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Understanding Our Audiences

Mini Guide

Animal Think Tank

Updated March 2026

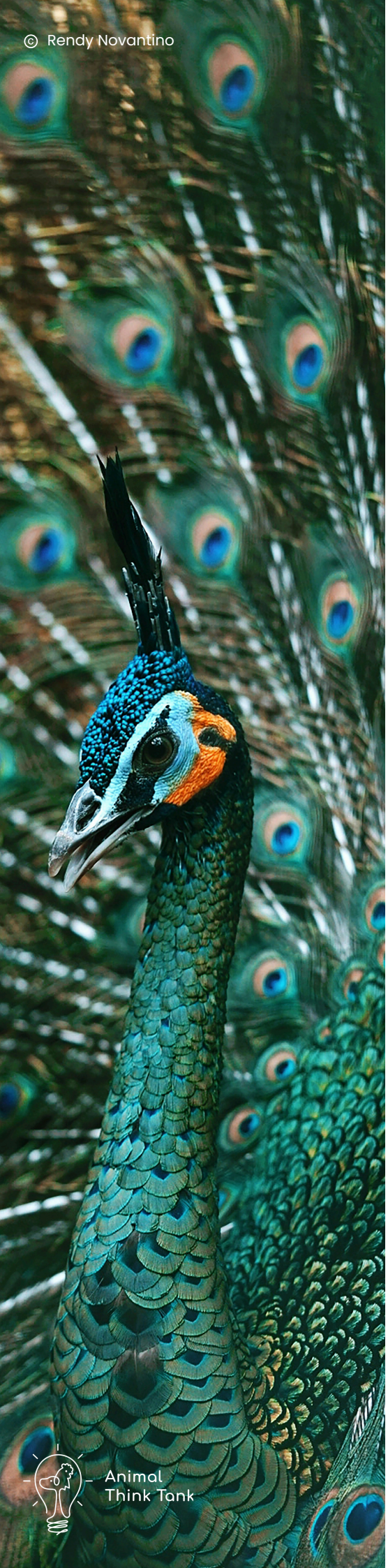
This guide is part of Animal Think Tank's series on **persuasive communications** for animal freedom.

Each guide draws on the **latest research** in psychology, public opinion and movement strategy.

This edition is about audiences:
how understanding who we're talking to does more than sharpen our messages — it shapes whether we reach people at all, and whether we move them.

People hold different **mental models** about other animals — cognitive shortcuts shaped by dominant frames and narratives over time. Though deeply ingrained, these models can shift through **consistent exposure to new ways of thinking**.

Everyone is at a different point in their journey — and the most effective communication meets **people where they are, and nudges them forward**.



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What You'll Learn From This Guide

How people form beliefs

Learn how dominant narratives and mental shortcuts shape public attitudes — and how they can be reshaped over time.

What makes messages resonate

Explore how to match your message to people's values, identities and stage of awareness to increase impact and reduce resistance.

How to meet people where they are

Find out how to identify where someone is on their journey and use language that helps nudge them one step further.

How messages can support core psychological needs

Understand how a sense of agency, belonging and alignment with values affects how people respond to what we say.

