



Turning Questions Into Answers.

*Fairbank,
Maslin,
Maullin &
Associates*

*Opinion Research &
Public Policy Analysis*

TO: Partners in Fire Education

FROM: David Metz
Fairbank, Maslin, Maullin & Associates

Lori Weigel
Public Opinion Strategies

RE: Opinion Research Based Communication Recommendations Regarding the Ecological Role of Fire

DATE: April 10, 2008

These “lessons learned” regarding how to increase the effectiveness of communications with the public regarding the ecological role of fire are drawn from qualitative and quantitative research conducted on behalf of Partners in Fire Education by our two firms in 2008. As in any industry, scientists and those dealing with this issue on a regular basis have a very technical and specialized vocabulary. One goal of the research was how to translate this technical and unintentionally off-putting language into everyday vocabulary which resonates with the general public. This does not mean that we are suggesting changes to the policies, actions and approaches being undertaken by government agencies, non-profits and private individuals. Rather, we are suggesting some ways to communicate with the general public that will ideally provide an increased acceptance for these policies, approaches and actions.

While difficult to sum up such extensive research in just a few pages, we none-the-less believe that providing these recommendations in a list of easy-to-follow, broad “rules” for communication has typically been helpful for other coalitions with similar communication needs. While there can certainly be unique circumstances, we found few exceptions to these broad rules in terms of geography or key demographic groups in the national survey and in the targeted geographic populations. Still, it is always prudent to test language in a local area prior to public communication.

Again, we would stress that these recommendations are all drawn directly from the research conducted jointly by the Democratic polling firm of Fairbank, Maslin, Maullin & Associates (FMM&A) and the Republican polling firm of Public Opinion Strategies (POS). This research program included a series of six focus group in fire-prone communities around the country, and a national survey of 2,000 individuals drawn from four key samples: a representative national sample of all Americans; residents of fire prone counties near and in forested areas in the Southeast and West; residents of fire prone counties in shrub and grasslands in the Rocky Mountain and Plains states; and residents of Southern California.

COMMUNICATION RECOMMENDATIONS

- Do not use acronyms and phrases which are technical in nature. Every industry and profession tends to have its own vocabulary which is well understood among those professionals, but unfortunately can be off-putting to the general public. Often using more commonplace language can immediately create a more compelling and persuasive communication. Examples of phrases tested in the focus groups which are generally not well understood by “lay people” included: wildland, wildland urban interface or WUI, appropriate management response, mechanical thinning, natural fire regime and altered fire dynamics.
- Do reassure citizens that safety of the public, of fire fighters, and of property is the chief priority for you and your organization when considering approaches to fire. The public will not be open to additional information, unless they understand that there is a strong commitment to safety. One statement we tested which resonates strongly and begins with the safety reassurance is:

“Safety is always the number one priority when it comes to fire. But, by putting out every single fire, we are actually creating more dangerous conditions. Using controlled burns to thin out overgrowth and carefully managing natural fires helps ensure the safety of neighborhoods in outlying areas” (43% say this is a very convincing reason to support this package of approaches to fire).

- The converse of this point is that citizens do not want to be told that homes may not be protected. Some of our initial conversations suggested the desire to convey a “tough love” message to home owners whose homes are in fire prone areas. Intellectually people understand that it may be impossible to protect all properties. In fact, 79% agree that “during large, severe fires near homes, there are times when fire fighters may have to let a home burn if no lives are at risk.” However, this does not mean they do not want someone to *try* and save all homes. Fully 83% agree that “During large, severe fires near homes, fire fighters should do everything they can to try to save all properties.” This research suggests that any communication approach that tries to dissuade people of the idea that their home will be protected will be vehemently rejected.
- Do incorporate people into all communications, for example by clearly demonstrating how people will be affected by any changes in the approach taken to fire. Messages we tested which resonate strongly and which all place an emphasis on people include:

“Taxpayer money is being wasted putting out fires that are far from people and their property. A far more cost-effective approach is to use controlled burns to prevent large, severe fires from spreading into areas where people live, and to allow some fires to take their natural course, which costs five times less than trying to put out fires.” (41% very convincing reason to support a package of approaches to fire)

“Forests and natural areas are important to our health - they act as natural filters to give us clean air, and are the source of our clean drinking water. We must ensure the health of our forests and natural areas by allowing some fires to take their natural course.” (40% very convincing)

Conversely, communications which did not incorporate people were often viewed skeptically as potentially being driven by “environmentalists” with the implication that they care more about nature than about people.

- Do recognize that the public understands and accepts intellectually that fire can be beneficial (over

three quarters nationally agree with this concept) and that putting out all fires can lead to fires which burn faster and more out of control. People do value the health of natural areas, particularly natural areas “near them” or ones which they view as iconic, such as specific national forests and parks in our nation. Specific language that elicits an overwhelmingly positive response:

“We know that allowing fire to take its natural course can help the health of our forests and natural areas. For example, the fires in Yellowstone in 1988 showed how natural areas can quickly bounce back rejuvenated with even more wildlife and types of plants than ever before.”
(45% very convincing)

“Many types of plants and wildlife need fire to survive. Periodic fire stimulates growth, reproduction of plants, provides wildlife habitat, and ensures healthier natural areas near us.”
(40% very convincing)

