



Communicating Climate Change and Water Linkages in the West

— Guidelines and Toolkit —

September 2009

PART I COMMUNICATIONS GUIDELINES

Introduction

In March 2009, in consultation with our partners at Exloco's Carpe Diem – Western Water and Climate Change Project, Resource Media conducted a comprehensive framing analysis of existing media coverage and public opinion data on the issues of climate change and water in the West. Based on our research, we see a significant opportunity for those engaged in communicating solutions to the West's water woes. We believe that a thoughtful approach to communications can help support a fundamental shift in how decision-makers throughout the West engage the issues surrounding climate change-induced water challenges.



Certainly, the American West has faced dry times before. Drought today, though, is happening in the face of the region's rapid climate shifts. In coming decades, according to increasingly definitive research, less water will be available throughout most of the region even as demand for water continues to grow. Responding to this new reality has yet to become an integral part of water development and allocation decisions. While discussions by decision-makers about the linkage between climate and water have begun in certain policy circles, they have yet to gain traction among broader audiences. Our assessment found that the debate over the climate-water connection is today largely undefined. Those who engage early can set the terms for a conversation that is certain to grow in importance as climate impacts on the West's scarce water supplies are felt even more acutely. Our research provides an important starting point for creating a clear communications strategy that can serve well-defined policy goals. By seizing this opportunity, stakeholders may have an opening for spurring greater interest in and enthusiasm for smart approaches to alleviating water insecurity. This document presents

our preliminary guidelines for communicating the connections between western water and climate change in a variety of settings. It also includes a communications campaign-planning workbook. Together, these tools are designed to help stakeholders throughout the water and climate change communities craft winning communications strategies. The challenge ahead: building a connection between water issues and climate change that helps foster support for smarter water policy. Communications strategies will play an integral role in building these connections.

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Framing Analysis: Methodology and Key Findings

Our March 2009 framing analysis was based on a quantitative assessment of 165 news stories from major daily newspapers in 11 Western states. In addition, we conducted a comprehensive synthesis of 16 public opinion surveys, meta-analyses and focus group reports on water and climate change in the West. We also interviewed 14 prominent water experts from the region.

The most striking finding of the framing analysis was the lack of stories connecting the issues of climate change and water. Of thousands of news stories generated on the topic of Western water, only 10% even mentioned the words "climate change." Even fewer made any substantive connection between the two issues.

What coverage we did find was highly technical and mostly inaccessible to lay audiences. Simply put, neither reporters nor scientists - the most common messenger in our sample - nor environmental advocates are connecting global warming and water insecurity in the region. And while water managers are making these connections more frequently, their voices are underrepresented in the overall conversation.



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COMMUNICATING CLIMATE-WATER LINKAGES

Our research indicates a number of communications guidelines for those planning or launching smart water use campaigns. While specific messages must be created in the context of particular policy goals, these guidelines can provide a roadmap to support initial planning. They may also help hone and refine messages for projects already underway.

Use with Care — Global Warming Messages

It is clear that climate change has the potential to permanently alter the availability of water in the western United States. But whether or not to invoke climate change as a message in support of particular policy campaigns is highly dependent on the target audience for the effort. Alliances that seek to influence federal agency decisions may design a very different water solutions message than those targeting western Statehouses.

Climate Change: Consider Your Audience

Polling shows that roughly 20% of Americans grasp the extreme urgency of the climate crisis. However, that support is uneven throughout the West. Most public opinion research reveals substantial confusion about global warming. Comprehensive recent research shows that nearly 50% of Westerners do not accept the reality of anthropogenic climate change. In some Rocky Mountain States, this number reaches the mid-sixtieth percentiles.

As a result, partnerships targeting state and local elected officials should pause before leading with a global warming message on water policy. These decision-makers must be responsive to the general public. As long as many of their constituents remain confused about, or even resistant to the idea of climate change, global warming messages are unlikely to be persuasive. Such messaging may be used to support or bolster leading messages in private conversations, or to galvanize a base of existing supporters. Depending on the local political landscape, however, such messages are not likely to garner the traction needed to affect outcomes at the state or county level.

