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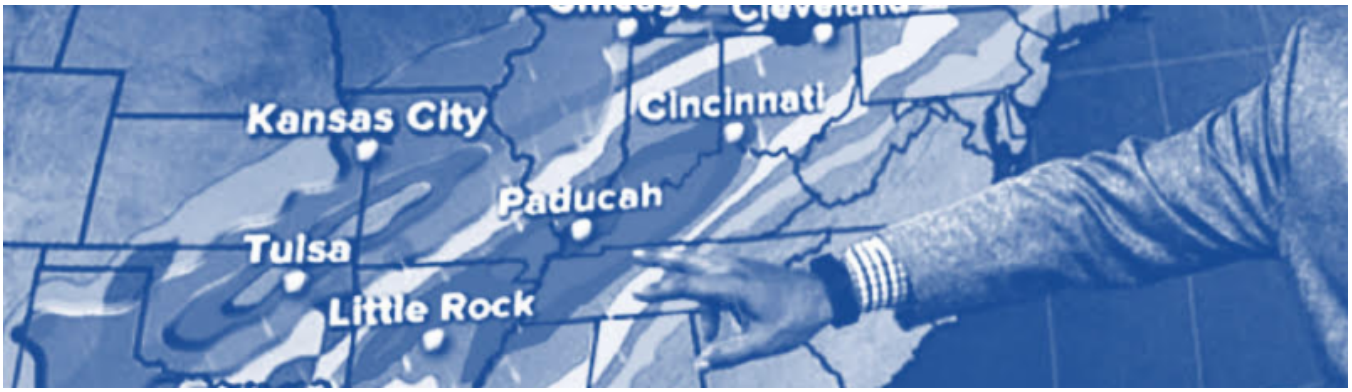
free-range THINKING™

free-range thinking™ is a monthly journal of best practices, resources and generally useful stuff for public interest communicators who want to reach more people with more impact



Tonight's Forecast: Changing Minds with a Chance of Learning

Smart communicators will labor long and hard to ensure their messages strike just the right chord with their target audiences, but they won't stop there. If the right words come out of the wrong mouth, the result will be noise - and even worse, wasted time and money - so choosing a trustworthy spokesperson is equally critical.

I was reminded of this principle recently by "Climate Matters," a shrewd initiative to increase public awareness and understanding of climate change. Even if your work has nothing to do with the environment, the approach taken by Climate Central, the nonprofit behind Climate Matters, is worthy of study.

On any given evening in cities across the US and around the world, Climate Central's messengers are helping television viewers understand how climate change is affecting them directly. And the audience is leaning in to hear more, because who wants to miss the nightly weather report? Read More. *Please note: Apple Mail users may need to scroll down manually.*

Tonight's Forecast: Changing Minds with a Chance of Learning (Continued)

When you consider three factors that influence the likelihood of public response to a problem, climate change flunks across the board. If the problem feels too large, people tend to feel helpless, and you can't get much larger than *global*. If the problem seems too complex, people's eyes start to glaze over, and what's that you were saying about *parts per million*? And if the most serious impacts of the problem are still years (or even decades) away, well, I've got to focus on paying for mom's operation next week, so let's talk about that climate stuff later, okay?

That said, climate change remains an existential threat that cannot be ignored, so the challenge for communicators is clear: make it easier to understand, show the effects that are happening both here and now, and offer actions that will definitely make a difference. And if that's not hard enough, let's also make sure that the messages come from a trusted source and are delivered with enough reach and frequency to educate millions. Got that? Off you go.

If you went to Washington, DC about ten years ago, you'd have been headed in the right direction. At that time, Joe Witte was a weathercaster for WJLA-TV, he was concerned about climate change, and he had an audience that trusted him five nights a week. Witte knew he wasn't the only meteorologist with such a public platform, so he contacted Ed Maibach, a communication scientist at George Mason University, to discuss the potential of turning weathercasters into nightly climate educators.

