

warm regards

NOW THAT THE PUBLIC IS READY TO HEAR IT, HOW WILL GRAPHIC DESIGNERS SHAPE THE DISCOURSE ABOUT CLIMATE CHANGE?

By Rick Poyner

As I write this in October, there are strong reasons to think that we have arrived at the tipping point of global awareness about climate change and the need to act as a matter of urgency. A recent BBC World Service international survey of more than 22,000 people in 21 countries found that a substantial majority of people—two-thirds of those polled—agreed that "major steps need to be taken soon to address global warming," while 79 percent of respondents believed that "human activity, including industry and transportation, is a significant cause of climate change."

In the U.S., 89 percent had heard a great deal, or at least something, about climate change and global warming—a level of awareness that puts the country at the top of the world chart. A sizable 71 percent regard human activity as a significant cause, although this figure is not especially high compared with countries such as Mexico (94 percent) or Spain (93 percent). Nevertheless, only 6 percent of Americans believe that it is not necessary to do anything at all about climate change; 59 percent favor major steps starting very soon, and 33 percent see the need for modest steps in the years ahead.

While the number of Americans who favor decisive action could be higher, they now form a majority, and this is good news. Action on the scale required will need fundamental changes in national policy, and no government, anywhere, is going to take these initiatives unless it is convinced that its people demand, and will support, such action. Individual steps to change our own behavior do make a difference—as

an activist once put it, "Simple actions times lots of people equals big change"—but they also demonstrate to politicians the public's readiness for larger programs of action without which a reduction in greenhouse gas emissions will never come about. And the figure we are talking about is massive. According to climate change activist George Monbiot, writing in *Heat: How to Stop the Planet from Burning*, a superbly incisive analysis, we need to achieve a 90 percent reduction by 2030 if we are to prevent the temperature from rising by more than two degrees Celsius—the point where major ecosystems begin to collapse.

How can graphic designers help? There has been well-meaning talk for years about going green and becoming sustainable, usually focusing on paper and ink specifications. For many designers, this discussion was never given priority, but now the issue of sustainability, conceived in the

broadest terms, has returned with new force. The AIGA Center for Sustainable Design offers vital leadership by providing designers with information relevant to sustainable practice. The AIGA has also put its own house in order through such initiatives as using less hazardous cleaning materials, conserving water, purchasing green electricity, and installing a green roof in its Manhattan offices. One of the most notable initiatives coming from design practice is the Design Can Change website, launched in April as a self-funded venture by mashLAB in Vancouver, B.C. DCC outlines five aims: to bring the design community together; to establish definitive standards that all can implement; to showcase environmentally aware projects; to promote designers who embrace sustainable practices; and to raise awareness of the importance of sustainable thinking.

Designers who support these goals can



Christopher Miller's "One Day at a Time" desktop calendar incorporated a range of climate-related icons (above) in its design. The piece was a finalist in Design 21's recent Heated Issue competition to raise awareness about global warming.

pledge their commitment on the site. More than 1,000 people from 68 countries have so far added their names to the online directory. In early October, these included 428 designers in the U.S., 122 in Canada, 99 in the U.K., 32 in Australia, and 24 in India. "Designers from Brazil are offering to translate the site into Portuguese," Peter Pimentel, one of DCC's creators, told me. "Developers in Argentina want to lend their video authoring skills, U.S. studios are submitting projects to be featured in the online gallery, and eco-conscious groups from everywhere are offering partnership opportunities." The rapid embrace of DCC by designers is certainly encouraging, but good intentions need to become actions before they mean anything—and this applies to designers as much as everyone else. Two-thirds of people worldwide may say they believe that something needs to be done urgently about climate change, but to what extent does that translate into changes in personal behavior when it comes to recycling, using less water, regulating power consumption, walking more and driving less, or taking fewer flights?

Promoting behavioral change is one of the established goals of graphic design, so designers have much to contribute here. Some non-designers are seeing the possibilities. "Make a decision to live a carbon-neutral life," Al Gore urged his audience at the TED conference in 2006. "Those of you who are good at branding, I'd love to get your advice and help on how to say this in a way that connects with most people." A British report titled "Warm Words: How Are We Telling the Climate Story and Can We Tell It Better?" (available online) reached the same conclusion: "Ultimately, positive climate behaviors need to be approached in the same way as marketers approach acts of buying and consuming—it amounts to treating climate-friendly activity as a brand that can be sold."

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Some web-based ventures, such as WorldChanging, We Are What We Do (both of which spawned books), and the recently launched It's a Green Thing, are already doing this for different audiences. Design 21, the social design network sponsored by UNESCO, organized Heated Issue, an international competition to design a campaign to raise public awareness of how consumer choices affect global warming. We need many more confident, clever initiatives like these—aimed at all kinds of people—as well as official campaigns with local and government funding, to keep the message at the forefront of the public mind.

Intensive campaigning works. Australia, a heavy emitter of carbon and greenhouse gases, has since 2003 been experiencing a severe drought, the worst on record, and water supplies are now alarmingly low. A Brisbane designer told me that public attitudes toward water use and conservation have been transformed with the help of TV advertising, billboards, and other forms of public information. Nearly everyone understands the seriousness of the situation, and people are taking responsibility for their future well-being.

The key question faced by climate-awareness communicators is what form of communication will be most persuasive. WorldChanging opts for uncompromising radicalism. "Alone, we are essentially powerless to change anything that matters," writes executive editor Alex Steffen. "We can't shop our way to sustainability. I believe we are bombarded with messages encouraging us to take the 'small steps' precisely because those steps are a threat to no one. They don't depress the sales of fashionable crap we don't need." And here,

to be sure, lies a profound challenge for design, which is still engaged, much of the time, in cheerfully helping to sell us fashionable crap.

A speaker at the recent Applied Green marketing conference in London suggested that the language of climate campaigning needs to be more emotionally compelling. Words like poisoning, addiction, obesity, profligacy, and cruelty are much harder to resist than ambiguous-sounding formulations like carbon footprint and greenhouse gas—what's threatening about a footprint or a greenhouse? Playing on people's feelings of guilt and shame helped to change public attitudes about smoking: *Think about what you're doing to your kids.* A similar painful message might be applied to our profligate addiction to consumption in the face of environmental disaster. Monbiot's impeccably rational *Heat* ends with an acknowledgment, as honest as it is risky—that this is a campaign "not for abundance but for austerity."

As the authors of "Warm Words" argue, this kind of accusatory rhetoric seems likely to repel many people who could be persuaded to do the right thing so long as it boosts their self-esteem as consumers. It is still taboo to suggest that we need to consume less, notes another environmental campaigner, and if you talk like that you will be ignored. A follow-up report, "Warm Words II," published in September, argues that people are much more likely to persist with an action if they are drawn to it for emotional reasons than if they regard it as a civic duty. It could be that both styles of communication—tough and soothing—have their uses for different audiences. What we know for sure is that the public is now in the mood to listen. There is no bigger problem facing us today, and no bigger communication problem, either. 

Rick Poyner is a contributing editor at PRINT.

RESOURCES

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