While our research shows a substantial gap between public understanding and scientific understanding of global warming, some policymakers - particularly within water agencies and federal agencies - now grasp the climate challenge in a very immediate way. For campaigns and partnerships that seek to influence agency decision makers, climate change messaging on water solutions may be highly persuasive.

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Climate Change: Educational Messaging

Talking about climate change may not be a universally persuasive way to effect shifts in water policy, but it should not be abandoned too hastily. Stakeholders may consider deploying climate change messaging in educational campaigns, even if such messaging does not lead the policy campaign. The frame around climate change is shifting quickly, and it is well worth the investment in educational messaging on global warming to help this process along. Key audiences may be ripe for a smart, targeted educational campaign on the climate-water connection. Westerners are living with the effects of climate change today, even if some do not yet perceive it as such. Educational messaging on the local impacts of climate change may be a critical strategy to "connect the dots" between global warming and local communities.

Promote Values-Based Messaging

Speaking to values must be the starting point for our work in establishing the climate-water connection, no matter what the campaign setting. We must craft messages for every campaign, whether directed at the statehouse or the White House, that directly align with the core values shared by most Americans. These values – such as family, health, prosperity and safety –

are deeply held and strongly motivate audiences to act, whether in support of or opposition to specific plans and policies. When advocates put the climate impacts on water supply in the context of these core values, messages are much more likely to gain traction and inspire action. Conversely, when dry, technical or abstract messages dominate, audiences are likely to tune out.

The quotes below reflect the difference in feel between values-based messaging and “process” oriented messaging. The first message uses metaphor and imagery, and resonates with frugality, a key Western value. The second centers on administrative processes remote from everyday experience.

“The handwriting is on the wall,” said lead author Tim Barnett, a marine geophysicist at Scripps Institution of Oceanography in La Jolla. “Mother nature is going to stop being our water banker.”

– Los Angeles Times, February 1, 2008

“What we’re hoping is that they’ll adopt an anticipatory approach rather than a reactive approach,” he said.

– Eugene Register-Guard, March 4, 2009

Move Beyond a “Seasonal” Awareness of Drought

Our research shows that for most Westerners, with the exception of Pacific Northwesterners, drought is a fact of life. Westerners know that we live in an arid climate. Many are willing to tighten their belts during drought, but expect to “loosen” a little when the drought ends - as it always has. Today, drought has a seasonal quality for most Westerners.

However, few understand the implications of long-term changes in precipitation patterns for our future water supply. Until the unprecedented nature of current and predicted climate change-induced water insecurity is better understood, it will be difficult to build support for bold water solutions. Educating target audiences about the extraordinary water challenges of our time must be a cornerstone of any communications effort. However, this education effort does not require predicting catastrophe or adopting an unnecessarily alarmist tone. In fact, extreme messages related to another environmental threat may be much less likely to succeed in today’s news cycle. Instead, future education efforts should emphasize common-sense solutions readily available today to address this unparalleled challenge.

Values-Based Messaging – It Works

Values-based messaging means the difference between communications campaigns that resonate, and those that fall flat. In the Martis Valley of the Sierra Nevada, a successful campaign to stop a massive resort development plan illustrates the power of values-based messaging. Building their campaign messaging and messengers around the values of family, stewardship and fairness, a diverse alliance convinced the Placer County Board of Supervisors to accept a far less damaging development plan. Messages centered on the County’s permitting process could easily have dominated the campaign, allowing the issue to be framed as yet another “conservationists obstruct economic progress” story. Instead, the campaign, orchestrated by local outfit Sierra Watch, featured local messengers, solutions-oriented messaging, and consistent values-based messaging. This combination kept the focus on Tahoe’s legendary quality of life, and framed the debate as an important opportunity for smart development that would benefit all the valley’s stakeholders.

Go Local

Our research also shows that while water is primarily a local issue, global warming is almost never framed in terms of its impacts on local people and communities. For the linkage between climate change and water insecurity to come alive, advocates must connect the dots between global climate change and its local impacts. Members of the farming and ranching communities, tribal leaders, healthcare workers, longtime community members and hunters and anglers are uniquely situated to talk about how water scarcity is affecting livelihoods, families and recreation opportunities. Using persuasive messengers to bring global warming impacts home is a critical ingredient of any water-solutions communications strategy.