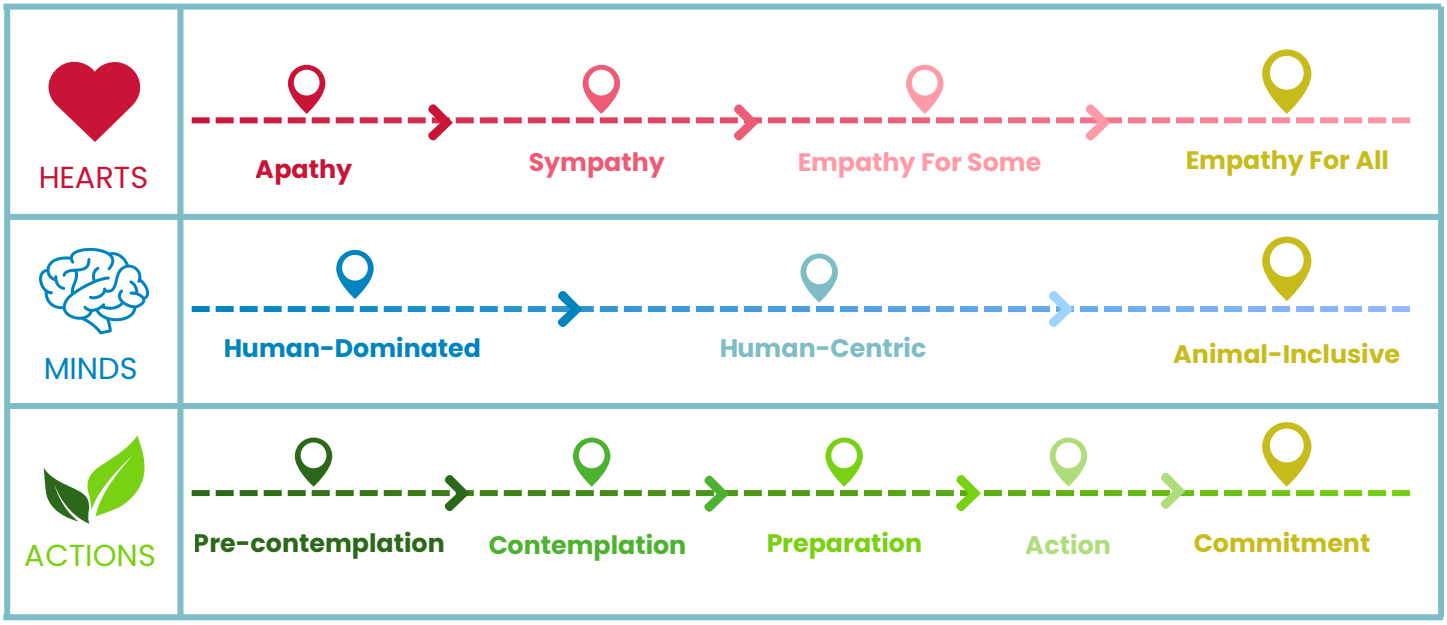
Strategies to grow broad public support

Learn how to excite your core supporters, reach conflicted audiences, and avoid language that reinforces opposition narratives.

The bad news is:

There's never going to be one message, story or narrative that everyone finds persuasive. Even iconic messages from other movements – like 'Love is Love', 'Black Lives Matter' or 'Me Too' – move some people and repel others.

Everyone is unique in terms of what moves them**,** and everyone is at a **different point of their journey . . .**



Take our own movement's dominant message of **'Go vegan'.** For some people — particularly those already contemplating change — it could be received as an **invitation** to live in line with their values. For many others, especially those who haven't given much consideration to this issue, it lands as a **command** to assume an identity they may not want.

The good news is:

We can learn to engage people who are open to change — by understanding what **motivates** them, what language **resonates**, and what **moves** them forwards without triggering defensiveness or making them feel villainised.

If we look back at what moved us to go vegan and become active, it likely wasn't one thing, but a **series of nudges**. Maybe a conversation, a documentary, an image, a message that caught us at the right moment — each one building upon the last until something shifted. That's how change works. And it means **repetition matters**: people often need to encounter a frame or narrative multiple times before it lands.

Animal Think Tank's research is finding that some messages, frames and tactics are consistently counterproductive across audiences — while others are proving more effective. Creativity and experimentation matter, but when we find framing that genuinely helps people take steps towards supporting animal freedom, it's strategic to reinforce it.

Strategic communication means identifying who is **most open to being moved**, understanding what they **already value**, and meeting them there, with the right message at the right moment. Our role isn't just to inform. It's to spark curiosity, build connection, and take people as far as they're ready to go.

