

# BELDEN RUSSONELLO & STEWART

RESEARCH AND COMMUNICATIONS

## MEMO

TO: The Brainerd Foundation

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RE: The American Public and the Environment

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We are living in a time of great opportunity for advocates working on environmental issues. Despite the understandable preoccupation with a down economy and insecurity over jobs and the future, Americans remain aware of and concerned about the environmental issues surrounding them.

It is also a time in which young adults between 18 and 35 have become energized by the 2008 candidacy and success of Barack Obama. They did not just vote in large numbers. They organized community meetings, raised money, and used the new media in multiple ways to support their candidate. Although the spark of this new activism can die out just as quickly as it was ignited, its potential holds much promise for the future.

On the other end of the age and political spectrum, this summer we saw the spectacle of anger mostly from the older generation. I believe this holds little meaning for the future. After all of the news coverage of the recent vitriol emanating from tea parties, town hall meetings, with claims that Congress wants to kill grandma, nothing has changed politically. Support for health care legislation is where it has always been and party identification has not changed much—Republican numbers are at historic lows and Democrats have not made any gains. The harsh discourse over the summer was, I have always believed, a sideshow of primarily older non-voters, Ron Paul voters, and the most right-wing Republicans. These people are real but they do not represent anything but a small, self-disenfranchised portion of America. Because they are mostly in the older age cohort, they are not likely to become a lasting movement. The strong spirit and positive attitudes of the 18 to 35 year olds indicates a brighter rather than darker future.

In this atmosphere, I offer several insights to help you meet the environmental challenges that lie ahead.

### **1. Pay less attention to national polls on the environment.**

Get comfortable with the fact that environmental issues will almost always register as low priorities on national surveys. The public thinks of environmental issues in personal ways rather than as one or two national policy issues. The fact that Americans take a more personal and piecemeal approach to environmental issues is a good vantage point for moving people to act locally. A polluted river, a park or public land that is about to be spoiled by mining, excavation or drilling, forests that they can see being clear cut, or the threat of corporations siphoning water from the Great Lakes for profits—all can be high priorities for people affected by them.

Since appreciation of the environment has become part of everyday life, to be effective, advocates need to present more personal arguments to people. Often this means turning a national issue into a local issue. For example, in Idaho, environmental advocates are making a contribution in the fight against global warming and against the national expansion of animal factories by creating a buzz for local food: serve your family milk from a real cow on a local farm, not one from a cow factory.

When you cannot turn a national issue into a local one, your appeal can still be personal by presenting audiences with a choice that clearly demonstrates the value of the environmental position and the wrong-headedness of your opponent.

### **2. Calibrate your tone to the times—less accusatory, more positive.**

When the environmental community criticized George W. Bush, your base of supporters would pump their fists and say right on. You could easily make the case that the White House belonged to Halliburton and Big Oil, and that the motivations of those inside were not in the country's best interest. Now, this attitude toward the White House is gone among your supporters, and with it should go the rhetoric of personal criticism.

Your base of support—liberals, moderates who lean liberal, young Americans—is the same base of support that the president calls on. When you criticize him, it must be like criticizing someone in your family—you criticize because you want him to succeed, and you are trying to make him see his mistake and improve. Tone is very important. Do not give him a pass, but criticize him as you would a family member.

### **3. Building a broader environmental base is a work in progress that comes from learned behavior.**

If you try to convert people directly to environmental commitment or activism in general, your climb will be steep. Such an effort would be akin to attempting to turn a person into a liberal or a social conservative. People do not become transformed because of information they learn from you. Rather, their life experiences contribute to their philosophy and any

shifts in their perspective. For example, many people move toward liberalism when they see the inanity of war or the injustices in our criminal justice system. Others may become conservative when they are victims of crime or of burdensome government regulations.

In the U.S., environmentalism has reached beyond ideology to become an accepted, shared objective that Americans hold for many different reasons. Therefore, communications should not aim to be about environmentalism writ large—as an ideology—but rather should address each environmental problem individually.

For example, saving a particular piece of wilderness from oil and gas drilling should not be about the value of protecting all wilderness, nor about winning the argument that saving wilderness is more important than saving jobs. Communications should be about why destroying this particular wilderness is not worth a few new jobs. Similarly, stopping the expansion of nuclear power in the United States should not be about condemning all nuclear power, but about why building new nuclear reactors when we cannot find any place to put the radioactive waste is ridiculous.

When Belden Russonello & Stewart helped clients achieve victories that have advanced environmentalism in Montana and South Dakota and Colorado, we have held up a mirror by using research to show environmentalists that their neighbors in pick-up trucks or Hummers who they see as enemies in fact share with them a vision for the future of their community—they too want a clean and natural place to live and hunt and fish and raise children, and they want some say in how the rules are set.

If you focus on short term goals—such as preserving downtown Kalispell from a new mall, protecting Flathead Lake from pollution by limiting the number of new homes there, preserving special hunting grounds in national forests where people have gone for generations—people will see the value of taking responsibility for the environment and support action. They will probably never become card-carrying environmental activists, but you still will have reached an important goal.

Changes in ethics or deep-seated attitudes take time—and these changes often occur after behavior has already changed.

#### **4. Don't defend your point of view—make the other side defend theirs.**

Whether the issue is abortion rights, gay marriage, education, or environmental issues, BRS has tried to guide clients into listening to their audiences, identifying shared values that are important to people, and then forcing the other side to explain why they do not share the same values. That is why we believe women's rights advocates must stop defending a woman's "right to choose" and start asking why their opponents believe the government should make personal moral decisions for individuals and their families. Gay rights advocates should stop defending the right to marry and begin asking why the other side

supports government discrimination against people who obey the law, pay taxes, and serve their country.

