Communications Toolkit for Animal Freedom

Animal Think Tank

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This toolkit 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 provides a quick communications overview: bringing together the **key principles, tools and frameworks** that can make the difference between a message that lands, and one that doesn't.

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1

Audiences

There's no single audience

People are on different hearts, mindsets and actions journeys

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Dominant narratives shape people's mental models

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There is no 'one' audience we can communicate with. **Everyone is at a different point of their journey**, in terms of their **empathy** towards other animals, their **attitudes** and **beliefs**, and their **behaviours**.

Where people are in their journey affects **which communication strategies will be most effective**.
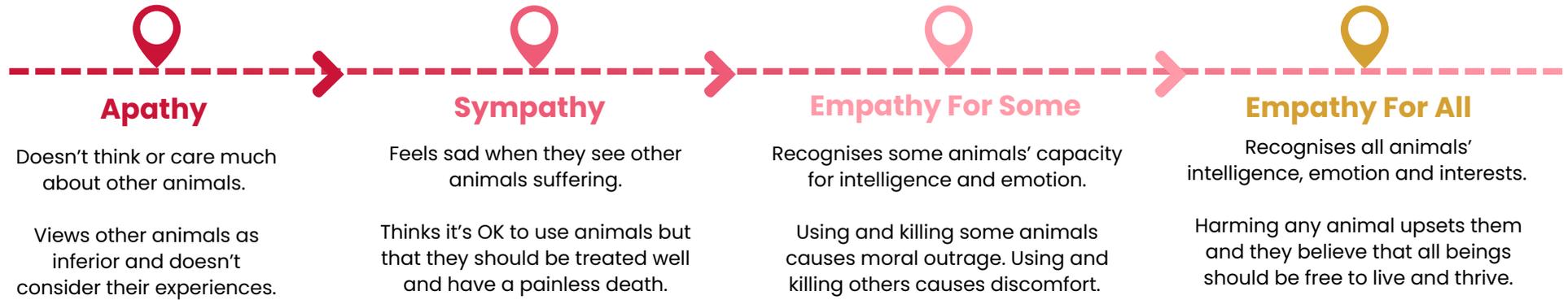
People hold different **mental models** about other animals. These cognitive shortcuts are **shaped by dominant narratives** over time. Though deeply ingrained, we can **reshape them through consistent exposure to helpful frames and narratives**.

Audience Journeys

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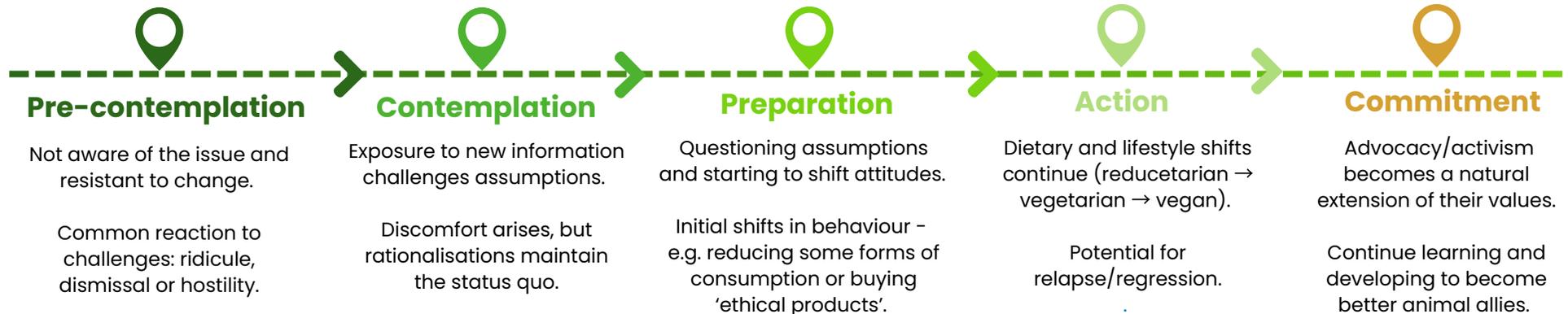
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HEARTS

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.

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.