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Audience Journeys

*Everyone's at a different point in their journey, in terms of their empathy towards fellow animals (**hearts**), their attitudes and beliefs (**mindsets**), and their behaviours (**actions**).*

HEARTS

Apathy

Doesn't think or care much about other animals.

Views other animals as inferior and doesn't consider their experiences.

Sympathy

Feels sad when they see other animals suffering.

Thinks it's OK to use animals but that they should be treated well and have a painless death.

Empathy For Some

Recognises some animals' capacity for intelligence and emotion.

Using and killing some animals causes moral outrage. Using and killing others causes discomfort.

Empathy For All

Recognises all animals' intelligence, emotion and interests.

Harming any animal upsets them and they believe that all beings should be free to live and thrive.

MINDSETS

Human-Dominated

Prioritises human needs and interests, often to the detriment of other animals.

Believes other animals exist for human benefit.

Human-Centric

Filters through a human lens; centres human concerns and experiences.

Acknowledges other animals' needs and experiences, but are not regarded as equal to humans'.

Animal-Inclusive

Equally considers other animals' needs and interests with humans'.

Views other animals as unique individuals with inherent value.

ACTIONS

Pre-contemplation

Not aware of the issue and resistant to change.

Common reaction to challenges: ridicule, dismissal or hostility.

Contemplation

Exposure to new information challenges assumptions.

Discomfort arises, but rationalisations maintain the status quo.

Preparation

Questioning assumptions and starting to shift attitudes.

Initial shifts in behaviour - e.g. reducing some forms of consumption or buying 'ethical products'.

Action

Dietary and lifestyle shifts continue (reducetarian → vegetarian → vegan).

Potential for relapse/regression in this stage.

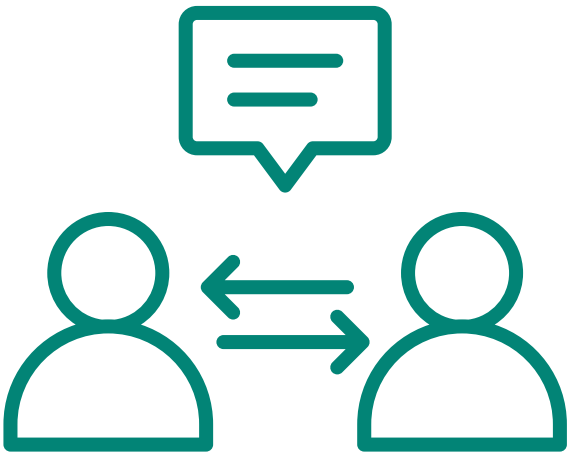
Commitment

Advocacy/activism becomes a natural extension of their values.

Continue learning and developing to become better animal allies.

Cognitive dissonance can arise when people are at different points in their **empathy**, **mindset** or **action** journeys. Where they are in their journey affects which **communication strategies** will be most effective.

Reaching Audiences



Delivering a message is only half the work.
The other half is understanding how it's received.

Communication isn't just the transmitting of information; it's about **listening to what comes back.** True communication is a two-way process between sender and receiver.

It's easy — especially in a movement with urgent things to say — to treat communication as broadcasting. But listening is where the real insight can be found that can help take our communications to the next level.

The only way to know what genuinely moves people is to hear from them directly: through conversations, focus groups, surveys and message-testing. This is how we can learn what opens people up rather than shutting them down, what resonates, what triggers defensiveness, and **how far we can take someone** at any given time.

Our goal as communicators isn't to inform; it's to move people — from apathy to awareness, from awareness to empathy, from empathy to action. And that journey starts with understanding the people we're trying to reach.

Who are you communicating to?

If we're talking to everyone, we're talking to no one.

It's a familiar temptation in social justice advocacy: we have something urgent to say, so we say it as loudly and broadly as possible.

But communication that tries to reach everyone at once rarely moves anyone effectively.

