

# A Climate of Change?

BY SOLITAIRE TOWNSEND

James Murdoch, son of media mogul Rupert Murdoch and chief executive of satellite broadcaster BskyB, recently said, “A company such as ours can bring the climate change debate into the household... Not only can we hammer home the issue, but give people the information they need. Coverage of environmental issues on Sky News is increasing.”



At the same time the (allegedly) corporate-sponsored Competitive Enterprise Institute has scoffed at the climate change believers, declaring in advertisements across the U.S.:

“Carbon dioxide: They call it pollution. We call it life.”

Why these contradictions in business communications on climate change? At the end of last year, *The Economist* magazine ran a special report on climate change. Corporate advertisements with a climate element accounted for almost a third of the report's thickness, with companies such as Total, Shell, BASF, Lexus, Toyota, and Vattenfall taking out full-page or even double-page ads. This list is not impressive for the number of large players it includes, but for the fact that some of the most prolific corporate climate communicators—the likes of BP, GE, and BskyB—are not even on it.

After Al Gore, business seems to be the highest profile communicator on climate change. It is definitely spending more than anyone else: BP's international advertising campaign alone in all likelihood outweighs the climate communications budgets of all the governments of the world combined.

## The Believers and Detractors

Both the climate change committed and the detractors are taking climate change seriously enough to spend money on some

hefty communications. But to what purpose?

There are three key types of corporations committed to the climate change cause: Reputation Enhancers, Marketers, and Influencers.

The “Enhancers” are led by the big oil and energy players, from the old stalwarts of BP and Shell through to Chevron, Duke, and even Exxon Mobil. For these companies, talking about climate change/global warming in public has become *de rigueur*.

Almost without exception, they set out to convince us that they do take climate change seriously; they've had plenty of clever ideas about it, and they are even acting on some of them. “Drop by our website for a chat!” they urge us. Think of Chevron's “Will You Join Us?” or BP's “When it comes to green matters, we develop grey matter.” For these companies, talking climate change is about selling their climate credibility.

Unlike the enhancers, the “Marketers” are trying to shift their products that reduce climate impact. Toyota, Lexus, Sun Microsystems (“Let's Change This”), and a plethora of small players are now marketing their products and services on climate friendliness. As more companies go carbon neutral or introduce a hybrid, efficient, clean, or green version of their products, we will see a boom in climate marketeering.

The “Influencers” are a new breed: companies trying to change the way consumers use their products and services. Examples include Ford giving guidance on “eco-safe” driving, energy companies providing efficiency advice, and washing machine manufacturers recommending low heat wash cycles.

Let's not forget the rear-guard action of the detractors. Much of their response has been in the murky world of “astro-turfing,” where slick PR masquerades as common folk artlessly questioning the logic of climate change. This is an innovative but seemingly last ditch effort. Once you



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have to disguise your voice, the chances are you will eventually go silent.

## Looking Ahead

Whatever their motivation, businesses need to pay attention to their climate communications tactics and avoid the trap of thinking that this issue is like any other public issue. The Carbon Disclosure Project gives a hint of things to come. Its fourth report, released earlier this fall, examined the perceptions of 940 large companies across the globe on climate change. Some 87 percent said climate change represents “commercial risks and/or opportunities.” A lot of companies are thinking about climate change, and it's a fair bet that a significant percentage will decide to start talking publicly about it very soon.

There are a few simple tips for any company trying to get the message across. These are drawn from the extensive *Rules*

and Games research on the communication of climate change available at [www.futerra.co.uk](http://www.futerra.co.uk).

### 1. Information can't work alone

Just telling people about the climate problem and your action in response to it isn't engaging; don't forget to use empathy and clear visuals.

### 2. Target groups

Different people respond to different messages; tailor your campaign to a variety of needs, interests, and audiences.

### 3. Raise the status of behaviors

Many of the actions you ask for may seem un-cool, geeky, and low status. Show high-status individuals with aspirational lifestyles undertaking them.

### 4. Sustained communications

The most successful communications campaigns are sustained over many months and years.

### 5. Pleasure principle

Whatever the "ask" or "call to action" of your campaign, try to make it seem a pleasure, leisure, or fulfillment activity rather than a chore.

Most new communicators will be enhancers, marketers, or influencers, perhaps with a few detractors thrown in. The most successful will be offering partnerships and tangible ideas for action rather than simply crying "me too" in their communications. Their markets, audiences, and industries will be different, but they will all be struggling with the same issue. As Murdoch put it, "There's simply no bigger challenge we face...the stakes could not be higher."

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*Solitaire Townsend is chief executive of Futerra Sustainability Communications, the specialist climate change communications agency. For more information, contact her at [solitaire@futerra.co.uk](mailto:solitaire@futerra.co.uk).*

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