

“WHEN YOU PUT IT THAT WAY...”: HOW FRAMING IMPACTS ACCEPTANCE OF A DIFFICULT MESSAGE



A price increase is bad news. No one wants to be told their costs are going up—especially for an essential commodity. But how you deliver that news can make all the difference.

To demonstrate how framing impacts acceptance, we investigated alternative ways of delivering news that a utility was adding a 3% surcharge to people’s bills.

Shortly after Puerto Rico was flattened by Hurricane Maria in September 2017, we tested three ways of introducing a new infrastructure fee. The first was an appeal to building for the future. The second

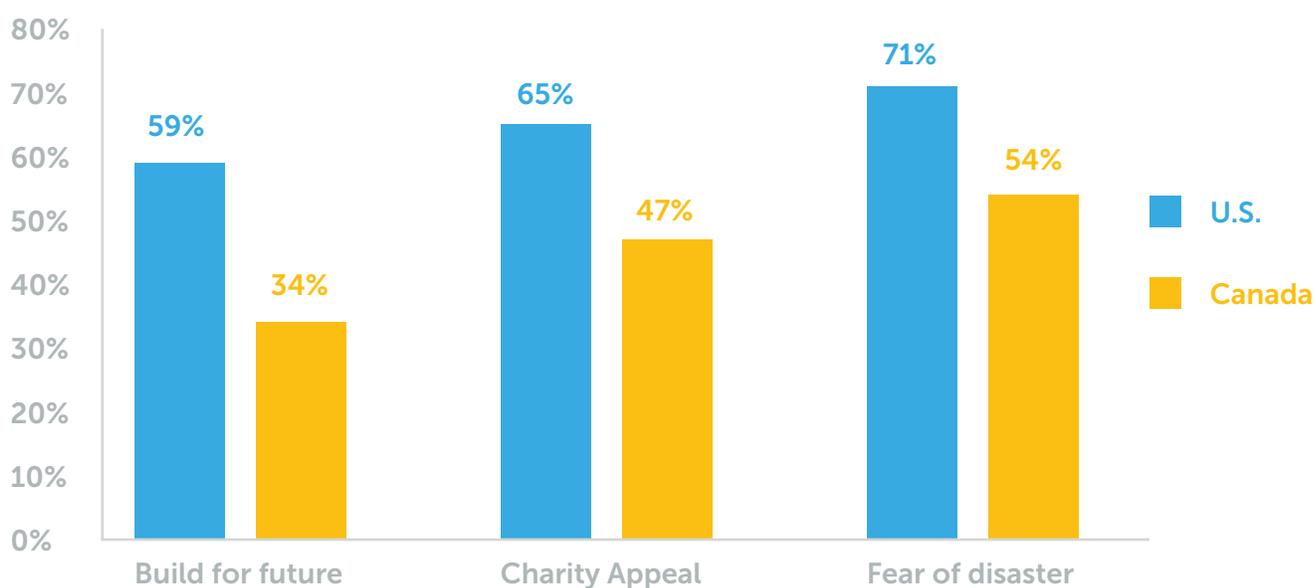
included an appeal to support a charity that would benefit the people of Puerto Rico. The third pointed out how disastrous it would be without a robust electrical infrastructure, pointing to Puerto Rico as an example. Each person answering the survey was exposed to just one of these messages. They were told, “Imagine this message was included in your next electrical bill” and asked if they thought this was a good or bad idea.

Future	Charity	Potential Disaster
<p>“To ensure that future generations have access to reliable clean energy we’re investing in upgrading and strengthening our infrastructure. This necessitates the introduction of an infrastructure investment fund charge, equal to 3% of your monthly energy bill.”</p>	<p>“At the time that we sent this invoice, at least 75% of Puerto Rican’s are without electricity, because Hurricane Maria destroyed much of the island’s decaying electrical infrastructure. Many are expected to be without electricity until well into 2018. But you can help them rebuild by donating an amount equivalent to 1% of this energy bill. If we all donate just 1% we will help turn the lights back on for thousands of Puerto Ricans, so please donate today!</p> <p>To ensure that future generations have access to reliable clean energy we’re investing in upgrading and strengthening our infrastructure. This necessitates the introduction of an infrastructure investment fund charge, equal to 3% of your monthly energy bill.</p>	<p>“At the time that we sent this invoice, at least 75% of Puerto Rican’s are without electricity, because Hurricane Maria destroyed much of the island’s decaying electrical infrastructure. Many are expected to be without electricity until well into 2018. This disaster highlights the importance of upgrading and maintaining our energy infrastructure.</p> <p>Imagine if your community had no electricity until 2018. It could happen, unless we invest in our infrastructure today.</p> <p>To ensure that future generations have access to reliable clean energy we’re investing in upgrading and strengthening our infrastructure. This necessitates the introduction of an infrastructure investment fund charge, equal to 3% of your monthly energy bill.</p>



The appeal to building for future generations is a classic rational argument. The charity approach involves both misdirection and an appeal to the heart. The potential disaster scenario plays the emotional card of fear. Not surprisingly, both the emotional appeals test better than the purely rational one, but the potential for disaster tests the best of all. Why?

% thinking infrastructure investment is a good idea, based on how it was framed



“Bad news sells because the amygdala is always looking for something to fear,” writes [Steven Kotler](#). The amygdala is the part of our brain that is responsible for primal emotions like rage, hate, and fear. It’s our danger radar. Its job is to identify anything that could threaten our survival. When we appeal to fear and possible negative consequences, even a 3% price hike on your electrical bill can seem like a good idea.

How utilities frame [messages](#) to their customers about price increases, outages, investments and conservation initiatives (to name a few topics) is one thing we are exploring in our Utility Guidebook—a subscription-only quarterly deep dive into [issues facing the Utility industry](#). We are interviewing more than 8,000 North

Americans over the course of 2018, delving into topics like: improving the customer experience; testing new initiatives and programs; the value of community engagement; and market trends. To learn more about how the Utility Guidebook can help you develop a better relationship with your customers, contact [us](#).