

KEY TAKEAWAYS & RESOURCES:

Social Science for Communications and Messaging

This document is a summary of takeaways that could be useful to practitioners and researchers interested in this topic, especially as applied to the Seacoast region of New Hampshire. Generated from “Learning Circle #4,” organized by the [Bridging Human Dimensions Project](#). Additional shared project files [are available at this link](#).

Practitioner Context & Challenges

- ★ People have created most of our water quality problems and **we need to involve people** widely and skillfully in order to find, advance, and sustain solutions.
- ★ Locally, we have been investing in new communications efforts, such as 7 Rivers to the Coast. What **best practices** should guide this new work? What **resources and data sources** should we be consulting to **understand our audience and develop messaging**?
- ★ Water quality is also a social justice issue which requires a nuanced understanding of the individuals and **groups most impacted**.
- ★ Effective science communication requires **integrating many types of expertise**.
- ★ How can communicators work with social science researchers and integrate their research methods?

Key Takeaways

- What have we learned about engagement that can support **individual or community scale adoption of best practices** for water quality (new treatment plants, new septic systems)?
 - People’s questions often go well beyond what you might expect (e.g., costs) and include risks, sounds, landscaping considerations, questions about the technology and contractors. Take time to learn about and respond to questions.
 - Even in cases with robust engagement programs to support a new program or policy, people often feel they weren’t engaged early enough.
 - Likelihood to adopt a new practice varies from community to community. Different towns may need a different approach.
 - Promoting the co-benefits of a new practice can help in some cases if the benefit resonates locally e.g., using shellfish aquaculture for nutrient removal if shellfish are part of the local culture.
 - See: Resources below, particularly [these from Kate Mulvaney](#).
- Important questions to consider when **envisioning a new communications** effort:
 - Who, specifically, are you trying to reach?
 - How do they want to receive information?
 - Knowing and respecting audience preferences is key to inclusivity.
 - What do they care about related to the mission and goals?
 - Small focus groups can be helpful
 - What do you want people to do as a result of your communication with them?
 - What do they know about your organization, and how does that affect you being the bearer of information?
 - Are you open to changing communication efforts as an organization?
 - How can you engage partners in the communications effort to extend reach?
- Tips and best practices for **developing messaging**
 - Place-based messaging is often more effective than promoting awareness about abstract environmental issues. For example, using messaging that connects with physical spaces that

resonate personally with your target audience. Make it clear how they and the places they love are affected by x environmental things.

- Our communications goal should be to connect instead of convince.
- There is a lot of scholarship about the social science theories behind communications. None are perfect but they can help organize thinking and narrow your focus. See: [Key Takeaways for Learning Circle 1](#).
- Ideas for **inclusive communications**
 - It's important to acknowledge your limitations and ignorance of language and norms in some communities. Partnering with representatives of a focal audience can help.
 - Language is challenging and constantly evolving. It can elicit strong feelings in people. Ironically, sometimes adopting new more inclusive terms can be confusing and inhibit understanding.
 - Inclusive communications is rooted in intentionality and basic, good communications practices (e.g., Who is your audience? What are their preferences? What is the science you are communicating?). Make sure people can easily understand the language and concepts you are sharing!
- Ideas for **integrating some social science research practices** in communications
 - When possible, work with a collaborative team of practitioners and researchers to incorporate some research into communications design in an interactive, practical way.
 - Data collection to assess effectiveness can be accessible and painless.
 - A multi-organization approach can also help sustain the work over time.
 - Practitioners can use some research practices (focus groups, interview protocols and coding) to inform communications work and ensure you get the most value and learning as you consider your audiences and plan a communications effort.
 - You can look at findings from other places that likely have a similar ecology and/or social environment. The setting of a study (urban vs. rural) matters.
 - Informal conversations with people similar to or part of your focal audience can help you get more grounded, even if you don't do full focus groups.
 - You can start to see the nuances in people's thinking through open-ended conversations and qualitative data, and these nuances are critical for messaging.
 - Social science is really different than natural science. There is so much that changes behavior, and conditions change rapidly over time. Never going to reach 100% clarity or find a model that perfectly predicts behavior!