Joe Witte

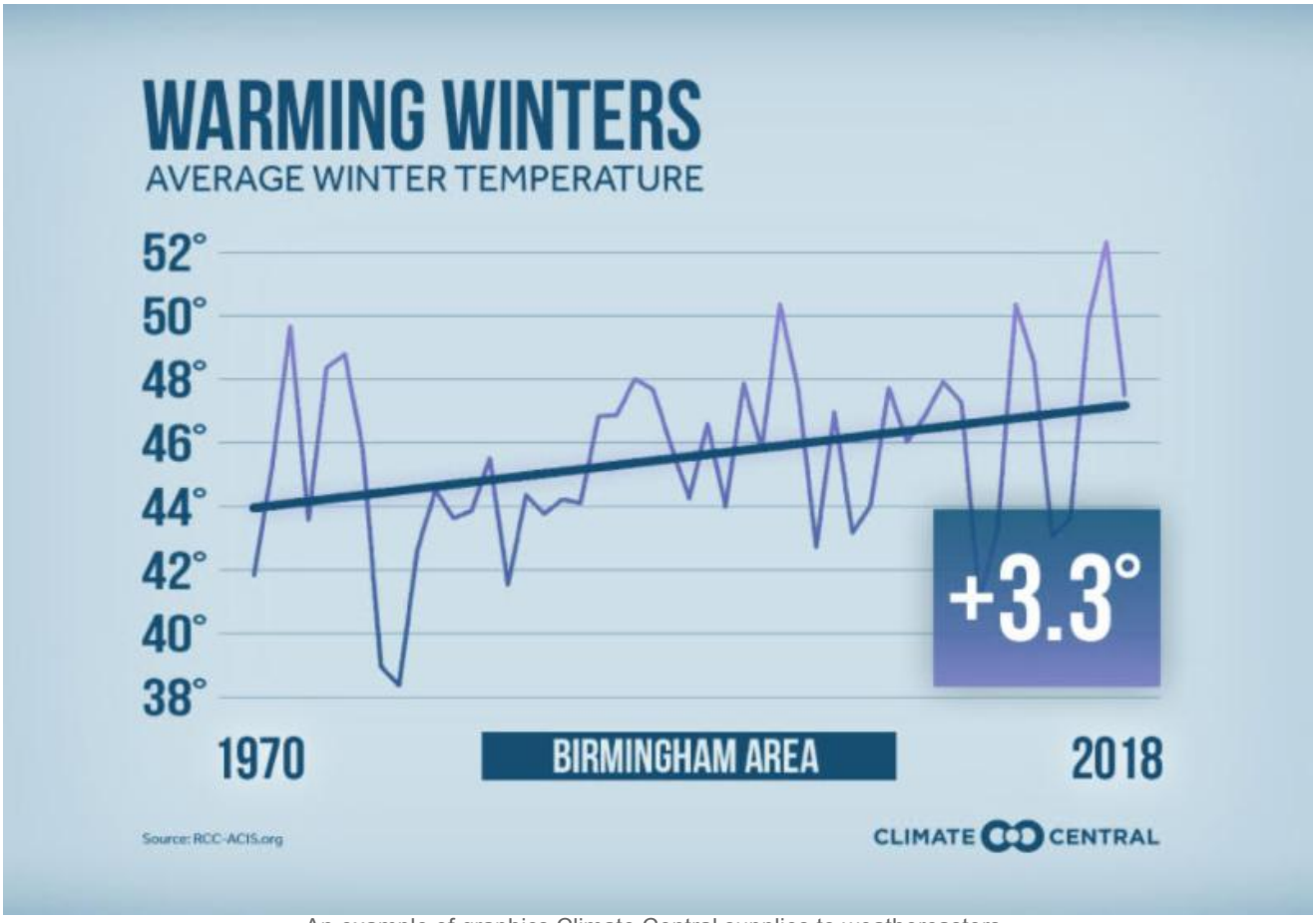
Witte and Maibach brought the idea to Climate Central, a nonprofit based in Princeton, New Jersey that was established in 2008 to "communicate the science and effects of climate change to the public and decision-makers." With a grant from the National Science Foundation, Climate Central launched a pilot program at WXLT-TV in Columbia, South Carolina. Working with the station's weathercaster, Jim Gandy, they developed a series of segments on climate change to run in nightly news broadcasts. Bernadette Woods Placky, the current program director for Climate Matters, said Gandy, the station, and the market were all careful choices.

"When people talk about their local TV weathercasters, Jim is one of the classics," Placky told me during a telephone interview last week. "He is a storyteller, and his delivery is fantastic." Placky noted that the pilot program had strong management support at WXLT, which was important for a year-long test, and since Columbia is a politically conservative market, nobody could mistake the audience for low-hanging fruit.

WXLT-TV Chief Meteorologist Jim Gandy

The segments developed by Climate Central and Gandy were titled "Climate Matters," and the name stuck. More importantly, the messages stuck where it mattered most. Surveys conducted before and after the segments aired showed that, over the course of a year, Jim Gandy's audience had learned more about climate change than viewers of other local TV stations.

Encouraged by these results, Climate Central expanded the program to 10 markets in 2012. NOAA, NASA, Yale University and other agencies joined the partnership and Climate Central began supplying graphics and analyses in a steady stream to participating weathercasters. Over time, the weathercasters started linking climate change to more extreme weather events, increased incidence of flooding, changes in pollen count, increases in diseases carried by insects, and other impacts that were being felt locally.



An example of graphics Climate Central supplies to weathercasters.

From one market in 2010, Climate Matters now works with 650 television weathercasters in the US plus over a hundred more across six continents. According to Placky, studies in 2015 in Chicago and Miami confirmed that "bringing climate change into local weather forecasts did have an impact," and another study currently in the field will help determine the extent of that impact across the US today.

Still, a question remains: for such an existential threat, is "awareness" or "public education" enough? On this point, says Placky, Climate Central is clear. No, it's not enough, but it is *essential*. "If people don't understand what climate change means to *them*, they will not be able to make sensible decisions on the issue." Bearing that in mind, Placky and her colleagues at Climate Central hope the long-term forecast for their TV messengers is a gradually warming reception with strong winds at their backs.

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About Us

free-range thinking is written by Andy Goodman and edited by Celia Hoffman. To read back issues, download free publications, and to learn more about our work, please visit www.thegoodmancenter.com.

To reach Andy directly, please call (323) 464-3956 or send an email to andy@thegoodmancenter.com.

the goodman center
where do-gooders learn to do better

The Goodman Center, 444 North Larchmont Blvd., Suite 102, Los Angeles, CA 90004