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Seeking to Save the Planet, With a Thesaurus

By [JOHN M. BRODER](#)

WASHINGTON — The problem with [global warming](#), some environmentalists believe, is “global warming.”

The term turns people off, fostering images of shaggy-haired liberals, economic sacrifice and complex scientific disputes, according to extensive polling and focus group sessions conducted by ecoAmerica, a nonprofit environmental marketing and messaging firm in Washington.

Instead of grim warnings about global warming, the firm advises, talk about “our deteriorating atmosphere.” Drop discussions of carbon dioxide and bring up “moving away from the dirty fuels of the past.” Don’t confuse people with cap and trade; use terms like “cap and cash back” or “pollution reduction refund.”

EcoAmerica has been conducting research for the last several years to find new ways to frame environmental issues and so build public support for climate change legislation and other initiatives. A summary of the group’s latest findings and recommendations was accidentally sent by e-mail to a number of news organizations by someone who sat in this week on a briefing intended for government officials and environmental leaders.

Asked about the summary, ecoAmerica’s president and founder, Robert M. Perkowitz, requested that it not be reported until the formal release of the firm’s full paper later this month, but acknowledged that its wide distribution now made compliance with his request unlikely.

The research directly parallels marketing studies conducted by oil companies, utilities and [coal](#) mining concerns that are trying to “green” their images with consumers and sway public policy.

Environmental issues consistently rate near the bottom of public worry, according to many public opinion polls. A [Pew Research Center](#) poll released in January found global warming last among 20 voter concerns; it trailed issues like addressing moral decline and decreasing the influence of lobbyists. “We know why it’s lowest,” said Mr. Perkowitz, a marketer of outdoor clothing and home furnishings before he started ecoAmerica, whose activities are financed by corporations, foundations and individuals. “When someone thinks of global warming, they think of a politicized,

polarized argument. When you say ‘global warming,’ a certain group of Americans think that’s a code word for progressive liberals, gay marriage and other such issues.”

The answer, Mr. Perkowitz said in his presentation at the briefing, is to reframe the issue using different language. “Energy efficiency” makes people think of shivering in the dark. Instead, it is more effective to speak of “saving money for a more prosperous future.” In fact, the group’s surveys and focus groups found, it is time to drop the term “the environment” and talk about “the air we breathe, the water our children drink.”

“Another key finding: remember to speak in TALKING POINTS aspirational language about shared American ideals, like freedom, prosperity, independence and self-sufficiency while avoiding jargon and details about policy, science, economics or technology,” said the e-mail account of the group’s study.

Mr. Perkowitz and allies in the environmental movement have been briefing officials in Congress and the administration in the hope of using the findings to change the terms of the debate now under way in Washington.

Opponents of legislation to combat global warming are engaged in a similar effort. Trying to head off a cap-and-trade system, in which government would cap the amount of heat-trapping emissions allowed and let industry trade permits to emit those gases, they are coaching Republicans to refer to any such system as a giant tax that would kill jobs. Coal companies are taking out full-page advertisements promising “clean, green coal.” The natural gas industry refers to its product as “clean fuel green fuel.” Oil companies advertise their investments in alternative energy.

Robert J. Brulle of Drexel University, an expert on environmental communications, said ecoAmerica’s campaign was a mirror image of what industry and political conservatives were doing. “The form is the same; the message is just flipped,” he said. “You want to sell toothpaste, we’ll sell it. You want to sell global warming, we’ll sell that. It’s the use of advertising techniques to manipulate public opinion.”

He said the approach was cynical and, worse, ineffective. “The right uses it, the left uses it, but it doesn’t engage people in a face-to-face manner,” he said, “and that’s the only way to achieve real, lasting social change.”

[Frank Luntz](#), a Republican communications consultant, prepared a strikingly similar memorandum in 2002, telling his clients that they were losing the environmental debate and advising them to adjust their language. He suggested referring to themselves as “conservationists” rather than “environmentalists,” and emphasizing “common sense” over scientific argument.

And, Mr. Luntz and Mr. Perkowitz agree, “climate change” is an easier sell than “global warming.”

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