Audience Mental Models

*Mental models are the brain's way of **organising information** to understand the world.*
*These **cognitive shortcuts** are **shaped by dominant narratives** over time,*
and enable quick decision-making and recall.

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Mental models are made up of a network of associations

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

Dog

Pig

Companions

Cat

'Farm animals'
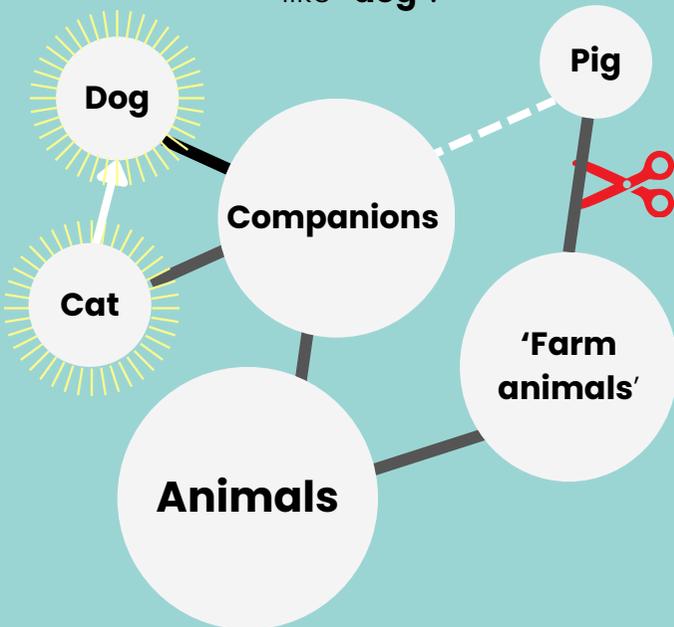
Animals

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

The brain prefers to maintain existing mental models

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

Sociable

Is food

Dog

Pig

Animals

Is not food
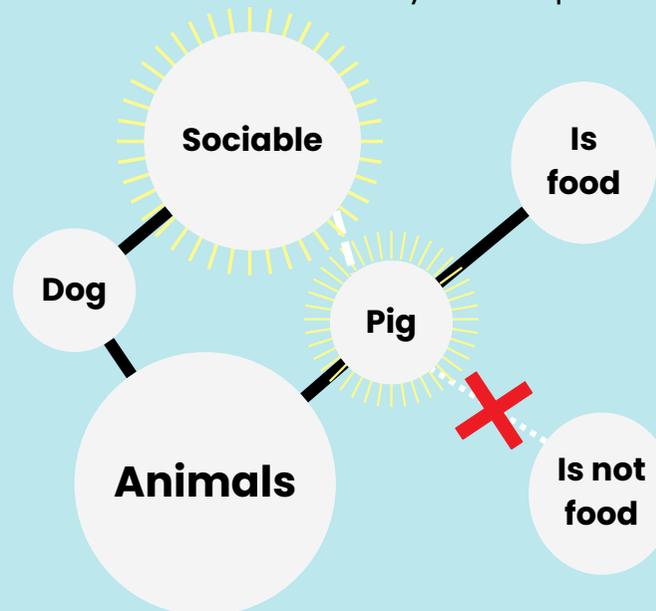
However, new information that mismatches the existing mental model can be **ignored or rejected.**

Working with existing mental models

Understanding mental models can help us craft more impactful messages.

Framing is the process of **changing attitudes** through the use of existing mental models.

For example, talking about pigs in a **food frame** makes people activate related concepts, i.e. that pigs ARE food.

Whereas talking about them as **intelligent individuals** activates similar associations as with other 'non-food' animals, i.e. dogs.