- At the same time, be aware that fire is also seen as essentially dangerous and unpredictable. The view that fire is “dangerous” leads to a clear desire to ensure someone is actively attempting to “control” fire. In fact, this speaks to a number of communication recommendations specifically about controlled burns. Our research indicates overwhelming support for the practice when it is described as follows: “Allow fire teams to use controlled burns when and where doing so will safely reduce the amount of fuel for fires.”
 - ✓ Do talk about “fire teams.” In the focus groups, respondents clearly felt more confident if more than one entity was making decisions about when to implement this practice, ideally forest experts, fire fighters and even meteorologists would work together to determine when and where these burns are conducted.
 - ✓ Do use the term “burn” rather than “fire.” A burn is seen as smaller, less “wild” and more able to be controlled than a “fire.”
 - ✓ Do use the word “controlled” when describing this approach to fire. While focus group respondents understood that no one could absolutely “control” fire, this did not mean that they didn’t want those in charge to TRY and control fire. In fact, they reject many words which were seen as too lackadaisical, such as “monitored” or “supervised.” People want to know someone is in charge and vigilant. While they intellectually understand that no one can “control” fire, this does not stop them from wanting to know that someone is *trying* to control it.

In fact, when asked to choose between four terms – controlled, prescribed, proactive, and managed – a majority of voters nationally say that “controlled” would give them the most favorable feeling toward the approach being taken by their state’s forest experts. With the term “prescribed” they questioned whether they were getting the “right medicine.”
 - ✓ Do reassure about safety again, by using words like “safely” when describing the process. The phrase “when and where” is also important here, as focus group respondents saw many variables as potentially leading to out of control fires and want many factors considered.

- Do say “cut and remove overgrown brush and trees,” rather than the more technical “mechanical thinning.”
- Do talk about fire teams actively managing naturally occurring fires away from people and homes that are allowed to burn when and where they do not threaten people, property or the health of a natural area.
- Do use messengers who the public perceives as being on the “front lines” – namely, fire fighters, park rangers, state foresters and the U.S. Forest Service. People respond most strongly to “experts” who are out in the field and dealing with fire. Interestingly, “local” firefighters tend to be the preferred messenger for respondents who have been evacuated due to fires before.

In summary, we learned a great deal about how to better communicate to the general public the good work taking place everyday using these approaches to fire. We believe that incorporating these recommendations into the statements and information provided to the public will be helpful by not creating unintended and unnecessary concerns among the public.

Methodology Statement:

These recommendations are drawn from the most extensive public opinion research conducted to date regarding the public’s views of fire in natural areas. FMM&A and POS completed telephone interviews with adults age 18 and older among four distinct audiences: 800 adults nationally proportionally throughout the United States; 400 adults in fire prone counties in forested areas in the West and Southeast; 400 adults in fire prone counties in shrub/grasslands in the Rocky Mountain and Plains states; and 400 adults in Southern California. Interviews nationally and in the forest sample were conducted February 23-26, 2008, while interviews in the shrubs/grasslands and Southern California were conducted March 11-13, 2008. The margin of sampling error for the national sample is +/- 3.5%, and for the three targeted samples is +/-4.9%. The margin of error for subgroups within each sample will be larger.

Each sub-sample was composed of counties which were selected by the Research Subcommittee. The explanation for selection is as follows:

FOREST:

To select high fire risk counties in the West, we used data from the Headwater Economic study “Home Development on Fire-Prone Lands West-Wide Summary”. The study identified counties with high current development and future development potential on lands adjacent to fire-prone public lands. For our sample, we selected counties with at least 20 acres of large areas of developed forested private lands adjacent to the fire-prone public lands.

To select high fire risk counties in the Southeast, we used data for the Southern Wildfire Risk Assessment (SWRA). We selected counties using their Level of Concern (LOC) rating. LOC is calculated as the Wildland Fire Susceptibility Index (WFSI) times the Fire Effects Index (FEI). SWRA uses districts instead of county boundaries so we identified districts with at least 50,000 acres with LOC 0.64-1.36 and at least 100 acres with LOC 14.9-100 and then selected the counties within those districts. In both the west and the southeast, we removed counties with large cities (pop. >150,000).

SHRUB-GRASSLANDS:

To select high fire risk counties in shrub and grassland areas, we started by examining the Landfire National data. While this data did help to narrow down focal areas within states, the data was either too coarse or did not completely cover grassland areas to be reliable for selection of the final counties. With the focal areas identified, we turned to on the ground fire and conservation professionals. We asked this group to name 5 or less counties in the focal areas that they are familiar with that meet the follow criteria: all or predominantly grass lands or shrub lands; rural with no cities or towns over 50,000; high natural fire ignition.

In addition, the survey was preceded by three sets of focus groups among homeowners in the suburbs of major metropolitan areas, and in smaller outlying communities. The goal of the groups was to refine language and messages, and to inform the content of the survey. The groups were held in the following locations: Denver, Colorado; Bend, Oregon; and Jacksonville Florida. One group in each location consisted of homeowners who reside in relatively “close-in” suburbs, and/or farther from large, undeveloped natural areas, so that they are not as likely to be personally affected by fire but might see smoke, for example. The other group consisted of homeowners who reside in outer suburban/exurban or even rural areas (depending on the site). These home owners are residing in areas that would likely be considered as “WUI.”