

Per Espen Stoknes

At a time when simply conveying information about climate change has seemingly had underwhelming results, what can exhibitions do that is different – that engages visitors, spurs conversation, and inspires action? In this issue, editor Ellen Snyder-Grenier interviews psychologist and economist Per Espen Stoknes to learn how his innovative work can inform our practice.



Q Ellen In *What We Think About When We Try Not To Think About Global Warming: Toward a New Psychology of Climate Action*, you write about psychological barriers to climate action. For those who may not know of your work, could you briefly describe some of the barriers?

A Per Espen The five main psychological barriers to climate action are:

1. Distance: the distance most people feel to climate change makes it seem too far from our pressing everyday concerns.
2. Doom: when climate change is repeatedly presented as a coming catastrophe or disaster, we start automatically to avoid the topic altogether.

Per Espen Stoknes is a TED Global speaker, a psychologist with a PhD in economics, and serves as the director of the Centre for Green Growth at the Norwegian Business School. An experienced foresight facilitator and academic, he's also a serial entrepreneur, including cofounding clean-tech company GasPlas. Author of several books, among them *Money & Soul* (2009) and the "Outstanding Academic Title of 2015" award-winning book, *What We Think About When We Try Not To Think About Global Warming* (2015). Per Espen has served as member of the Norwegian Parliament and is an advisor to the EU Commission's mission board on Horizon Europe's Climate Change and Societal Adaptation.

3. Dissonance: if what we know contradicts our actions then cognitive dissonance sets in. It is easier to get rid of by altering our beliefs rather than our behavior, as the latter comes with greater costs.

4. Denial: we tend to repress the unsettling facts about climate change by silencing, negating, or even mockery of those who do not avoid it.

5. Identity: news is always filtered through our core identity values, which means that we are less likely to believe the message from someone who we perceive as not being the same as us politically and culturally.

Q You also write about overcoming barriers, and share evidence-based solutions for how to discuss climate change in a way that fosters meaningful action. Could you tell us a bit about what you've learned about what works?

A So, if neither factual communication nor information campaigns are sufficient for effective climate communication, then what is? Fortunately, there is a wide range of well-founded and tested options. But they require a certain willingness to think differently and innovatively, lots of determination and perseverance to experiment, and trial and error. The direction of the new strategies, however, is very clear.

At least four are worth mentioning: 1) use the strength of social networks; 2) make it simple to act in a climate-friendly manner; 3) use the power of storytelling; and 4) use new framings for the messages.

Take, for instance, the power of social networks. In conventional economics, it's primarily price incentives that work: consumers will then be rational and do what is cheapest. But with recent psychological-economic research, the importance of social norms and peer pressure has become much more prominent. We tend to copy what others, neighbors, colleagues and peers are doing, as is apparent from the recent school strikes

that Greta Thunberg has started. Nobody wants to strike alone, but if my classmates go, I go too.

Q For a museum that wants to tackle climate change – but is concerned that visitors might find the topic controversial, and become alienated – what words of advice or support could you offer?

A I suggest rather than just telling, we can ask people, What's the kind of future society you would really like to live in, relative to today? And then find ways for them to respond creatively, envisioning or designing solutions from a set of options, for instance from Project Drawdown (drawdown.org).

Storytelling and vision-making generates inspiration. Most people would prefer to see a future which is not overly polluted, where there's less congestion, less crime, and a warmer, kinder society. Engaging people in that kind of inquiry, rather than going down partisan arguments, is very, very important.

Q Climate change can feel so abstract. If you were asked to create a museum exhibition about climate change, what would be your personal “must haves” – what object/s, image/s, or experience would you want to include to make climate change feel less abstract – and have a meaningful impact on visitors?

A I'm no exhibit designer. But I believe interactive experiences is key. But drop polar melting glaciers and polar bears. Research shows that showing people climate research doesn't work when it comes to creating engagement. So, they've got to see and feel for themselves. The best thing is to see someone similar to themselves taking some kind of action. And to compare themselves and their results to someone they care about. For instance, by including ecological footprint calculators and letting the visitors compare their results with each other and people they know. Maybe also have a competition on a simulation for running a city, a nation, or a world, in terms of turning levers on climate actions. MIT's Climate Interactive

model can do such realistic calculations for the world (climateinteractive.org) through a web interface at a number of levels of complexity. Project Drawdown has 100 climate solutions; which are the visitors' favorites?

Also, by exploring and evoking emotions: how do they feel about it, before – during – afterwards? After solving a challenge – shocked, inspired, helpless, intrigued, confused, worried, or embarrassed? On exiting, what action do they want or plan to take in the coming days or months?

People need to know their reaction and attitude relative to others. How do their attitudes and feelings compare to average visitors, to people from their state, or to the average American? The Yale Program on Climate Change Communications (climatecommunication.yale.edu) keeps score of these, and makes comparisons possible.

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