'The public' isn't a single, uniform mass. It's made up of many **different groups of people**, who hold different values, different beliefs about animals, different levels of awareness, and different openness to change.

A message that resonates deeply with one group can fall flat — or actively backfire — with another.

Strategic communicators don't broadcast — they **connect**. And connection starts with the question:

Who, specifically, am I talking to right now?

Understanding your audience

Before crafting any communications, it's worth pausing to ask:

- **Who is this message for?** Be specific — not 'the general public', but a particular group of people with shared characteristics, values or behaviours.
- **What do they already believe about this issue?** What mental models are already in place? What do they assume, accept, or resist?
- **Where are they in their journey?** Are they at pre-contemplation, sympathy, active consideration? (See Audience Journeys.)
- **What do they care about most?** What values, identities and concerns matter to them — and how does this issue connect to those things?
- **Where is there common ground?** What existing beliefs, values or experiences can this message build on?
- **Where might there be resistance?** What might trigger defensiveness, discomfort or rejection — and how can the message avoid or navigate that?
- **Who do they trust?** Whose voices carry weight with this audience — and are those voices available to carry the message?
- **Where can I reach them?** What media, platforms, spaces and channels does this audience actually use?

These questions don't need to slow you down. Once they become habit, they can sharpen communications and deepen engagement.

Tailoring communications to your audience

Once you know who you're talking to, you can make deliberate choices about how to connect with them.

Language

The words we choose carry associations. Terms that feel natural to us can feel alienating or confrontational to someone earlier in their journey. Choose language that connects to values your audience already holds.

Framing and narratives

How a message is framed shapes how it's received. The same fact can be accepted or rejected, depending on the frame. Choose narratives that fit with an audience's existing mental models and nudge them forwards.

Imagery

Visuals trigger emotion and associations faster than words. Images that move one audience can alienate another. Consider what your audience finds inspiring, moving or relatable.

Trusted messengers

People are more persuaded by voices they already trust. E.g. a scientist, farmer, doctor, faith leader, celebrity they admire. The same message delivered by a different messenger can have a very different effect. Think about who this particular audience is most likely to listen to.

Stories and characters

Abstract arguments rarely move people; stories do. Identify the kinds of stories — and the kinds of people and animals at the centre of them — that this audience will find relatable and emotionally compelling.

Channels and spaces

Targeted ads, online spaces, trusted media outlets, local events — different audiences are reachable in different ways. Use what you know about their interests and online behaviour to reach them where they already are.

When communicating to everyone

Sometimes, targeted segmentation isn't possible. TV and cinema advertising, billboard campaigns, national press — these reach broad, mixed audiences simultaneously, and it's not possible to tailor to one.

In these cases, the question becomes:

What messages, frames and narratives have the potential to move many different people at once?

The answer isn't a message that's perfectly optimised for one segment, but a message that speaks to a value or belief that's widely shared, and communicated in ways that can land across the spectrum.

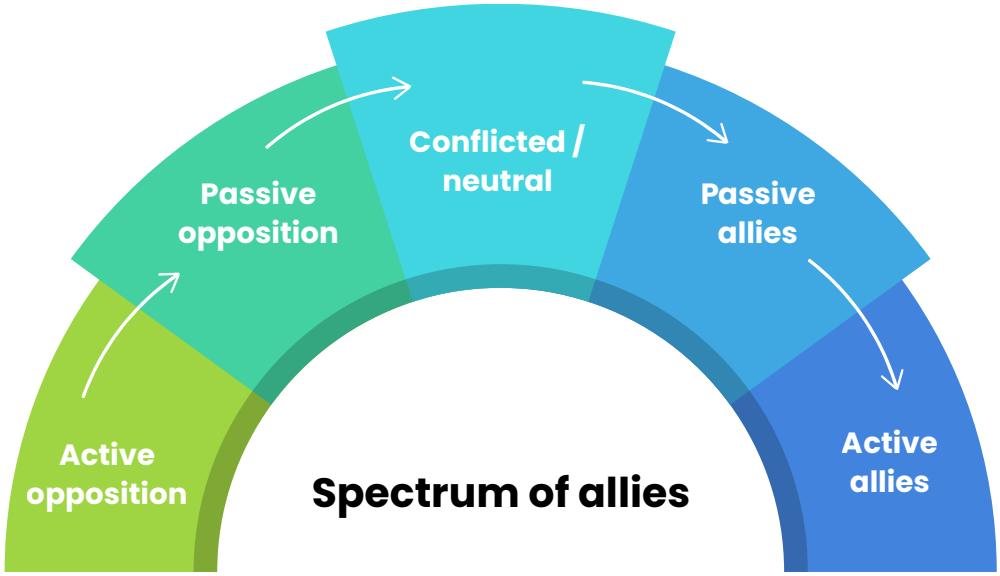
This kind of broad-reach communication may not be the single most persuasive option for every audience segment. But if it's grounded in robust public research and message-testing, it can still nudge all of them.

