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BULL'S EYE! HOW FRAMING ENVIRONMENTAL MESSAGES HELPS THEM HIT THEIR TARGET

JENNIFER LYNES

We all know that we should drive less, recycle more and turn down the thermostat for the sake of the planet. However, it takes more than knowledge to spur most people to action. That's where the right kind of messaging comes in. And just how those messages are framed can have a big impact, according to the School of Environment's Jennifer Lynes.

By reviewing a number of cognitive psychology and social psychology studies, Lynes and two of her fourth-year students concluded that negative messages tend to be more effective than positive ones. For example, most people pay more attention to messages that describe how much money they're losing by not insulating their house, rather than how much money they could save with a high-efficiency furnace.

Messages work better when they emphasize benefits for the current generation, rather than benefits for future generations.

Finally, messages that focus on social outcomes resonate more with women than men. For example, teenaged girls are more likely to drive less if you emphasize how cool it is to use greener forms of transportation, rather than how ditching the car benefits the planet.

Lynes cautions that because research in this area is few and far between, there isn't a lot of data to draw on. One thing is clear, however: the better you know your audience, the more effectively you can frame your message.

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