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

Audience Mental Models

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*Mental models are **shaped** and **limited** by both **dominant narratives** about other animals and the absence of **alternative narratives**.*

DOMINANT HARMFUL NARRATIVES

Purpose/Resource
Animals are there to benefit humans

4Ns
Using animals is normal, natural, necessary and nice

Hierarchy/Natural Order
Humans are superior to all animals

Animals Are Inferior
Vulnerable, incapable of agency, 'voiceless', some pose a risk

Stewardship
Humans are responsible for 'managing' animal populations and 'habitats'

Welfare
As long as animals are treated well, it's OK to use and kill them

DORMANT HELPFUL NARRATIVES

Animal Abilities
Every individual feels emotions, has their own desires and ways of experiencing the world

Bigger Us
Community of life; shared experiences and similarities

Co-existence
Living in harmony with our animal cousins

Shared Struggle
Struggle for animal freedom is connected to other struggles for freedom and dignity

Rigged System
This oppressive system was created by humans and therefore can be recreated into something better

Animals as Teachers
Humans have much to learn from our animal cousins
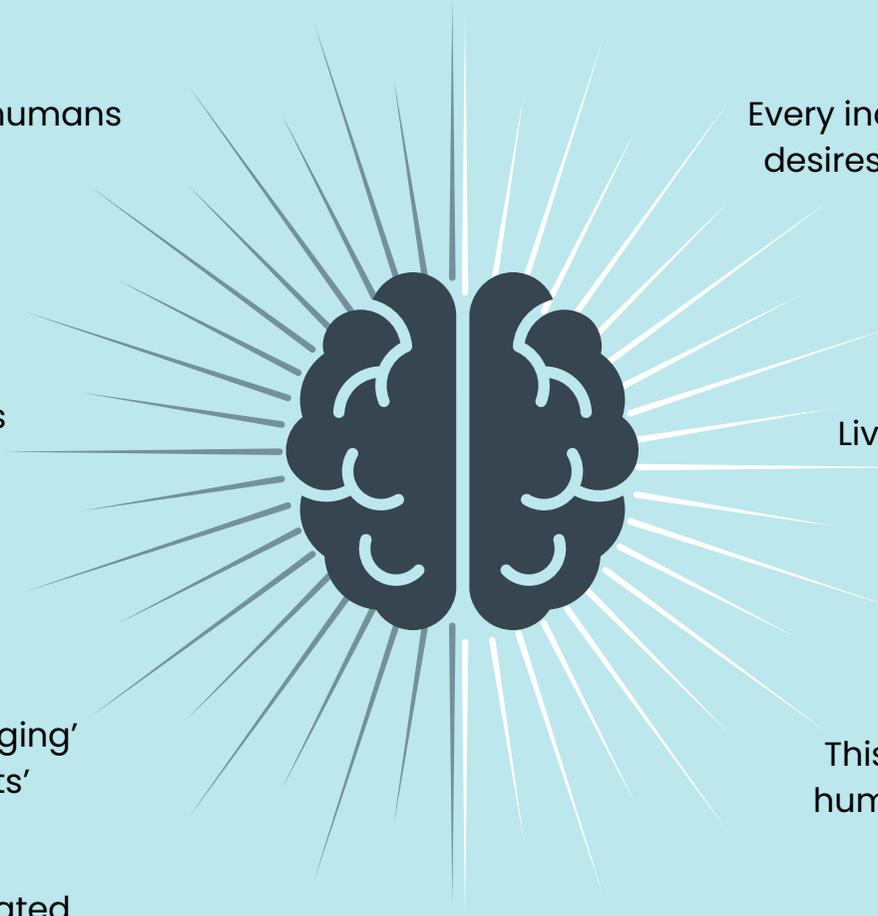
Amplifying the most helpful narratives is the crucial work of narrative change - and social change - because **we can't bring into existence what we can't imagine…**

2

Narratives

Narratives are the deep ideas that influence how we see the world

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Four research-backed persuasive narratives

———

People hold both helpful and harmful narratives

Narratives are **powerful, deeply held ideas** that feel like common sense and influence how society operates. Narratives are reinforced by messages and stories.

Narratives help people **make sense** of issues, and the way the world works.

Our job as communicators isn't to win arguments, it's to **change the story of what's normal and possible** by repeating helpful narratives until they feel like common sense.

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Click here to download our
2-minute narrative checklist

Persuasive Narratives for Animal Freedom

Animal Abilities

Share that other animals feel complex emotions and have unique abilities, personalities, desires, interests, intelligence and cultures.

Social Progress

Communicate that we're continually evolving, and animal freedom is a step forward in our progress to becoming a fairer, kinder society.