Promote Ingenuity over Sacrifice

Our research uncovered a powerful current of support across the West for water conservation measures. This ethic runs deep and reflects key Western values of stewardship, prudence and frugality. Messaging that builds on this support and links it to core beliefs in ingenuity, technology and innovation will strengthen any communications effort. In contrast, conservation messaging that focuses on sacrifice undermines support for solutions by framing conservation as an either/or proposition – a poorly understood benefit (more water in the future) is obtained at the price of a clear personal sacrifice (less comfort for me today). However, effective policy campaigns do not require framing conservation in these terms. Conservation is a clear win-win for individuals, communities and ecosystems; promoting its many benefits helps build support rather than feeding the fatigue and fatalism that can result from the sacrifice frame.

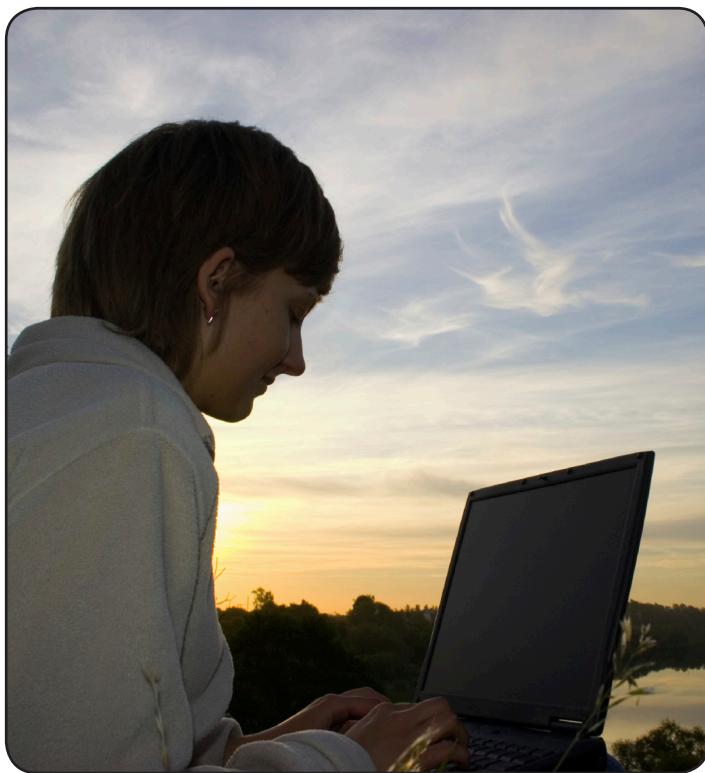


“...a diverse cast of messengers speaking on smart water policy will bolster the variety of messages that can be successfully deployed.”

Broaden the Messenger Pool

The messenger is as important as the message. Though muted relative to the overall media environment, scientists' voices are by far the loudest in the current climate-water conversation. Scientists are highly credible messengers, but may not be willing to speak forcefully on policy matters or to clearly link global warming with local weather phenomena. While scientists' messages will always be important, a diverse cast of messengers speaking on smart water policy will bolster the variety of messages that can be successfully deployed. More importantly, credible messengers like farmers, diverse community members, tribal leaders, and doctors and nurses can persuade audiences that ordinary people recognize the region's water challenges and solutions. Depending on a campaign's goals and

audiences, diverse messengers may also be able to speak with authority on the local impacts of climate change. Farmers, in particular, are missing in action in the current media coverage of the climate-water nexus. As alliances between farmers and other water stakeholders take root, farmers' voices can play a critical role in strengthening the call for water solutions.



Social Media

Our research revealed very little discussion in the digital media world about the nexus between climate change and water insecurity. This dearth of discussion offers an important opportunity for advocates to broaden the conversation, generate grassroots support and expand the cast of messengers and supporters. Diverse campaigns might use the new social media platforms in different ways. A Facebook page with associated Twitter feed might be a valuable tactic for an educational campaign linking climate change and water in particular states or regions. For campaigns targeting legislation or policy, social media platforms can be used as organizing tools. These spaces also provide room for the core of climate change believers to deliver solutions to their local and virtual communities. And all campaigns can use these technologies to expand their reach, build credibility and cultivate new messengers.

