

# Apocalypse Not -- Study Says Cool Down the Climate Message

Craig Miller, KQED News (San Francisco television), 11-18-10

Remember that TV ad that represented climate change as an oncoming train? Polar bears falling from the sky and spattering on the sidewalk? If a new study from sociologists at UC Berkeley is any indication, they probably backfired.

Sociology Professor Rob Willer says more than two years of testing with college students and subjects recruited over the Internet reveal that if projections of severe climate impacts clash with a person's fundamental view of a safe and stable world, that person is less likely to act on it.

"When you underscore potential ways out of the problem," says Willer, "Then you can communicate the facts of climate change without threatening people so much that they deny the problem.

Willer says that repeatedly exposing subjects to "negative" messages about climate change affected more than their personal motivation to address it; their belief in the science behind the message was actually eroded. And he says that people in the study tended to be put off by "scary" messages, regardless of their politics.

As part of the negative messaging, Willer showed subjects the "train" spot produced by the Environmental Defense Fund. Willer says it was not a motivator in his study, even though it ends with the message "There's still time."

The study's conclusions came as no surprise to "messaging" experts at the Behavior, Energy and Climate Change conference, wrapping up today in Sacramento.

Anne Dougherty, Manager of Social & Behavioral Research at Oakland-based Opinion Dynamics Corporation, says that motivational messaging in general should steer clear of tones that are bleak, catastrophic, punitive or scary.

"There is this tendency to disassociate with messaging when the messaging is bleak," said Dougherty. "People, in order to be inspired to take action, need to feel a bit optimistic about what they're going to be doing."

Dougherty's company has been involved in developing energy conservation campaigns in California, such as "Flex Your Power" and the upcoming "Engage 360" campaign, sponsored by the California Public Utilities Commission.

Willer says his study focused on personal actions, not what the government should do about global warming. His work will appear in the journal *Psychological Science* early next year.

Meanwhile, what motivates you? What doesn't?