Values & Morality

Reinforce that as caring people who want to live in a fairer, kinder society, supporting animal freedom is the right thing for us to do.

Bigger Us

Emphasise our shared experiences and similarities with other animals. Show that we're all part of a larger community that shares the same home.

© Daniel Hansen

How to Challenge Harmful Narratives

TO OVERCOME THESE NARRATIVES…	…USE THESE NARRATIVES
US/THEM Humans are superior; hierarchy; animals aren't intelligent; animals are vastly different.	**BIGGER US or ANIMAL ABILITIES** Shared experiences and similarities; everyone's dignity should be respected.
INDIVIDUALISM Individual interests matter most; personal choice should be respected; taste and price.	**BIGGER US or VALUES & MORALITY** Shared values, needs and interests; harming other animals harms who we are as a society.
THREAT Humans/farmers/economy will suffer if we stop using animals; change is bad and will be a slippery slope.	**SOCIAL PROGRESS** Benefits and opportunities offered by animal freedom and a plant-based future; win/win for everyone.
ANIMALS' PURPOSE / WELFARE As long as animals have decent living conditions and are treated well, it's OK to use and kill them.	**ANIMAL ABILITIES or VALUES & MORALITY** Animal resistance; psychological trauma; all animals want the freedom to live, explore and be with family.
FUTILITY Humans are selfish, change is impossible, so there's no point trying to change anything.	**SOCIAL PROGRESS** Change is possible when people take action, it's inevitable and it's already happening (existing solutions).

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3

Framing

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The way issues are presented (or 'framed') significantly influences public perception and understanding. By framing issues in specific ways, communicators **can guide how people think** about them.

How we frame our communications is about what we choose to **include** and **emphasise**, and what we choose to **leave out** or **de-emphasise**.

As well as the narratives we reinforce, the **words** and **images** we choose influence how our messages are framed, and how they are **perceived**...

Framing Checklist

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FRAMES is a six-point checklist to use against campaign communication plans and messaging.

F

FRAME THE ISSUE

Does it reinforce the values and vision you're promoting?

R

REFRAME THE OPPOSITION'S STORY

Does it change the story by reinforcing your core narrative frame rather than repeating the opposition's frame?

A

ACCESSIBLE TO THE AUDIENCE

Is it crafted with language, values and imagery that will resonate with this specific audience?

M

MEMORABLE

Is It sticky and spreadable? Does it use a symbol, slogan or metaphor that conveys the core narrative frame?

E

EMOTIONAL

Does it trigger an emotional response — hope, urgency, joy, outrage — rather than just presenting facts?

S

SIMPLE & SHORT

Does it get to the core narrative frame - i.e. is the single most important point - clearly and concisely?

*Framework adapted from **Center for Story-Based Strategy***

Language Top Tips

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1 Lead with positive frames

E.g. 'animals are someone not something' rather than a purely negative frame like 'animals are not products', which risks reinforcing an 'animals are products' frame.

2 Use inclusive language

E.g. 'other animals' conveys a bigger us; 'non-human' is othering. Like humans, other animals 'talk' — they're not 'voiceless'. They're part of 'families' and 'communities', not just 'populations' or 'species'.

3 Connect with people's identities and create a 'bigger us'

E.g. use inclusive identities like 'caring people' or 'animal lovers', rather than divisive identities like 'vegans', 'meat-eaters' or 'activists'.

4 Avoid reinforcing industry terms

E.g. 'broiler chickens', 'beef cows' and 'livestock' objectifies other animals (use 'chickens', 'cows' or 'farmed animals'), while terms like 'culling' and 'tail-docking' obscures what's being done (i.e. killing and mutilations).

5 Use animal-first language

E.g. 'horses forced to race' rather than 'race horses', which implies they're doing what they were supposedly born to do; or 'animals confined in zoos' rather than 'zoo animals', which implies a zoo is where they belong.

6 Use active language

E.g. 'farming animals' not 'animal farming'; and 'testing on animals' rather than 'animal testing', to emphasise that something harmful is being done to other animals.