Here are a few key principles for broad-reach communications:

- Lead with shared values that cut across demographics: care, compassion, fairness, family.
- Avoid language or imagery that's energising for your base but alienating to the middle.
- Aim to nudge, not convert. The goal of a billboard or a TV ad isn't to change someone's life in 30 seconds — it's to shift a frame, plant a seed, or make an idea feel a little more familiar.
- Test before you broadcast. Message-testing across diverse groups is especially important when you can't segment. (See: Ways to Understand Our Audiences.)

The goal is a message that everyone can take something from — even if they take different things.

Reaching Audiences



Effective communications needs to activate different audience segments in different ways:

Our 'base' (active and passive allies):

Messages should inspire and motivate people who already support animal freedom. If they're not excited by a message, they're not going to share it or take action. Social justice messages that go viral are messages that excite the base.

The 'persuadable' middle (neutral and passively opposed):

Messages should persuade those who are ambivalent/conflicted about animal freedom, and move them further along their journey. They're likely to be the biggest segment of the public, and therefore a key focus in building broad support.

Our 'opposition' (actively opposed):

Messages should repel the 'opposition' (those who actively oppose animal freedom and are unlikely to change their mind). If our messages don't repel them, that's usually an indication that what we're saying is either reinforcing opposition frames or is too neutral, and therefore is not a threat to the status quo. We shouldn't be afraid of alienating the opposition, but we need to do it while bringing the rest of the spectrum towards us, so that the opposition look like outliers.

Reaching Audiences

Reaching people is about bridge-building

We can see where we want people to end up — but the bridge has to start from where they're standing. Bolder messages that resonate with people further along their journey can feel like a leap too far for those just starting out. Messages rooted in values an audience already holds are more likely to connect. The goal isn't to dilute our message for audiences early in their journey — it's to make it land.

Persuasion is a journey

Changing how people feel, think and act rarely happens overnight; it's built through repeated exposure to narratives and frames. This often starts with small shifts – noticing an inconsistency, feeling a tug of empathy, supporting a single reform or issue – that can build towards deeper engagement. Understanding where someone is on their journey can help us select messages that can expand their thinking, rather than push them away.

Psychological Needs of Our Audiences

Whether a message is accepted or rejected depends on whether it ***aligns or conflicts with three core psychological needs:***

1 Our communications need to work with people's existing mental models

Mental models are our set of personal beliefs about the world we live in. Some of the most relevant mental models are about:

- **Ourselves/personal identity** (e.g. 'I am a good person')
- **How the world is** (e.g. 'animals are intelligent' or 'animals are inferior')
- **How the world ought to be** (e.g. our morals: 'killing is bad').

People seek consistency in their understanding of the world. This need trumps the need for alignment with reality. Their beliefs, values and knowledge need to align in a way that feels logical and stable to them.

