

SPACE EDUCATION AND OUTREACH SYMPOSIUM (E1)
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CREATE SPACE ON EARTH: LEVERAGE THE PROXIMITY FACTOR

Abstract

The Proximity Factor is the root cause for the existing disconnect between citizens of Planet Earth and international activities off this planet. Communications professionals can leverage the Proximity Factor to our advantage by creating Space On Earth opportunities for individuals to engage, experience, express, and enthuse.

What is the Proximity Factor?

The Proximity Factor is the degree to which individuals care about a topic based on how close it touches their lives. In other words, public opinion is shaped at home with friends, family, colleagues, and in the community in which they live.

The Proximity Factor concept is derived from welfare reform research conducted by researchers Joe Soss and Sanford Schram to measure shifts in public opinion before and after the adoption of the Temporary Assistance for Needy program in the 1990s, the key component of welfare reform that provided cash to support work rather than public handouts. Soss and Schram describe a “distant-visible” model that links the visibility of issues with their proximity to members of the general public. Unaffected citizens rarely notice policy decisions or events that occur at a distance location. Facts and figures outside the proximity of individual experience don’t easily dissuade long-held beliefs or traditions. When issues touch home, individuals judge them based on what they experience personally, or by what they observe.

How is the Proximity Factor Relevant for Space Outreach?

Very few citizens of Earth will ever break free from gravity’s hold. If the Proximity Factor is correct, “space” is too far from home to make a difference in public opinion. Unless they work in a space-related industry or are related to someone who does, citizens are largely unaffected by space policy, budget allocations, or program decisions. Shifting public opinion requires more than rhetoric. It requires proximity opportunities through on-the-ground citizen engagement programs.

What is a Proximity Opportunity?

We can create Space On Earth “proximity” opportunities for individuals to 1) engage, 2) experience, 3) express, and 4) enthuse.

This paper will address ways to engage individuals by reaching out authentically in their passion language, invite them to come inside our space community inner circle, give them tools to share the experience they’ve created with us, and provide continue care and feeding for their new space addiction. Two examples: LAUNCH.org and FragileOasis.org. The goal is to leverage the Proximity Factor by building a community of committed space enthusiasts here on Earth.