

Using the Six America's Short Survey (SASSY) to Teach Audience Segmentation

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Introduction/ Need for Innovation

Fundamental strategic communications scholarship and practice have encouraged communicators to understand who is in their audience before developing messages. Throughout agricultural communications courses, instructors encourage students to think carefully about the characteristics (e.g., demographic, psychographic, and behavioral) of their target audience, or subgroups of a public with similar characteristics which may influence message processing (Grunig, 1989; Warner et al., 2016). Furthermore, it is understood that messages tailored to these target audiences are more effective than one-size-fits-all messages that do not consider differences between audience members (Grunig, 1989). While target audiences have been identified based on demographic characteristics such as age, scholarship has urged future efforts to go beyond the demographics and include context-relevant psychographic and behavioral characteristics (Bouman et al., 2020; Corner et al., 2014; Dietz, 2012; Hine et al., 2014). When considering communicating about complex and controversial scientific issues (e.g., antibiotic resistance, GMOs, climate change), recent studies have indicated the importance of considering these additional attitudinal characteristics (Hine et al., 2014). This advice rests upon the understanding that individuals process messages regarding complex or unfamiliar issues with heuristics related to trust, values, and issue perceptions (Bouman et al., 2020; Corner et al., 2014; Dietz, 2012). These climate change communication studies have highlighted the importance of developing messages tailored to individual's values due to the controversial nature and varying perceptions of climate change in American society. These polarized perceptions increase the likelihood of adverse message effects (Kahan et al., 2011).

Audience segmentation has been used extensively in climate change communication literature and practice to develop messages that encourage perception and behavior change for distinct audience groups (Hine et al., 2014). One of the most common audience segmentation tools for climate change communication is the Global Warming Six America's Framework. This 36-item questionnaire measures issue belief, concern, and motivation and divides the respondents into six categories: alarmed, concerned, cautious, disengaged, doubtful, and dismissive (Maibach et al., 2009). A version known as the Six America's Super Short Survey (SASSY) was developed by the seminal team to measure the same areas in a reliable but shortened format. This course-based innovation utilized the SASSY to engage an agricultural communications public opinion course in an audience segmentation activity. The activity sought to foster understanding of audience segmentation and target audience identification, particularly concerning controversial scientific issues. This innovation and abstract address the National AAEE Research Agenda Research Priority 5: Efficient and Effective Agricultural Education Programs (*Effective programs in communicating with diverse audiences*) (Thoron et al., 2016).

How it Works

We first disseminated an online Qualtrics survey containing the SASSY to a graduate agricultural communications public opinion class with both in-person and online sections. Students were required to take the survey for five discussion points, resulting in 35 respondents. The questionnaire contains four categorical items which reliably measure the original instrument's constructs (Chryst et al., 2018; Maibach et al., 2009). Upon taking the survey, the course instructor used the provided online Group Scoring tool to compare the class's views to the

American public (Chryst et al., 2023). This tool provided data visualizations depicting the size of each segment in the class vs. the American public (e.g., pie charts and bubble charts). The results were then presented to the class and were used as a launchpad for both in-person and online discussions. To reflect upon the activity, students were asked the following questions: “Considering the SASSY survey and surrounding discussion: 1) How did this activity help you learn about audience segmentation? 2) How could you apply this to your “hot topic” projects?”

Results/ Implications

We present the students’ perspectives provided in both in-class discussion and online discussion boards. Overall, students were intrigued by how their class compared to the national norm and noted that the class had lower levels of the more skeptical and disengaged groups, likely due to a younger sample with higher education levels. Many students expressed the activity solidified what they had begun learning about audience segmentation, and the activity was particularly helpful due to being a controversial topic and aligning with their class project of investigating a “hot” agricultural topic. A few of their topic ideas include cultured and processed meat, dairy sustainability, prescribed burns, and GM labeling.

One student wrote, “I think the biggest thing I kept learning this week is to be prepared to work with people with many different opinions and ideas on the SAME topic. To also be prepared for not everyone to understand and support your point of view but be ready to make them feel their opinion holds weight.” Another acknowledged, “With my project, I will need to look closely at my audience's values, leading to how receptive they will be toward the message.” Another student also expressed the activity’s application to their understanding, saying, “This exercise shows just how important audience segmentation is for opening pathways for discussion and audience buy-in of a topic...otherwise the data isn’t enough to pinpoint your communication scheme and marketing plans beyond a broad stroke.”

Future Plans/ Advice to Others

Due to climate change’s polarized nature, care should be taken to emphasize that there are no “correct” answers, and no judgement will be passed on their responses. We emphasized that we aren’t concerned with *what* they think but to consider it an opportunity to participate “behind the scenes” in an audience segmentation activity concerning a controversial scientific topic. Those who intend to use this tool should accompany this activity with audience segmentation lessons and examples of audience segmentation literature. Instructors should also have students complete an audience analysis with their own topics.

Costs/ Resources Needed

The survey and analysis tools can be accessed online for free at the Yale Program on Climate Change Communication website. Therefore, no costs are associated with this project. Although students will need access to a computer or cell phone to take the survey. Additionally, Blackboard was used to facilitate discussion about the assignment, and the project took about two-weeks of time from data collection to presenting results to discussion. Adequate time should be invested in planning and executing the activity.

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