When new information fits within their existing mental models, it is more likely to be **accepted**. However, **when it contradicts** these models and doesn't align with them, it can **trigger reactance and message rejection**, as the message isn't seen as credible or logical.

Communications that are more likely to be accepted:

Communications that are more likely to be rejected:

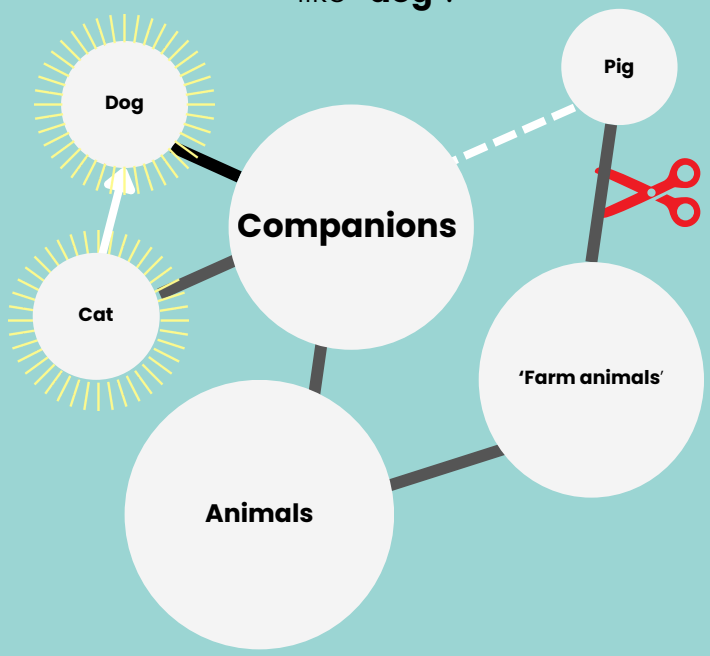
Psychological Needs of Our Audiences

Mental models organise information

Mental models are the brain's way of understanding the world. These **cognitive shortcuts** are **shaped by dominant narratives** over time, and enable us to process information faster and make quicker decisions.

Mental models are made up of a network of associations

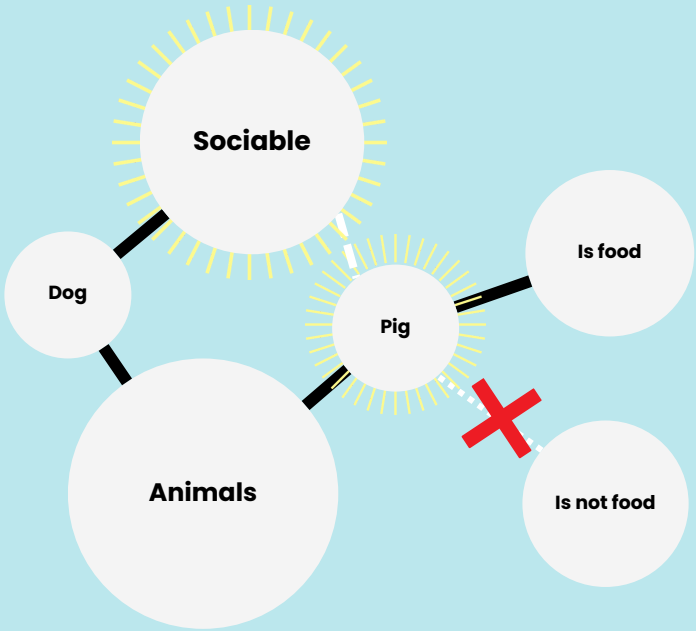
Activating a node, such as **"cat"** triggers the activation of nearby nodes, like **"dog"**.



Learning is the process of adding, removing, or rewiring existing connections.

The brain prefers to maintain existing mental models

For example, the brain already accepts that some animals can be **social**, so learning that pigs are sociable is easy to accept.