7 Use values-based language

E.g. freedom, kindness, fairness, dignity, truth more than abstract terms like 'rights' and 'justice', which are less likely to move or resonate with people early on in their journey.

Framing Through Images

*A picture is worth a thousand words – but we need to be **strategic** about what **associations** and **emotions** the images we choose provoke in our audience...*

Victims

Factory farming

Anonymous group

Bodies/body parts

Suffering

Passive

Lifeless

Helpless

Depressed

Cruelty

Pity

Nightmare

Industrial/unnatural

Want to look away

Unique individual

Freedom

Natural

Curiosity

Wonder

Agency

Connection

Harmony

Admiration

Intelligence

Want to engage

Tip: A single image may only be able to tell part of a story, whereas contrasting two images can create a fuller picture and provoke a broader range of emotions in an audience.

Imagery Top Tips

© Isa Leshko

Use level or low angles

The angle of the camera can affect how an audience relates to an animal. Low angles make other animals look bigger, conveying a sense of stature and importance. Level angles position the audience at an equal level. Whereas high angles diminish the size of an individual.

© Khamkéo
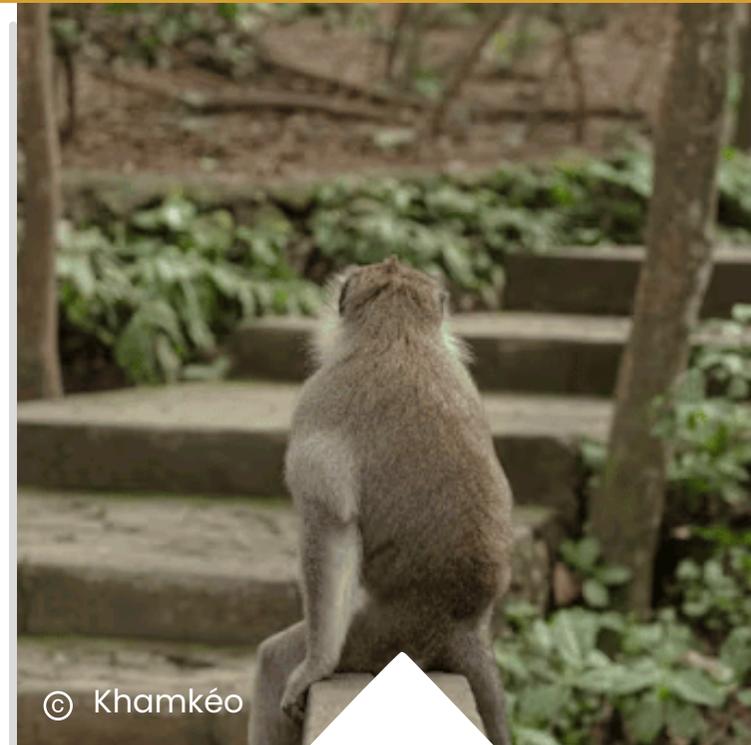
Emphasise individuality

Images that focus on one individual (rather than an anonymous mass) can emphasise their uniqueness. Where possible, choose images that show that other animals feel a range of complex emotions, and how similar they are to humans.

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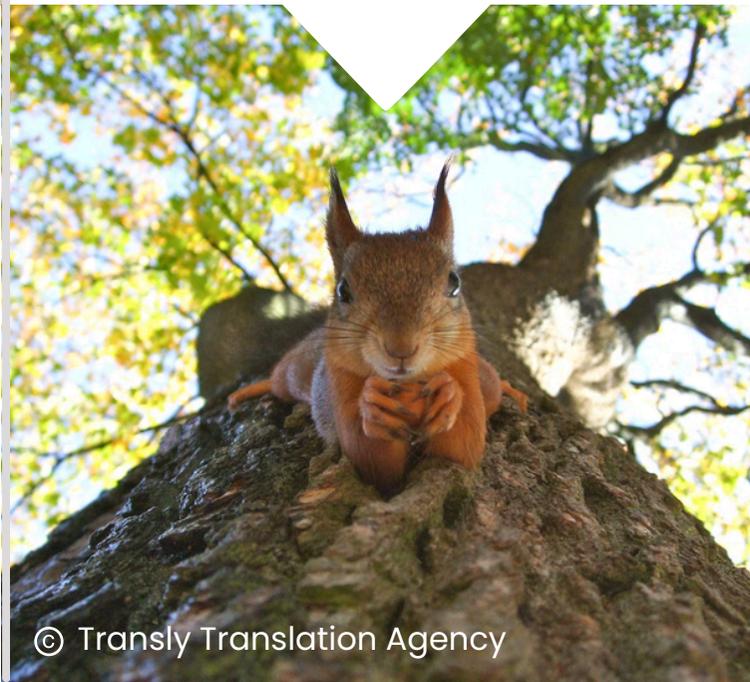
Offer another perspective

