

## Communications Primer Step 3: Learn About Your Audience

Before deciding what to communicate to your audience to advance your goal, it's extremely helpful to step back and listen to the concerns of those you want to reach. We often tend to assume our audience holds the same priorities we do, or that they care about an issue for the same reasons we do. But this is rarely the case, and such assumptions can be self-defeating. Listening can be as informal as having conversations with members of your audience to gain a more in-depth understanding of their feelings and beliefs, or as scientific as hiring a professional public opinion research firm to conduct a survey or focus groups.



### Start with Values

As you investigate your audience, you should be listening for the core values they bring to the issues at hand. Core values are those deeply held beliefs that form the foundation of all attitudes and behavior.

#### American Values

##### Primary Values:

Responsibility to care for one's family;  
 Responsibility to care for oneself;  
 Personal Liberty;  
 Work;  
 Spirituality/Belief in God;  
 Honesty/integrity;  
 Fairness/ equality.

##### Secondary Values include:

Responsibility to care for others;  
 Personal fulfillment;  
 Respect for authority;  
 Love of country or culture.

##### Environmental Values:

Responsibility to future generations;  
 Nature is God's creation;  
 A desire for one's family to enjoy a healthy environment.

Source: *Human Values and Nature's Future: Americans Attitudes on Biological Diversity* by Belden Russonello & Stewart

By listening for values, you learn the keys to communications that will create concern and may change behavior.

In-depth research by Belden Russonello & Stewart finds that most Americans share a set of basic or primary values, as well as a set of secondary values (see sidebar). The research also reveals Americans' most widely held reasons for caring about the environment: a responsibility to future generations; a belief that nature is God's creation; and a desire for one's family to enjoy a healthy environment. An appreciation of nature's beauty and a belief in nature's rights and intrinsic value were selected by *much* smaller segments of the public.

Don't assume, however, that appealing to any of these values will necessarily garner your target audience's support. These survey results reflect the values of a cross-section of American society – they don't reflect those of your target audience.

Furthermore, not all "environmental" issues are created equal. Spirituality or a responsibility to family or future generations won't always be the most motivational

values. Some natural places, like the Great Lakes, are an important source of cultural identity, and some environmental problems, like water pollution, are seen by some as very real threats

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#### Generously supported by:

Great Lakes National Program Office of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency

#### Matching Funds from:

The Joyce Foundation  
 Great Lakes Aquatic Habitat Network & Fund  
 The Mott Foundation

to their families' health.

In addition to values—the lasting framework through which people view particular issues—it is important to be aware of the more immediate **concerns** an audience brings to the issue: current or chronic worries people have about their own or their families' health, economic status, quality of life, and future. *What is imminent or significant about the issue's impact on the audience that will make it important enough for them to take action?*

## Public Opinion Research

As noted above, public opinion research can be a valuable tool in communications planning. This type of research is a more scientific form of listening to audiences and can help answer the following questions: Where does the public stand on your issue? Does a majority support or oppose your objectives? What are the most salient reasons for the public to care about your issue? What stands in the way of increasing concern, and how can you overcome these barriers? What segments of the public are most supportive of your positions; which segments are in the middle and possibly persuadable; and which segments, if any, are not persuadable?

## Low-Cost Research Techniques

If you can't afford the services of a professional polling firm, here are some alternatives for learning about your audience's values and concerns. *We don't recommend attempting to design your own survey and using volunteers to conduct polls or focus groups because the results will not be reliable.*

- Take advantage of existing research – over the last decade, many environmental groups have begun using opinion research. In addition to providing reports like [Protecting the Great Lakes: Responsibility to Awareness to Action](#), Biodiversity Project shares research on Americans' attitudes towards biodiversity and sprawl.
- Conduct one-on-one interviews with concerned constituencies—"person on the street" (or "in the mall") interviews. Think about where you might find your audience and go there. While people are often happy to share their opinions, it is important to be sensitive to the setting (e.g. don't survey in front of the post office near closing time) and consider offering some token of your gratitude (such as candy).
- Contact your local college—many social science departments conduct opinion research and may be able to use your issue as a teaching tool.
- Talk to people who you know aren't environmentalists—your mother-in-law, the mail carrier, your car mechanic, the cab driver— folks from different life experiences. Find out what they think about protecting species, stopping development in your community, etc. You may get an informative earful!
- If your organization runs a canvass (or you work with one that does), arrange a debriefing with canvassers. They'll be able to tell you how the door-to-door conversations are running, neighborhood by neighborhood.

### Great Lakes Values

Overall, 94% of the Great Lakes states agree (67% "strongly agree") that each of us has a personal responsibility to protect the Lakes.

When asked to rate reasons why they personally would care about protecting the Great Lakes, residents were most likely to be motivated by: **responsibility to future generations** (64%); belief that the Lakes are **created by God** (58%); the value of the Lakes as an **important place of natural beauty** (55%); need to maintain a **balance of nature** that sustains us (54%); feeling that the Lakes are part of our **regional identity** (52%).

Source: [Protecting the Great Lakes: Responsibility to Awareness to Action](#) by Belden, Russonello & Stewart.

### Public Opinion On the Great Lakes

From various public opinion research projects conducted in the Great Lakes region over the last two years, we know...

**There is a strong sense of pride and personal responsibility for protecting the Lakes:**

- People understand that we *use* the Great Lakes, and therefore, need to *protect* them.
- The Lakes frame much of the region's sense of place and perceived quality of life.

**The public lacks awareness of the threats to the Lakes:**

- The threat of polluted runoff is not widely understood by the public, even though it's believed by many experts to be the biggest threat to overall water quality in the region.
- While people are opposed to water export outside the Great Lakes states, they're less concerned about expanded use in areas of those states outside the basin.
- Large majorities believe that industrial dumping and municipal sewage do great harm to the Lakes, but only 1 in 3 considers runoff from farms as being harmful.
- Only 2 in 10 see a great deal of harm from the use of water by power plants and construction of new homes, stores, and roads near the Lakes.
- Only 1 in 6 worries about pumping groundwater.

**The public doesn't grasp some ecosystem basics, including concepts related to hydrology:**

- People don't understand what groundwater is, why it has any connection to the Lakes, and whether they should be concerned about it.
- People don't understand where Great Lakes water comes from, how it is used (and by whom), what impact that has. They don't understand it's a "finite" resource.
- Concerns about low water levels are not correlated with water use and climate change, but rather framed as "cyclical" and natural.

**And habitat:**

- The notion that the Lakes are a living system is not front and center for most people. The Lakes are viewed through the lenses of water supply, recreation, regional economy and identity. Eventually, habitat will come up in a conversation, but it is not a lens through which most people in the region see the Great Lakes.

**Most people are concerned about the Great Lakes, but there is little urgency associated with many issues.**

**While the vast majority of Great Lakes residents feels personally responsible for protecting the Lakes, most don't understand what they can do or whether their personal actions have any impact.**

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