It's All About Solutions



A common misperception among conservationists is that if the public only understood the severity of the environmental crises we face, political support would materialize. In fact, hard earned experience shows that the most compelling messages are solutions based. Stories of catastrophe may be effective in grabbing the public's attention, but they also induce fatalism and disengagement from the hard work necessary to implement smart policy. For this reason, a focus on solutions is critical in all communications strategy. Solutions messages are particularly important in the climate-water nexus because the issues are not yet well understood by most of the public. Gloom and doom reports that the West is running dry are becoming increasingly common and may lead to hasty policy fixes. Solutions-based messaging, in contrast, communicates the heart of the problem, but also offers readily available solutions that inspire hope and engagement.

PART II COMMUNICATIONS PLANNING TOOLKIT

Effective communications campaigns can play a critical part in bolstering efforts to promote smart water management policies. Good communications planning, building off of strong campaign plans, is an essential first step. And as with solid campaign planning, effective communications campaigns require clarity about desired goals, key decision makers, target audiences, core values and effective messaging. No amount of resources can offset the need to carefully think through the elements of a successful communications effort. Even if you have already begun your work, going back over this ground is bound to clarify your thinking, strategy and messaging.

This toolkit will walk you through a communications campaign planning exercise. Sit down with your core team and take the time to clarify each and every step. If your policy goals are clear, this tool will help you to design winning messages and tactics. If you are not sure about your policy goals, this toolkit will help you recognize just how important it is to settle on your priorities and concrete goals before you proceed with any communications effort. We have included a few examples here to get you started, but the most important work you do with this tool will be your own.

Workbook

THE FRAMEWORK

Effective media campaigns are based on clearly defined goals and target audiences. Once these have been determined, the messages, messengers, targets and tactics can be developed.





1. GOAL

Goals are specific and measurable. Often, campaigns have more than one goal such as securing a policy or legal victory, or increasing funding or membership. In order to be successful, campaigns need to have one clearly defined goal. The clearer the goal, the better the strategy and execution. Consider the question – how will you know when you've won?

Examples:

1. Passage of the “Tobacco-Free Kids” bill at your statehouse. The bill will spend a \$.25 per pack cigarette tax on a statewide campaign to discourage smoking among teens.
2. Your local water agency recharges its groundwater with water saved through a comprehensive conservation program.

Your goals:

Pick one!



2. DECISION MAKER(S) and AUDIENCE(S)

Decision makers are those people who can help you achieve your goal – audiences typically influence decision makers. Sometimes audiences and decision makers are the same.

Who can help you achieve your goal?

Who influences them?

Examples: State legislators, water agencies, conservation groups, public health organizations, industry groups.

Your decision maker(s)

Your audience(s)



3. VALUES

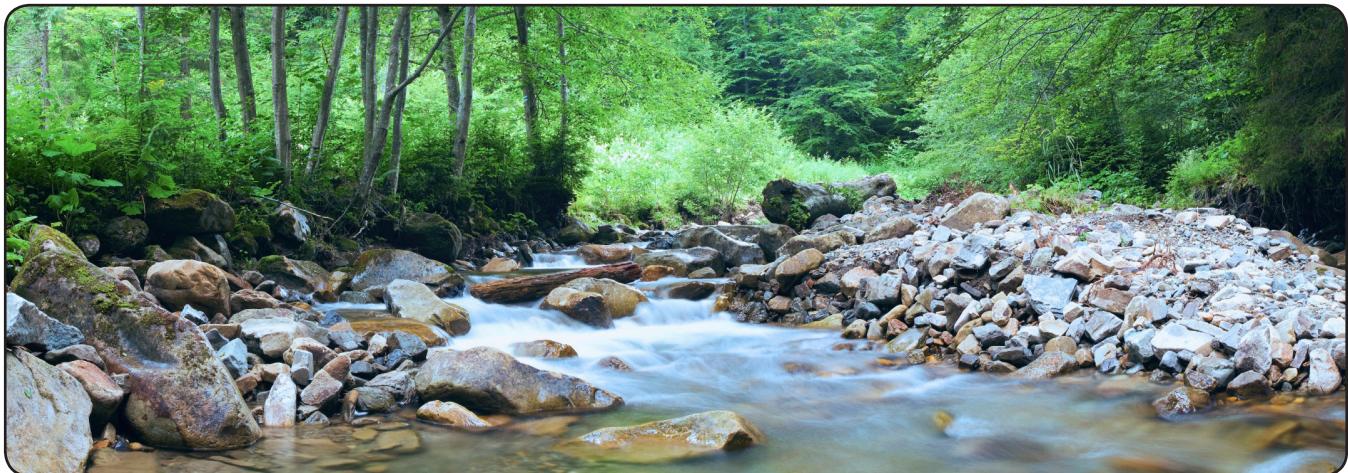
Each audience has different values that are based on personal experience, history, attitudes, needs and belief systems. They are shared by most human beings and are the fundamental bedrock upon which our opinions are based.