Encouraging the viewer to look directly into an animal's eyes can be visually arresting and emotionally powerful. Images taken from behind an animal, which invite the audience to look at them as well as at what they're gazing at, can create a shared viewing experience.

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THE ANIMAL AGRICULTURE INDUSTRY WANTS US TO BELIEVE THIS IS WHAT FREE RANGE LOOKS LIKE

BUT THIS IS THE REALITY

SUPPORT A TRANSITION AWAY FROM FARMING ANIMALS

Use contrasting images to tell more of a story

We tested the effect of single image messages compared to messages with two contrasting images, and found that contrasting images were more persuasive, if they told a coherent story (i.e. the paired images made sense).

'Nightmare' images showed the horrific reality of how other animals are confined, while 'dream' images either depicted how other animals should be living (our vision of animal freedom), or the fairytale fiction pushed by the industry.

Contrasting images tell more of a story than a single image can, and invite greater participation from the viewer.

© We Animals

Put humans in the frame

While we should always aim to centre other animals in our communications, it can sometimes be helpful to include humans in the frame. In message testing, we've found that images that featured humans with other animals did improve people's pro-animal attitudes. However, some people felt that images using human children were emotionally manipulative.

4

Messages

Every message is built on narratives

Frameworks can help structure longer messages to be more effective

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Messages should highlight what we're for, not just what we're against

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How we **structure** longer messages, and the **narratives we reinforce** through them can influence how different audiences respond to our messages.

While there is no 'one message' (or narrative) that will persuade everyone, there are **strategies** that can make longer messages more **effective**...

☑ Click here to download our **2-minute messaging checklist**

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Purpose of a Message

An effective longer message needs to answer...

1 **WHY SHOULD WE CARE?**

Values provide the **frame** through which people can view the issue.

2 **WHAT IS AT STAKE?**

Violation of our values conveys the **urgency** of the issue.

3 **HOW DO WE SOLVE THIS?**

Solutions show that meaningful change is **possible**.

4 **HOW WILL WE BENEFIT?**

Vision of a better future shows that change is **desirable.**

5 **WHAT CAN WE DO NOW?**

Actions provide the **opportunity** to make a difference.

Structuring a Message

*When crafting longer messages, why not use this **tried-and-tested framework**?
Depending on the message, **some elements can also be conveyed through images** rather than words.*

1 Open with **SHARED VALUES** (e.g. treating others as we wish to be treated, care, respect, love, friendship, community, dignity etc) to engage audiences and help them relate to our message.

2 Explain how those values are being **VIOLATED** and the **impact** it causes, so the issue feels relevant to audiences. If possible, name **who** is responsible (e.g. specific corporations or industries), **what** they're doing, and **why** (their motivation, e.g. profit).

3 Highlight the **short-term SOLUTIONS** that are needed to achieve **long-term change**. Ideally, give examples of solutions that **already exist** and/or **new solutions** that are needed, so that change seems possible.

4 Share a **VISION** of a better future that benefits everyone, so audiences feel that change is desirable. Emphasise how making this a reality is about **living up to our shared values** as a society.

5 Deliver a **CALL TO ACTION** (e.g. attend a demonstration, contact your MP, organise a local action) so that people who feel motivated can take action immediately.

