

Writing in the New York Times last week, [John Broder reported](#) that [ecoAmerica](#), described as “a nonprofit environmental marketing and messaging firm in Washington,” has been researching the best rhetoric to build political support for legislation addressing greenhouse gas emissions.

I confess that this story makes me a bit queasy. As an academic, I’m committed to the notion that at some level ideas should substantively speak for themselves, and that no one should be spun (or misled, if you want a less polite term) into supporting a policy proposal because they don’t really understand it or are only seeing one aspect of it. On the other hand, as a teacher and sometime advocate, I’m also well aware that you can’t effectively communicate any message unless you choose words that will connect with your target audience. So I know that rhetoric matters in the political arena.

The real question, then, is where the line falls between improved communication and cynical manipulation. The Times story compared ecoAmerica’s summary of its research, which was accidentally e-mailed to reporters, to the [infamous Frank Luntz memo](#) that was leaked in 2003. Luntz told Republicans how to “win” the global warming debate (and avoid political pressure to address the problem) by talking about “sound science” and global responsibility. Environmental groups and a raft of commentators (including me) excoriated Luntz for that spin. On the surface, ecoAmerica’s memo seems to have much in common with Luntz’s. According to the Times, for example, ecoAmerica recommends speaking “in TALKING POINTS aspirational language about shared American ideals, like freedom, prosperity, independence and self-sufficiency while avoiding jargon and details about policy, science, economics or technology,” and substituting terms like “dirty fuels” for “carbon dioxide” and “pollution reduction refund” for “cap and trade.”

So, is “our spin” really as bad as “their spin”? On reflection I think not.

What made the Luntz memo so deplorable was that it gave the clear impression that voters would perceive global warming as a problem needing a regulatory solution if they accurately understood the facts. Americans care about the environment, Luntz said, and “the scientific debate is closing.” He advised Republicans to emphasize uncertainty, although he didn’t appear to actually doubt the evidence of anthropogenic warming. He also emphasized that the economic arguments that in fact motivate much Republican opposition to regulation do not resonate with average Americans, and urged that they be replaced with (apparently

insincere) paeans to “American creativity and American innovation.”

No such naked cynicism appears in the ecoAmerica briefing, at least as described by the Times story. There’s a lot about choosing words that will appeal to the audience, and an implicit (and unsurprising) suggestion that the “cap and dividend” move is designed to make regulation more palatable to a larger portion of the electorate. But there is nothing that looks like hiding or distorting facts, or even hiding or distorting the motives that inspire environmentalists to seek emission limits.

I’m still uncomfortable with the marketing approach, and inclined to agree with the environmental communication expert quoted in the story that marketing is not a reliable path to lasting social change. But I don’t think ecoAmerica has crossed the boundary between legitimate marketing and inappropriate manipulation.