

TIP SHEET: 5 Tips for Messaging Clean Energy

By Climate Access, August 2016

Americans are emphatically positive about the potential of renewable energy (see our [tip sheet](#) on attitudes to clean energy for specifics), but most aren't clear on how we transition away from fossil fuels and how urgent the need is. The following tip sheet offers guidelines for communicating about clean energy based on public polling and messaging research, to help climate advocates turn this general enthusiasm into support for meaningful action.

- 1. Know your audience.** Renewable energy appeals to the public for a number of reasons: the opportunity to save money, reduce fossil fuel consumption, innovate, improve health and well-being, promote energy independence. Learn what underlies your audience's support and develop messages that build on these motivations and values.

 - ⇒ *Example:* Research¹ shows that Midwesterners believe people should have the *right to choose* solar for their home and pay for it how they want, and are frustrated that utilities are *limiting access* to renewables – including the opportunity to reap the economic benefits.

- 2. Put clean energy in the present tense.** Rather than emphasizing the need to transition to a clean energy future, frame renewable energy as a technology, employment and economic driver that is delivering benefits right now. Give examples of how renewables are already growing and diversifying local economies, and keep money in the hands of communities through capital investment or property tax revenue, as an alternative to importing fossil fuel energy.

 - ⇒ *Example:* Amazon chose to build a new data center in Iowa, in part due to the availability of abundant, clean, affordable energy in the region.
 - ⇒ *A word of caution:* Emphasizing the economic opportunity around renewables and energy efficiency can also decrease support for higher standards, since it suggests that businesses will naturally capitalize on this opportunity in the most-cost-effective way without the need for additional policies². Avoid this by making economic benefits just one part of the broader case for renewables.

- 3. Show how to scale up.** With the benefits of renewables well-established, pivot to specific, local opportunities to scale them up. Clearly explain how clean energy technologies are financed, which stakeholders are involved and who can benefit from the solutions. Focus on the need to remove market and policy barriers that are hindering innovation by favoring fossil fuels. Promote popular policy tools that could improve the reliability, security, and affordability of renewable energy in the region, such as renewable portfolio standards (see the [clean energy attitudes tip sheet](#) for more information on what policy approaches generate highest support).

 - ⇒ *Example:* Large majorities believe states should require a set amount of their electricity to come from renewable sources. Emphasize the important role governments and policy tools play in helping bring renewable solutions up to scale.
 - ⇒ *A word of caution:* Pointing out that the U.S. has abundant renewable energy potential highlights the untapped opportunity, but may also reinforce the feeling many have that fossil fuel companies have too much influence over energy policy and production for renewables to make real headway.

- 4. Point out the cost of inaction.** Help create a sense of urgency by describing what is at risk if we don't take advantage of renewable energy sources. Keeping in mind that audiences are motivated by different threats and concerns, point out how the U.S. and individual states are at risk of getting left behind other governments that prioritize investment in renewables. Lagging on renewable energy can limit economic and employment growth in communities that are in need of revitalization or have the potential to innovate and create greater energy insecurity, particularly in the face of worsening extreme weather events that threaten existing energy infrastructure, among other risks.

⇒ *Example:* A strong majority – including Republicans – support reducing air pollution from energy production and use when presented with the argument that the cost of improving air quality is low compared to the avoided economic costs of lower productivity and increased health care costs³.

- 5. Invoke climate change carefully.** Making the case for renewable energy can be both helped and hindered by connecting the issue to carbon emissions. A majority still see the benefits of renewable energy as environmental, namely reduced GHG emissions and air pollution. But in some cases, those who deny climate change or oppose action to reduce emissions actually support renewable energy and related policies. Bipartisan majorities favour clean energy subsidies and tax breaks, while support is split over policies that limit or tax carbon emissions.

⇒ *Example:* When asked about specific policies that states might use to reduce emissions under the Clean Power Plan, support is strongest for requiring energy efficiency standards for new homes and appliances (84%) and renewable portfolio standards (79%). Far fewer support increasing taxes on fossil fuels or cap and trade⁴.

FRAMING JOBS

While clear evidence exists that renewable energy jobs are outpacing oil and coal, fossil fuel interests have framed renewable energy programs as job killers that disproportionately impact the working class. In some coal communities, concern about unemployment overwhelms support for clean energy. Meanwhile, “green” or “clean” jobs are ambiguous to many Americans who cannot imagine what they look like. To frame renewable jobs effectively:

- Make the issue about livelihoods, not energy, by describing renewable employment as quality, family-sustaining jobs that protect the health of workers and their communities.
- Give examples of the types of clean energy jobs people have building, installing and maintaining solar panels or wind turbines.
- Tap core values around dignity, self-reliance, pride in place, American innovation and leadership, and the moral underpinnings of work that enable people to feel they're supporting their families and communities.
- Cultivate and amplify different voices, such as female or non-white workers, to shift what is often a male-dominated conversation.
- Focus on what we're transitioning to, not what we're getting away from.

Endnotes

1. <http://climateadvocacylab.org/system/files/Positioning%20Clean%20Energy%20in%20the%20Here%20and%20Now%E2%80%9494Message%20Framing%20Report.pdf>
2. <http://climateadvocacylab.org/system/files/Energy-Survey.pdf>
3. <http://climateadvocacylab.org/system/files/Energy-Survey.pdf>
4. <http://climateadvocacylab.org/system/files/CE%20tip%20sheet.pdf>