficiency is remarkably un-politicized.

WHAT IS ENERGY EFFICIENCY, ANYWAY?

Research shows that people think about energy efficiency in the context of their homes – i.e. products they can buy or actions they can take. In focus groups, when asked to write a definition for energy efficiency, people described getting the same results using less energy and long-term cost savings, but never brought up business or industry in their definitions. Educating people on the huge potential savings in the business/industrial sector could generate more support for programs that make those savings possible.

These findings place energy efficiency in a rare position: as a topic that side-steps controversy, sparks curiosity, and builds on a strong foundation of understanding and acceptance.

IT'S ALL ABOUT VALUES

The best messages connect with your audience's core values. Here are some core values behind Americans' support for energy efficiency:

- Personal responsibility
- Disdain for wastefulness
- Concern for future generations

Focus group participants reported feeling “smart” and “responsible” when they saved energy. And while saving money is seen as an important benefit of saving energy, it's more motivating to couple this benefit with core values like personal responsibility than to focus on money alone.

The Challenges

As with many other issues, positive perceptions do not necessarily translate into action. In a recent survey of 1,000 Americans, more than 90% of respondents expressed willingness to make at least a few changes in their own homes to become more efficient energy users. However, the percentage of people who would actively support new energy efficiency regulations, or preferentially vote for energy efficiency champions, was significantly lower. The exception is tax credits, which are far more popular.

Why the disconnect? Here are some of the challenges.

Personal, not public

People tend to think of energy efficiency as a personal responsibility, not the job of regulations or government. In focus groups, participants talked about everyone having a responsibility to save energy, both at home and in the workplace. But they resisted the suggestion that government should play an active role in driving efficiency measures in homes and businesses through policies and regulations. (Support for reducing government waste of energy, however, was high.)

“Energy Efficiency is great, but don’t tell me what to do, and I don’t tell you what to do either.”

On the bright side, lots of people – maybe even most Americans – have taken some action to increase energy efficiency in their homes or businesses, whether by changing lightbulbs, buying more efficient appliances, installing a programmable thermostat, or other simple steps. This means we can connect with people personally about energy efficiency in ways that would be far more difficult when it comes to other kinds of energy, like solar and wind, with which fewer Americans have personal experiences.

Nice, but not a solution to big problems

When it comes to energy choices, research shows that climate change is not a primary motivating factor for most individuals or businesses. Also, Americans do not currently think about energy efficiency on a sufficiently large scale to address big-picture, national energy needs, and reduce our need for fossil fuels.

The challenge for energy efficiency advocates is to translate personal enthusiasm for energy efficiency and reducing waste into support for policies that can promote energy efficiency actions at a large scale. Here are some communications recommendations to help bridge this divide.

Recommendations

1

START PERSONAL

Before introducing energy efficiency policies and programs, lead with stories of people who have already invested in energy efficiency and are now reaping the benefits, from cost savings to more intangible rewards such as a sense of personal satisfaction. This puts an audience in the best possible frame of mind to consider the policies and programs that make these energy savings possible.



Photo: Department of Energy

Use real stories featuring authentic people, and illustrate them with authentic images. Cognitive research and image testing have shown that audiences respond far better to stories about people they can relate to, and to images that don't look staged. Photos of individual homeowners and business owners taking action to save energy made strongest positive impact on people in the focus groups. These images got people excited about doing things to improve efficiency in their own homes, and interested in supporting businesses that were doing the right things to save energy.

2

GET CONCRETE

Specific examples are easier to grasp than abstract statistics, projections or models. When talking about costs and savings statistics, break them down to smaller, relatable chunks. For example, instead of aggregate US economy numbers, talk about savings for individual homeowners or business owners. Or, frame findings for specific audience segments, such as business sectors, or individual cities or states, to help audiences wrap their minds around what the savings might mean for them in their own lives.

For example, the recently released [New York City Benchmarking and Transparency Policy Impact Evaluation Report](#) found that between 2010 and 2013—the first four years of the City’s benchmarking and transparency policy—buildings covered by the ordinance reduced their energy use by 5.7 percent for a total dollar savings of \$267,492,147. Those are hard numbers that illustrate real, positive impacts of energy benchmarking (a policy that establishes the current building energy performance baseline and monitors energy efficiency progress against that baseline). Better understanding of these complex policies can make it easier for audiences to support them.

3

UNDERSTAND YOUR AUDIENCE

It’s vital to find out as much as you can about your target audience(s) up front: their values, their motivations, their concerns, and their beliefs. For audiences motivated primarily by the cost bottom line such as building owners and managers, opening with a message about cost savings and profitability may make sense. For audiences concerned about doing the right thing (or being perceived to be doing the right thing), such as politicians, focusing on opportunities to reduce waste and protect energy resources for future generations may be most useful. For engaging utility billpayers and homeowners, highlighting tangible costs and energy savings for individual families may be the best strategy.

By segmenting your target audiences up front, and identifying the right values-based messages to use for each audience, you increase the likelihood that your messages will resonate and prompt action.

The following sample message uses Kansas as an example to demonstrate how to build a good energy efficiency message—in this case in the context of the Clean Power Plan.

BUILDING THE MESSAGE

Start by pointing to real money savings and tangible benefits from existing energy efficiency programs, and highlight a real person – whether homeowner or business owner – and the specific ways they have benefited (money saved, better living or working environment).