Featured Practitioners and Researchers

Thank you to the following individuals who were part of the Learning Circle that informed this summary:

- [Kate Mulvaney](#) - Social Scientist, US EPA
- [Dolores Leonard](#) - Principal, Roca Communications+
- [Brian Eisenhauer](#) - Professor, Plymouth State University

Additional examples, related studies, and resources of potential interest:

Articles on water quality choices

- [Considerations for using alternative technologies in nutrient management on Cape Cod: Beyond cost and performance](#) (article by Mulvaney, Merrill and Atkinson, 2021)
- [Factors in homeowners' willingness to adopt nitrogen-reducing innovative/alternative septic systems](#) (article by Rudman et al. 2023)
- [Motivating the adoption and diffusion of enhanced nitrogen-reducing innovative/ alternative septic systems](#) (article by Rudman et al. 2023)

- [Messaging on Slow Impacts: Applying Lessons Learned from Climate Change Communication to Catalyze and Improve Marine Nutrient Communication](#) (article)
- Social construction of scientifically grounded climate change discussions (by Swim et al in [Psychology and Climate Change](#)). [Available here](#).
 - Takeaway: “Because of the social basis of perceptions of climate change, it is useful to focus on social interactions that influence these perceptions. The importance of interpersonal exchange of information on climate change opinions has been proposed through research on the role of social media on such opinions (Anderson, 2017). Expressive activities, such as voicing one’s opinions or concerns about climate change and social media consumption patterns, can influence perceptions of climate change.”

General tips and best practices for inclusive communications

- [Water Hub Blog - Continuing the conversation on water words](#) (blog + 53 min video)
- [The Power of Powerless Communication - Northwest Leader - Brian Dolleman](#) (blog)
- [The State of Inclusive Science Communication: A Landscape Study](#) (Canfield and Menezes, 2020)
- [Reimagining the language of engagement in a post-stakeholder world](#) (Reed et al. 2024)
- Although oriented to public health, there are many more helpful resources linked within the resources and adjacent pages (e.g. a preferred terms list):
 - [Creating Inclusive Communication \(CDC\)](#)
 - [Health Equity Guiding Principles for Inclusive Communication \(CDC\)](#)
- [A Progressive’s Style Guide](#) - This shows the complexities around, importance of, and power dynamics at play around language. A good “food for thought” resource, with some practical suggestions as well.
- [Behavioural Design](#) - a blog and resources about the psychology of influence. Here is one example: [Behavioral Design Advice for Environmentalists](#)

Community and citizen science

- [Why we’re changing the term “Citizen Scientist” to “Community Scientist”](#) (blog post)
- [Citizen Science Terminology Matters: Exploring Key Terms](#)
- [Community Based Water Monitoring vs. Citizen Science](#) (case study from British Columbia)

Communications examples that resonated

- [Hope In the Water on PBS](#) - The story starts and continues with the target audience. Excellent example of how to tackle a tough subject the right way.
- ["Save the Crabs then Eat 'em" campaign out of the Chesapeake](#). - a nice example of a coastal campaign that produced some nice case studies of impact.

Project Resources, Contacts, and Feedback: We appreciate your interest in this project and welcome additional questions or ideas for resources that would be useful. In addition, we appreciate hearing feedback on how you may have used this takeaway summary. Please contact Lindsey.Williams@unh.edu.

- A more detailed summary of this Learning Circle discussion [is available at this link](#). Additional shared project files [are available at this link](#).
- Additional takeaway summaries are available on the following topics:
 - Learning Circle 1: [Conceptual Frameworks for Motivating Behavior Change](#)
 - Learning Circle 2: [Documenting Public Opinion to Guide Programs & Influence Policy](#)
 - Learning Circle 3: [Understanding and Building Loyalty Among Visitors and Volunteers](#)
 - Learning Circle 5: [Drivers of Local Policy Change and the Role of Technical Assistance](#)
- A listing of academic research papers, data sources, and other resources [is available at this link](#).

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