What are your target audience's values? What compels them to act?

Examples:

- Family
- Prosperity
- Faith
- Personal Security
- Fairness
- Justice
- Integrity
- Community
- Nature
- Freedom

Your audience's values:



4. MESSAGES

Messages are often the hardest part of the campaign to develop. A few hints about messages: keep them short and simple, choose words carefully and avoid jargon and technicalities.

Messages are designed to answer the following questions:

What values are at stake?

What is the threat?

What is the solution?

Example: Recharging our depleted ground water will ensure the health of our families, communities and ecosystems.

Questions:

Values at stake: _____

Threat: _____

Solution: _____

Your messages:



5. MESSENGERS

Often, spokespeople – such as scientists, farmers, fishermen or others – can change a story's frame by shifting the focus from process to values. They also provide credibility and expertise and can appeal to the core concerns of target audiences. Who is doing the talking is often more important than what is being said.

Who does your audience respond to or want to hear from?

Your messengers:



6. TARGETS

Targets are the vehicles used to reach specific audiences and may include the news media, online advertising, direct mail, etc.

Examples:

- News Media: Associated Press, reporter at the local newspaper, Hispanic radio network
- Advertising: Paid advertising in the community newspaper, Google ads
- Digital Media: Bloggers, Social Media Outlets such as Twitter and Facebook

Your targets:



7. TACTICS

Choosing tactics is the final step in the process. Tactics are the “means” to reach different media outlets.