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Crafting a Message

*How to use this framework to **reinforce a 'values & morality' narrative** in a longer message...*

VALUES	What does kindness mean to you? Treating someone how you want to be treated? Caring about others - no matter who they are? Most of us want to be kind and avoid harming others...
VIOLATION	...but greedy corporations are intentionally misleading us into doing the opposite. They tell us that the animals they farm are treated kindly, yet the majority are separated from their families as newborns and confined their entire lives. They suffer immensely - as do many farmers working in this industry.
SOLUTIONS	Kindness is more than a marketing buzzword for unethical corporations to hide behind. It underpins who we are as society. And it's time for the government to support farmers to move away from farming and killing animals...
VISION	...towards a kinder plant-based future. A future where corporations can no longer deceive us or continue harming animals, farmers and our planet. A future that can benefit all of us - for generations to come.
ACTION	Will you join us outside Parliament to urge the government to support farmers who want to transition to a kinder, more sustainable plant-based future?

Messaging Strategies

*These are some **communication tactics** that we've found can work...*

1 Encourage curiosity and reflection

Help people to think through the issue rather than tell them what to think.

Questions or open-ended statements can prompt curiosity and help people consider what's being communicated.

E.g. 'Do you think animals long for their freedom?'; 'What is Big Animal Ag hiding from us?' or 'Imagine a future where...'

2 Connect with people's identities

Appealing to identities rather than actions can sometimes be more motivating.

Asking 'are you this kind of person?' rather than 'will you do this?' can be more compelling.

E.g. 'Are you an animal lover?';'Will you be a freedom supporter?' or 'Will you be an animal ally?'

3 Use journey stories

Share stories that reveal how people changed their mind about an issue.

Journey stories can acknowledge people's concerns while showing that change is something positive and possible.

E.g. stories of former farmers; industry vets who blew the whistle; or people who never thought they'd go vegan.

4 Use trusted messengers

Use messengers/characters who are likeable, relatable, credible or seen as experts.

The messenger/storyteller is as crucial as the content, as it affects the credibility of a message/story.

E.g. farmers; vets; former vivisectors; animal experts; everyday people an audience respect or can identify with.

5 Communicate our vision

Highlight what we stand for, not just what we stand against.

For people to support our issue, they need to understand what animal freedom looks like, and how it can benefit all of us.

E.g. all animals getting to live in peace and safety creates a world where the best interests of everyone are considered.

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6 Talk more about values

Values most people share provide a helpful frame through which people can view our issue, seeing the problem as a betrayal of those values.

The type of values we reinforce have different effects.

E.g. Intrinsic values - like care, respect, honesty, responsibility - encourage concern for others, whereas extrinsic values - like taste, price and appearance - encourage self-interest.

7 Make clear the 'villain', 'victim' & 'hero'

Emphasise who is causing harm, who is being harmed, and who can help end that harm.

Sometimes the 'characters' of a story have more than one role.

E.g. It's vital our audience isn't framed as the 'villain', but society is the 'victim', as well as the potential 'hero'. Industries can be both villain and potential hero (i.e. making bold changes).

8 Emphasise systemic/collective change

Frame change as being about a shared journey, collective progress and changing the system.

While individual change is important, if it's communicated as the main solution, it limits people's belief that real change is possible.

E.g. supporting farmers to transition to plant-based farming; collectively boycotting a harmful industry.

9 Show don't tell

Use stories or comparisons where possible. People are more likely to remember and relate to information in these forms compared to facts.

Stories connect with people emotionally; facts connect logically.

E.g. *Blackfish* told a powerful story about the psychological trauma of an individual orca, Tilikum, which resonated with people far more than stats about deaths at SeaWorld could.

10 Be strategic about people's fear of loss

Highlight the benefits of animal freedom, not just the risks of inaction.

Humans' fear of loss can be both a hindrance and a help.

E.g. 'end'/'stop' framing can trigger loss aversion in people, making them resistant to solutions, whereas highlighting that continuing to farm animals jeopardises all of our futures can be a motivating form of loss aversion.

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> **The job of a good message isn't to say what is popular.**
>
> **The job of a good message is to make popular what we need said.**

Anat Shenker-Osorio

Want to find out more about effective messages and persuasive narratives for animal freedom?

Get more tips and insights in our **Messaging Guides**

Explore the data in our **Research Reports**

Get the latest research via our **Newsletter**

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