

Community comment – 3 minutes

This is Troy Nicolini with the National Weather Service with today's community comment.

One of the main focus areas of the National Weather Service is to help communities to become informed and prepared for a range of potential natural hazards. In northern California, examples include sneaker waves, tsunamis, floods, high wind, small hail events, and wildland fires. The challenge is that everyone is busy ... and everyone has a lot on their mind. And the things that are on people's minds are often pressing so it can be challenging to get folks to commit any of their mental energy to think about these hazards, and even harder to get folks to actually do something to be more prepared. Therefore it is natural for those of us in the preparedness business to use fear to jolt people into attention and action. The fear approach goes something like this: A scary image from a past disaster is shown, with the message: "if you don't prepare then a disaster like this will harm you and your family". It turns out, however, that fear does not get people to prepare. In fact, it often back fires.

Advertisers know that using fear can backfire. That's why you don't see an ad for shampoo that includes an image of the specific brand of shampoo next to an image of ugly looking hair with the message "if you don't use our shampoo then your hair will look like this". This approach leaves the viewer with an association in their mind between horrific hair and that specific brand of shampoo. So when a person is walking down the aisle in the store and they see that brand of shampoo, the image that pops up in their head is one of ugly hair...so they walk on by. It works the same way with preparedness.

If you see a scary image of a past disaster at the same time that you are being instructed how to prepare, then your mind will associate the fear in your gut with preparedness. You are then less likely to take actions to prepare because they will bring back those yucky feelings of fear. Our approach, therefore, is to sell preparedness just like they sell shampoo: For shampoo, advertisers associate an image of beautiful hair next to their brand of shampoo with the message "if you use our shampoo then your hair will look like this".

We do this by making sure that our preparedness pitches make people feel less afraid and more empowered to survive any disaster. Our best tool for doing this is by having people participate in positive, uplifting activities that help them feel like they and their families will be safe. Evacuation drills that are fun and positive are a great example of this. Participants have universally told us that evacuation drills reduced their fear and increased their optimism. And they caused them to want to do more preparedness activities.

I am sharing this perspective to empower everyone to reject any attempt to scare you into becoming prepared. But also remember this if you are trying to convince a friend or family member to be more informed about, or prepared for the hazards of our region. You may be tempted to use fear to get them to take your words seriously. Resist that temptation and instead try the positive and hopeful approach.

This has been Troy Nicolini with today's community comment.