However, new information that mismatches the existing mental model is likely to be **ignored or rejected.**

Mental models can be reshaped

Though deeply ingrained, we can rewire mental models through consistent exposure to new helpful narratives and frames, which can influence people's hearts, mindsets and actions.

2 People need to feel like they've reached their own conclusions

Agency is the fundamental **need to feel in control of our own actions and decisions**. When communication styles threaten people's sense of agency, it can cause rejection of a message, defensiveness, or even anger towards the messenger. *(Ever wondered where the 'militant vegan' stereotype came from?!)*

Messaging strategies:

- **People respond better to open questions than directives** (e.g. 'What does kindness mean to you?' or 'Imagine a world where...' rather than 'Be kind to animals' or 'Go vegan').
- Messages about **welfare-washing** (i.e. that the industry is lying to us, and therefore taking away our agency) also work well.

3 People need to feel a sense of belonging

Belonging is the **need to feel accepted and connected within a group or community**. Because of this, people will 'follow the crowd'. This is known as **social proof**, where people are more likely to support a cause if they see others doing so. Highlighting growing public support for animal freedom and movement wins can tap into the power of social proof. Likewise, if people see plant-based eating becoming the dominant norm, they will adopt it in order to remain in the 'in-group'.

Narratives that reinforce helpful social norms:

- **Social Progress** (e.g. we're continually evolving, and animal freedom is a step forward in our progress to becoming a fairer, kinder society).
- **A Bigger Us** (e.g. our shared experiences and similarities with other animals; how we're all part of a larger community that shares the same home).

Ways to Understand Our Audiences

Segmentation

Divides a large audience into smaller segments based on shared characteristics (e.g. demographics, interests, attitudes, behaviours and values). It helps identify distinct groups that can be **targeted with tailored communications,** based on what is most persuasive to them and what kind of actions they're likely to take. Segmentation can be done across a **broad audience** or more niche audiences, like **supporter bases**.

Animal Think Tank is researching broad audience segmentation and will have more to share later in 2026.

Surveys & Polls

Large-scale research can help us gauge people's **attitudes** and **beliefs,** their **understanding of certain issues**, their **levels of concern**, and their **willingness to take action**. Surveys and polls can be run so that they're nationally representative.

Interviews & Focus Groups

In-depth exploratory research can help us understand **how a segment feels** about certain issues or messages, **why**, and what **barriers** and **opportunities** might exist.

Message-testing

Involves **testing different frames and narratives** to see which ones resonate more effectively with a particular audience/segment. Testing variations in **language**, **imagery** and **format** across similar audience groups can **determine the most impactful elements**.

How Can Animal Think Tank Help?

If you want advice *on how to run surveys, interviews, focus groups or A/B testing, please reach out to us and we'd be happy to help.*

If you want us to conduct research *for you, we may be able to do it at cost.*

Audiences

Key Takeaways

Everyone is at a different point of their journey

We need to meet people where they're at and move them along their journey by tailoring messages in a way that connects with their values and identities, and encourages change.

There is a spectrum of allies

Our communications need to excite and mobilise our base (so they spread the message and take action), and resonate with those who are conflicted yet 'persuadable', to encourage them to support our cause.

Our communications need to work with people's mental models

We can do this by framing our messages in ways that fit with people's existing mental models, and that still shift their thinking in positive ways, re-wiring how they think about an issue by amplifying helpful narratives.

People need to feel like they've reached their own conclusions

A core psychological need is the desire for people to make their own choices and form their opinions, rather than feel like they are being coerced or told what to think, which can result in message rejection. Messages that are open-ended or ask questions are more engaging and thought-provoking.

Use social proof to persuade others to support animal issues

Communications can tap into people's desire to belong by showcasing stories and testimonials from diverse and trusted messengers, demonstrating widespread support and involvement.

Want to find out more about persuasive communications for animal freedom?

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Get more tips and insights in our **Mini Guides series**

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Contact us

narrative@animalthinktank.org.uk

animalthinktank.org.uk/narrative