Targeting as a Mode of Science Communication: Principles, Issues and a Practical Example

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Introduction

• Today’s fractured media landscape contains a rich and diverse range of communications opportunities
• Pitfalls abound, but the diversity provides opportunities for targeted science communications
• Such an approach requires a careful framing of the message in terms familiar to the targeted group, including: immediacy, economics, culture, community leaders, emotions, and ideology.
• Here we elaborate on our approach to targeting and framing together with lessons learnt in the context of a practical example of working with a religious community.

“Only write the things you know...” (Mooney 2010)

Our Targeting Approach

Identify communities through a triage prioritization:
• Will the approach result in genuine communication and understanding?
• Resist the inclination to target groups that are already well informed, or fully in agreement, and,
• Avoid groups who are engaging purely for irrelevant reasons, such as politics or self-promotion.

Use a frame that is:
• Familiar and comprehensible to the selected community, and,
• Compatible with their perceptions of risk (Leiserowitz 2007)

Take a long-term view, moving carefully from ‘get to know you’, to dialogue, and then to serious 2-way discussion.

Target Community, Message and Frame

The Seventh-day Adventist Church in Boulder: “How can we improve communications between the church and scientists?”
• Their frame is complex and based around a strong and literal belief in the Bible including: Creation, the Second Coming, family, and stewardship
• Their community includes scientists and medical professionals
• They have a culture of debate and active discussion.

How many messages and quite different actions do you see in this frame?

“Getting to Know You”

Introductions:
• One of us (Jonathan) is both an atmospheric scientist and a member of the church – this enabled an excellent means of introduction.

The first meeting was with the church elders:
• Started off polite but very formal
• The elders were interested, but wary of high-handed scientists
• A single humorous incident involving Creation, quite unplanned, provided the ice-breaker.

The second meeting was with the pastor and a medical doctor:
• To plan a discussion session with the congregation,
• Session scheduled scheduled at the church following the Sabbath service and a pot-luck lunch; open to all interested members of the congregation
• It was agreed that all topics were allowed, and that both sides would be respectful of the views of the others.

Panel and Discussion Session

Involved:
• Two scientists and two church members (including the pastor)
• Moderation by Jonathan as a member of the congregation
• A series of topics related to the main question
• An extensive and lively discussion in which many topics came up, including differing views on potentially contentious issues such as Creation and evolution.

The lead-up was of considerable importance:
• The scientists came to the service and joined in the pot luck
• The pastor introduced the scientists at the service and expressed his support for the interaction.

The next session will address climate change in the frame of “Stewardship of a Changing Planet”. Continuing get-togethers are planned.

Lessons Learnt

• Do not preach – listening is vital to engage in a real dialogue.
• The frames that worked were stewardship and family
• Careful attention to the getting-to-know-you stage is critical
• Open and honest discussion on contentious topics works, so long as participants realize that not all views are compatible
• If the message is communicated and framed well, and the targeted group give it serious consideration, the meeting is considered a success
• It is then up to the target group to factor this new information alongside their many other priorities.

References
