



Framing Lessons

Framing Lesson #1 - Order Matters

Once a frame is established, it will dominate the conversation and crowd out subsequent frames. You shouldn't repeat a bad frame or wait to kill it off. Work to articulate immediately your frame and why this matters and why this is news, instead of setting up your opposition's argument and then trying to knock it down, with your reframe lodged in the last paragraph. Start with your frame, not the opposition's or the dominant frame in the news. For more on this, see our eZine, "Don't Think About Elephants," found here:

<http://www.frameworksinstitute.org/products/issue7elephants.shtml>

Framing Lesson #2 - Priming with Values Matters

Ideas and issues come in hierarchies: Level One: Big ideas and culturally shared values; Level Two: Issue-types; Level Three: Specific issues and policies. We find most advocates and experts begin their communications at Level 3, talking about the specific policy issue right off the bat, instead of situating the specific policy issue in a larger vision of "what is this about." For example, you want to start a piece on health care by articulating a need to be a responsible manager of the health coverage system, instead of articulating a problem with a particular policy initiative.

Framing Lesson #3 – Context Matters – Encourage Big Picture thinking (aka “Offer a Wide Angle Shot not a Telephoto”)

We reason within the frame, assigning responsibility to actors within the frame, and solve the problem with what we've got. You need to connect the dots for your audience and not assume they know the broader context of both the cause and solution to a social problem. Stay away from what political scientist Shanto Iyengar has identified as the dominant method of framing news, what he calls *episodic frames*. *Episodic frames* are stories about individual people that appeal to people as consumers of information and for which the solution is to fix the person; instead, work to construct what Iyengar calls *thematic frames*, those that tell stories of issues and trends, highlight the role for civic engagement and action, and for which there are public solutions.

Framing Lesson #4 - Metaphors and Simplifying Models Matter

In order to bring abstract ideas down to earth, and assign responsibility to human policies, we use metaphors. They are particularly helpful in filling in the mechanisms that are operative in social issues – the HOW, not the what of a particular issue. When people understand how an issue works, they are more likely to engage with it and are more inoculated against spin.

Framing Lesson #5 - Use of Numbers: Social Math Matters

Uninterpreted numbers are not frames. Unfortunately, most people have great difficulty interpreting size and effect. Try to use fewer numbers and incorporate social math to embed frames in numbers. In other words, give the meaning first, and back it up with easily understandable data. For more information, see our eZine, "The Storytelling Power of Numbers," here: <http://www.frameworksinstitute.org/products/issue25framing.shtml>

Framing Lesson #6 – Lists are Not Frames; Causal Stories Matter

Similar to the interpretive difficulty posed by lists of numbers, it is also counterproductive to resort to lists of potential effects of action or inaction on this policy or that. Instead, you should always work to try to give readers a meaningful picture of the issue where they can clearly see the dotted line from cause to effect. Lists run the risk of serving as triggers for dominant frames, so in general, you should stay away from them and tell a more coherent story about causes and effects. For more information on Strengthening Advocacy by Explaining Causal Sequences, see that eZine here: <http://www.frameworksinstitute.org/products/issue31framing.shtml>

Framing Lesson #7 – Tone Matters

Tone refers to the style, mood, manners or philosophical outlook of a communication: shrill, liberal, moderate, abrasive, etc. On social issues, FrameWorks identifies two categories of tone: reasonable and rhetorical. Advocates should strive for a reasonable rather than rhetorical tone. When people are in "reasonable mode," they are more likely to be open to new information and to problem-solving. Use a reasonable, not rhetorical, ideologically charged or partisan tone.

Framing Lesson #8 – Messengers Matter

WHO tells your story is very important. Think about "unlikely allies," those who have credibility but who will not be seen as having a vested interest in your issue. This is particularly important for op-eds and letters to the editor, but is also relevant to organizational press releases. Are those quoted and identified as supporters of your point of view more than the likely suspects? You can enhance your issue credibility by choosing unlikely allies as messengers.

A Framing Checklist

Use this checklist as an evaluation tool to check your communications materials in terms of key strategic framing principles.

- Based solely on the material you have provided, are you confident that an ordinary reader/viewer could answer the critical question: What is this about?
- In your attempt to frame for the reader "what this is about," did you begin at Level 1, by introducing a value like responsibility, stewardship, or fairness?

- Did you signal that solutions exist early in your message? Do the solutions “fit” the problem as defined?
- Did you emphasize efficacy in the solution? Did you inspire optimism and give evidence that the situation can be improved?
- Did you establish the cause of the problem, and did you assign responsibility?
Reviewing your material, can you tell who made the problem and who should fix it?
- Does your story have sufficient urgency to place it on the public agenda? Have you asked and answered the question: What will happen if we do nothing?
- Did you effectively contextualize the problem, explaining long-term consequences, trends, opportunities for resolution of the problem, so that your story is not episodic?
- Did you stay reasonable in tone, avoiding rhetorical or inflammatory partisan attacks as appropriate?
- Do your visuals make the same points that your words make? Are they organized to support a coherent story?
- Did you use numbers sparingly? Did you first tell what they mean? Did you translate them into social math?
- Did you anticipate and deflect the default frame? Did you avoid arguing with it directly and, instead, substitute a new frame?
- Did you use credible and unlikely messengers?
- Is your message strategically oriented to the intended audience, i.e. if addressing business leaders, did you frame your issue as appealing to managerial competence and responsibility?
- Did you tell people explicitly how they can help, how they can stay engaged, whom to hold accountable for what actions? And when you did so, did you address them in their role as citizens or merely as consumers?
- Did you use all elements of the frame to set up your reframe? Values, context, visuals, models and metaphors, numbers/social math, tone, messengers?