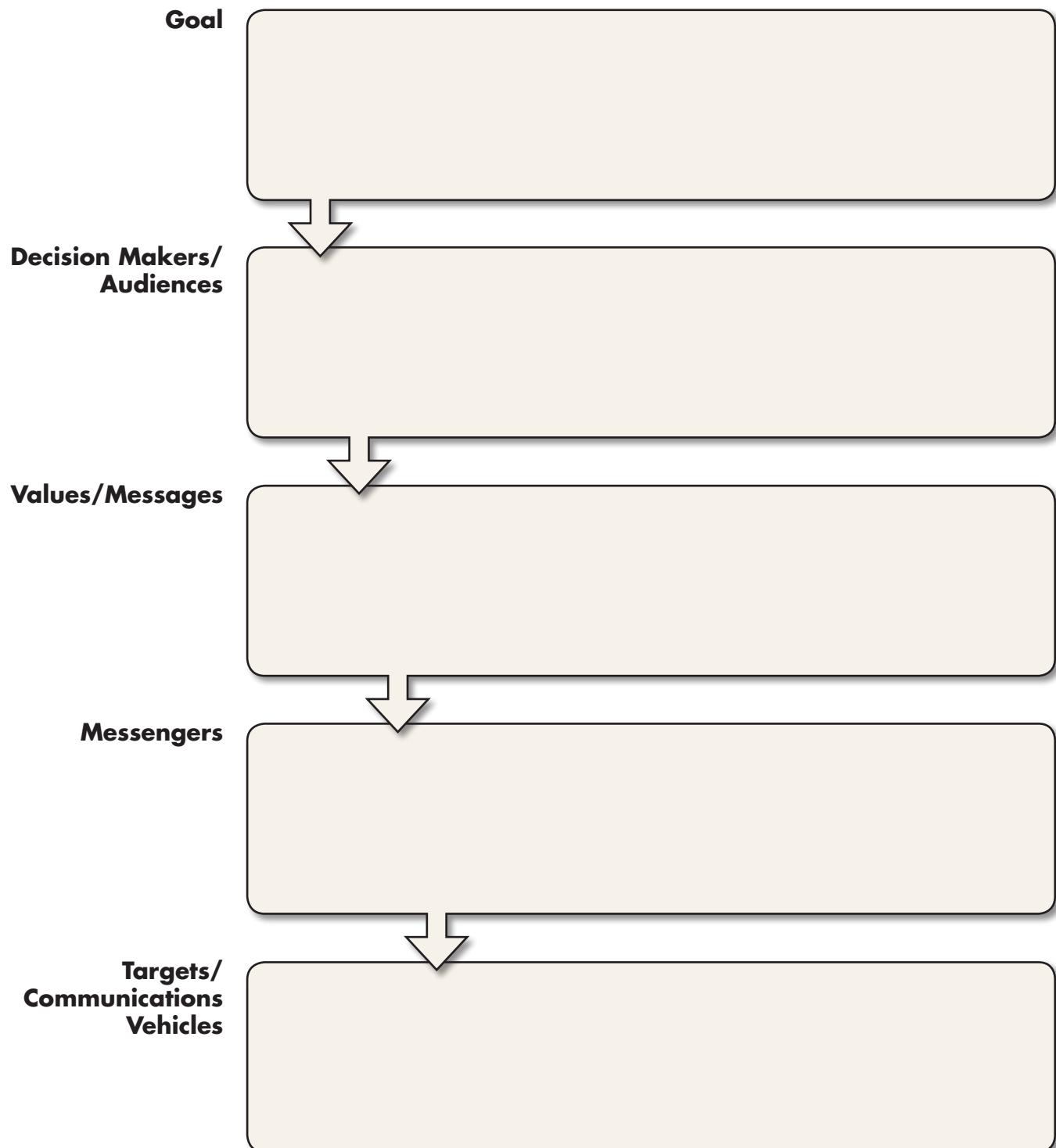
Examples of “earned media” tactics include:

- B-roll for television story
- Editorial board meetings
- Facebook Page
- Letters-to-the-editor
- Media tours
- News conferences
- Ning Social Network
- Online Newsroom
- Radio actualities
- Radio interviews
- Story pitches to bloggers
- Teleconferences
- Twitter Feed

Your tactics:

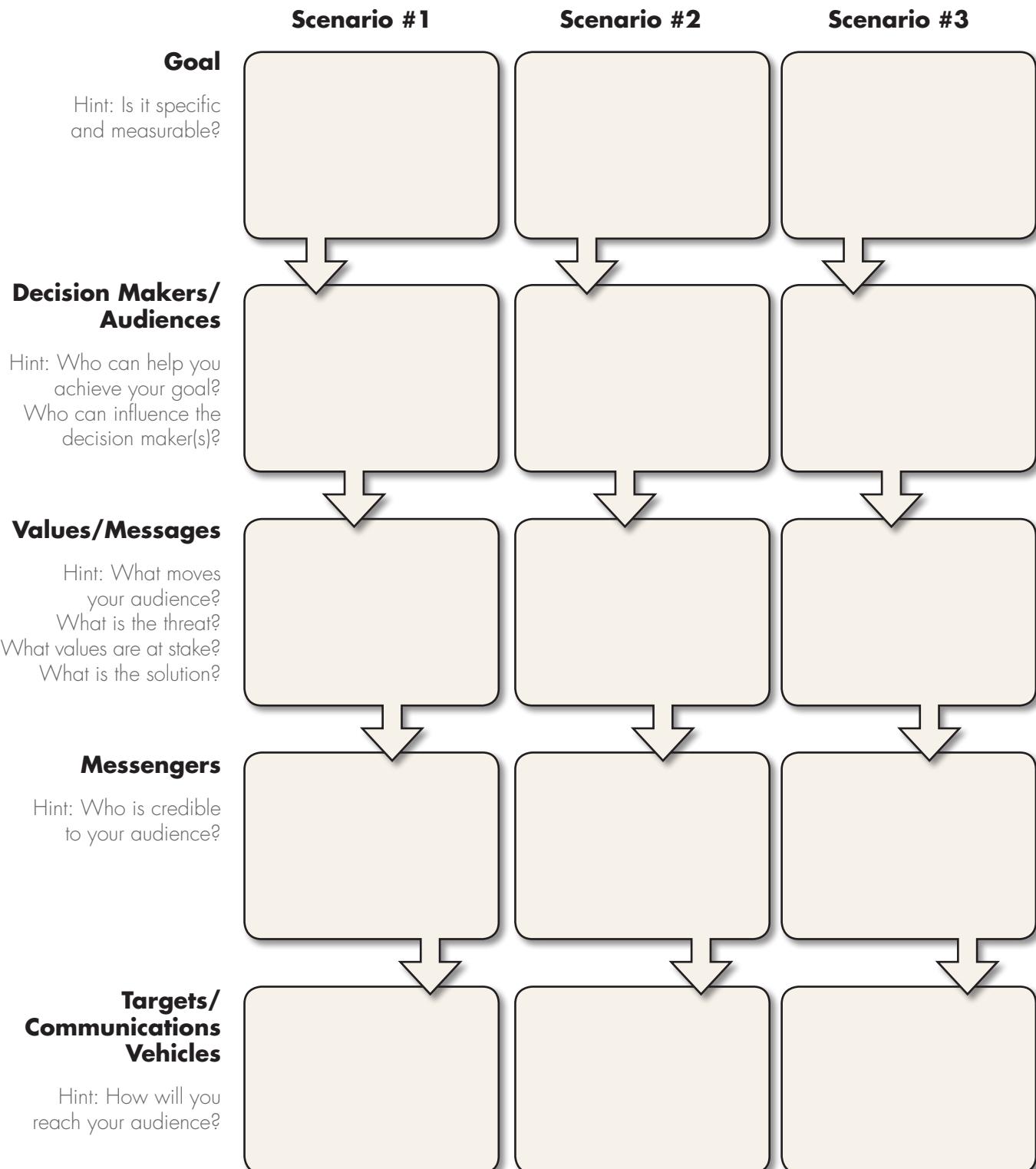
8A. PUTTING IT TOGETHER

The Roadmap



8B. PUTTING IT TOGETHER

Comparing Scenarios



ABOUT RESOURCE MEDIA

Resource Media provides communications strategy and media services to nonprofits, foundations and others who are working to protect communities and the environment. We work closely with our partners on to craft and implement effective communication strategies designed to reach key audiences and decision makers to build support for sound policies and practices. We have main offices in Seattle and San Francisco and field offices in Boulder, Bozeman, Kalispell, Sacramento, Anchorage and Salt Lake City. Credit for this project goes to Resource Media's Hunter Cutting, Belinda Griswold and Zach Warnow.

www.resource-media.org

For a copy of the framing analysis on which this document is based, go to:

http://exloco.org/federal/dwnlds/Western_Water_and_Climate_Change_Media_Analysis.pdf

ABOUT EXLOCO'S CARPE DIEM WESTERN WATER AND CLIMATE CHANGE PROJECT

The Carpe Diem – Western Water & Climate Change Project was established in 2007 by a group of western water leaders acting on a shared belief that climate change requires everyone in the field to think in new ways. The Project quickly evolved into a network of experts and decision makers dedicated to addressing the unprecedented change that the impacts of climate change on water resources pose for the western United States. By linking leaders and integrating state-of-the-art climate change science with the needs of a range of stakeholders, Carpe Diem incubates new initiatives and promotes sustainable management practices and policies that provide water security for people, ecosystems, industry and food production. The Project is housed at Exloco, a nonprofit organization that works to advance new strategies for a healthy and vibrant West.

www.exloco.org

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