

COMMUNICATION PSYCHOLOGY

Ways to persuade*Environ. Politics* **28**, 615–638 (2019)

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What motivates us to do things? A positive message (“You can do it”)? Or a negative one (“If you don’t, these are the costs to you and others”)? The language used to call people into action can have very distinct effects. How best to achieve behavioural change for sustainability is a slippery question concerning behavioural scientists and practitioners alike.

Nicolas M. Anspach from York College of Pennsylvania and Gorana Draguljić, from Towson University, both in the US, run a behavioural experiment to test the effect of message framings (the way information is presented) on attitudinal change among US respondents. They use the example of fundraising for a sustainable fishing initiative, and frame the message in three ways: motivational

(empowering the reader), economic (highlighting the costs of inaction) and personal (focusing on harm for others). Motivational messages aim to increase efficacy — one’s feeling of capacity for change, which is a powerful driver of action. They find that motivational messages do not boost efficacy as intended. In contrast, economic and personal framings increase psychological closeness (the problem feels closer to us), which is another known driver of action. These are valuable insights, for example, for NGOs aiming to attract supporters.

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Published online: 11 June 2019
<https://doi.org/10.1038/s41893-019-0317-z>