Pivot to the opportunity to expand the program or programs like it, thereby helping more families and/or businesses save money and energy. Include relevant statistics when possible, and point to the many potential state/community benefits from the action.

Finish with a call to action – contacting an elected official or utility commission or otherwise signal support for the program.

SAMPLE MESSAGE

Kansans save hundreds of dollars a year on average thanks to [insert utility] energy efficiency programs. One such program enabled Topeka resident Jane Doe and her family to install a programmable thermostat and add more insulation in the attic. Today, just a couple months later, their monthly utility bills are lower, and their home is warmer in the winter, and cooler in the summer. Jane rarely needs to turn on the heater or air-conditioner.

Kansas now has an opportunity to expand programs like these, helping more families save money and energy, by making energy efficiency a core strategy of the Kansas Clean Power Plan. By prioritizing energy efficiency, the State of Kansas can help residents save an average of XX dollars annually on energy bills, while significantly lowering energy use, resulting in cleaner air and water for everyone.

Please contact [insert decision-maker] and tell them to make energy efficiency the #1 priority in the Kansas Clean Power Plan

4

LEAD WITH THE RIGHT MESSENGER

Research shows that the most compelling, trusted messengers are those with no financial motivations to talk about efficiency. Energy service providers, utilities, and government agencies are perceived as having ulterior motives, and their words may therefore be automatically discounted by your target audiences.



Photo: Consumers Energy: Flickr

Homeowners and businesses owners who have made investments in energy efficiency and have seen positive results are more trusted, and easier for most audiences to relate to. The bottom line: Sell energy efficiency via the people who have benefitted from it themselves, rather than the people who are in the business of efficiency retrofits.

There's one exception that goes back to the need to understand your audience. If your target audience includes elected officials concerned about creating and protecting jobs, current employees of energy efficiency businesses are often perfect messengers.

MESSAGING TIPS

- DO: Use the term “billpayers,” rather than “ratepayers.”
- DO: Break down statistics into relatable numbers relevant to your audience.
- DO: Lead with stories of real people who have saved energy and money.
- DON'T: Try to convince lay audiences that energy efficiency is a “resource” like coal, solar or wind.
- DON'T: Lead with government programs and mandates.

Sell energy efficiency via the people who have benefitted from it themselves, rather than the people who are in the business of efficiency retrofits.

ENERGY EFFICIENCY: AN ENERGY “RESOURCE”?

Energy efficiency is often described as a clean energy “resource” on par with solar and wind. But focus groups and polling have shown significant cognitive dissonance around this concept. For most lay audiences, an energy “resource” is something you create or harness, and then pay for. By contrast, energy efficiency helps you to avoid wasting actual resources, and thus save money.

That said, some target audiences – particularly utilities and lawmakers – are comfortable talking about energy efficiency as a resource. Again, know your audience and tailor messages accordingly. At a legislative committee hearing or utility commission hearing, talk about energy efficiency in the language these audiences already understand – as a resource. But when talking to billpayers or other lay audiences, don’t ask to get them to change their basic conceptual framework of energy efficiency, in which it is a strategy to avoid wasting resources—not a resource itself. Instead, meet people where they are.

CONNECTING TO THE CLEAN POWER PLAN

The U.S. EPA’s Clean Power Plan offers a good opportunity to show the value of energy efficiency. Here are three powerful points to bolster arguments in favor of making energy efficiency a priority in state implementation plans:

- Energy efficiency is the **easiest and cheapest** way for states to reduce greenhouse gas emissions—**we know it works, it’s been tested, and it’s ready to deploy now.**
- Energy efficiency offers states **maximum flexibility** to take advantage of their own natural resources.
- Energy efficiency saves consumers and businesses **money**, creates **jobs**, and benefits the **economy.**

PICK YOUR IMAGES



Photo: Kristin Lyons NREL

Use relatable, revealing images

Imagery needs to have a very clear connection to energy efficiency to be understood and to connect with audiences. Pick concrete images that audiences can relate to, instead of abstract images that audiences need to decipher.



Photo: Clean Energy Resource Team

Building signage: the low-hanging fruit

We want people to see that energy efficiency is something everyone can do – and in fact, that many people are already doing. Signage at office buildings, retail stores and new developments indicating the energy and money savings can help make energy efficiency more visible, and more of a social norm.



Use waste imagery sparingly & strategically

Waste imagery can be effective at generating outrage, but that outrage does not necessarily translate into support for good policies. People tend to blame the individual or company for being irresponsible, and do not bridge to policy fixes. Images showing energy waste should be used sparingly, and coupled with images of solutions to eliminate or reduce waste.

RESEARCH SOURCES

“Talking about Energy Efficiency in Commercial Buildings” Topos Partnership, January 2015

[Beyond the CFL: Winning Images for Energy Efficiency](#) Resource Media, March 2015

[What Inspires Action? Understanding Motivations for Improving Building Energy Efficiency](#) Resource Media, April 2015

[Speaking Their Language: The Case for Energy Efficiency Investments in the Building Sector](#) Resource Media, July 2015

[Change Is in the Air: How States Can Harness Energy Efficiency to Strengthen the Economy and Reduce Pollution](#) American Council for an Energy-Efficient Economy, April 2014

[Modeling EPA’s Clean Power Plan: Insights for Cost-Effective Implementation](#) Center for Climate and Energy Solutions, May 2015

Learn more at www.resource-media.org/energyefficiency/

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