On environmental issues we should never defend the need for roadless areas in the national forests, but ask the other side what value it sees in opening up the last, most precious, quiet, natural places we have to noise and development.

When a coalition of environmental groups was fighting Alaskan drilling proposals, it felt it had to answer the Newt Gingrich appeals to drill in order to lower gas prices. In fact, our research showed that the public by wide margins did not think drilling in the Arctic would do anything to bring down gas prices, and that most people moved to the environmentalists' position when given realistic examples of the environmental devastation that would be caused by drilling. Keeping the debate on the devastation also brought it back to an area in which environmental groups have credibility, more so than on gas prices. Still, the Arctic Coalition did not believe what they were hearing from the public, only what they were hearing from the pundits. They wasted time responding to the accusations on gas prices, time that should have been spent educating people about the devastation caused by drilling.

The Washington, D.C. sages will tell you that the national polls demand that, because of the poor shape of the economy, all environmental messaging must be about jobs, or that you cannot defeat the nuclear power lobby. But, we know from experience that when it comes to our national forests, a pure message about protecting the most valuable places we have in America trumps jobs, even in a recession; on energy policy, jobs may be the background music that is being played out in all debates right now, but energy will always be about cost, safety, and reliability, with reliability the most salient. If the lights go out, nothing else matters to people.

##### **5. Recognize when you need a majority to win—and when you do not.**

In ballot initiatives, when you need a majority to win, you should start by listening to voters and respecting their perspectives. We won two voter referendums to keep corporate hog farms out of South Dakota because members of the Coalition of Family Farmers were willing to recognize that while they were in the campaign to save the family farm, most voters were concerned about the pollution—water contamination in particular—that would have resulted from the large-scale hog farming.

An important piece to winning is to recognize that when you appeal to voters who look at your issues from a perspective that is different from yours, you are being respectful and virtuous. This is not caving on your values but rather tuning in to the values of others, to find common ground.

Often, however, it is not necessary to amass a majority on your side to win on an issue at the local, state, or national level. Time and again we see the power of small groups that get their way in Congress and in the states, even though overall public opinion runs in a different direction. Sometimes it is because of large campaign contributions from business groups that do not represent the broader public interest. Many times, however, it is simply a matter of who communicates most forcefully and controls the dialogue. Recently, the Catholic Bishops group, which speaks for less than nine percent of Americans, successfully blocked abortion health services for women even though most Americans—and most Catholics—support this coverage.

The groups that win have the courage of their convictions and the discipline to stay with their message when others may raise doubts. They do not try to convert the public at large but enlist their supporters and target audiences to influence policy makers.

When Friends of the Earth and other like-minded groups working in a coalition got wind that Utah Senator Bob Bennett was pushing for \$50 billion worth of loan guarantees for nuclear power in the stimulus bill, they informed the people of Senator Bennett's state via some very effective television advertising. They also reached out to Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid's constituents with online advertising, informed by opinion research. The message: "Do not give a \$50 billion bailout to the nuclear industry to build new reactors across the country when we do not need another bailout."

After Senator Bennett heard an earful from conservatives in his state he felt it was not worth the effort, and he dropped the proposal from the stimulus bill.

## **6. Discuss global warming solutions more than problems.**

If people believe that an issue like global warming is too big and too scary to be solved, they will give up, shut down, and just plain deny its existence.

Rather than attempting to scare people into action, a better approach for environmental advocates would be to discuss global warming in terms of solutions that work to make life better now: less pollution from cars will provide cleaner air; higher mileage in cars will give you the option of saving money on fuel; more renewable energy will make us less dependent on the whims of the oil companies. These are real, current issues, discussed in solution format rather than as a problem for the future. Yes, these actions will also help to mitigate global warming, but you do not have to care about global warming to support them.

## **7. Take advantage of new media.**

For years, our advice to clients has been that the most personal communications are the most effective. Face-to-face, door-to-door expressions of your cause are the most personal and therefore the best. They have always been followed in efficacy by television

commercials that come right into people's living rooms and look them in the eye, followed by radio, then mail, then newspaper ads, then billboards—in that order.

Today, that has all changed. Except for face-to-face encounters, the most personal way to communicate is through the personal computer. We urge our clients to explore the literally countless ways of using the internet to educate and persuade. Recently, we worked for teachers in New Jersey in the gubernatorial election there, where we identified an audience through polling—younger women voters—that would be a target for teacher messages. We then worked with the teachers' media firm to craft an internet plan for communications, including specific blog sites, Facebook ad placements, and ads on the popular video website Hulu. This is really just the beginning of the possibilities.

We now live at a time when people are not reading newspapers to find the news as much as newspaper journalists are reading blogs to find out what news they should be covering. You are no longer dependent on the press as a filter or on traditional media consultants to produce multi-million dollar ad campaigns. Personal messaging is within your reach, and mastering the new media is essential to building a larger environmental base.

### **Conclusion**

Although the near future may become increasingly difficult for American families, this will not dampen their desire for clean waterways, pristine parks and forests, and other initiatives to protect people's quality of life. If environmental groups can resist the pull of conventional thinking and work to make environmental solutions come to life community by community, you will see a stronger, more permanent environmental commitment nationally that is grounded in shared values and confident about itself and its priorities.