

# Negative sentiment in environmental advocacy emails found to boost engagement

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People find it hard to resist negative messages. A recent University of Michigan study reveals that recipients are more likely to engage with emails containing negative sentiment sent by the Environmental Defense Fund, a U.S. based nonprofit organization. Specifically, emails with a negative tone were more frequently opened, and recipients were more likely to click on links within these emails, compared to those with a positive tone.

The work is [published](#) in the journal *Environmental Communication*.

Understanding optimal strategies for [public engagement](#) is crucial for organizations, the study's authors say. In some cases, they must determine if the most engaging option is having either a positive or negative tone in advocacy messages. Their research suggests that incorporating negative sentiments in advocacy messages may be an effective approach.

The study examined [email](#) campaign messages sent between November 2011 and February 2020, encompassing 2,724 email campaigns reaching nearly 330 million addresses in the United States.

Researchers examined the words used in the email message for positive or negative sentiment, and measured engagement through "opens"—the number of times an email was opened by the recipient—and "clicks"—the number of times the recipient clicked on the link in the email that led to the [campaign](#) website.

The study's lead author, Sol Hart, a professor in the U-M Department of Communication and Media and Program in the Environment, said that while [negative messages](#) were associated with more engagement, environmental organizations may benefit by still including actionable steps that individuals can take to address environmental issues.

Hart and colleagues noted some limitations to the study, including that individuals who received the emails are not representative of the public.

"By being on an environmental email list, they are more likely to be an environmentalist and also more likely to have strong political interests," said Hart, who is also a faculty associate at U-M's Institute for Social Research. "Even so, the study offers insight into how those typically targeted in pro-environmental campaigns respond to messaging."

The study was co-authored by Stuart Soroka, professor at the University of California, Los Angeles, and Dan Hiaeshutter-Rice, assistant professor at Michigan State University.

**More information:** P. Sol Hart et al, Go Negative for Clicks: Negative Sentiment in Environmental Advocacy Emails Is Associated with Increased Public Engagement, *Environmental Communication* (2024).  
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