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Framing issues

for Public Consideration



By Susan Nall Bales



Indulge me in a thought experiment. Imagine that you are interviewing chamber executives from any part of the country about their vision for their local chambers. How long do you think it would be before one mentions “influencing public thinking,” “raising issues in my community,” “moving the body politic,” or “convincing people to endorse realistic solutions?” If the chamber leaders we witnessed, who were gathered in Charleston and Dallas recently to discuss regionalism, are any indication, these are as much a part of the core mission of chambers as creating a vibrant business environment. To lead, these participants told us, you have to be able to explain, because leaders bring others along.

WHAT BUSINESS ARE WE IN?

Indeed, as ACCE has acknowledged, chambers are in a transition from seeing themselves as only “leading business” to also “leading communities,” with the latter more focused on a role for chambers in which they help “build stronger communities by staying focused and involved in the top business, civic and social priorities.”¹¹ No longer can chamber leaders be content representing the interests of American business alone, ACCE’s own research suggests, but rather they are



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far more likely to see themselves as involved in broad social issues that range from immigration and affordable housing to the relationship between workforce preparation and early child development. Issues of sustainability and infrastructure reliability inevitably involve the business community in such issues as energy independence and health care reform.

Now ask our hypothetical chamber executive what he knows about the science of communications. If leadership is so dependent upon explanation and persuasion, certainly this role must be accorded the arsenal of research, strategy and training that supports other core aspects of the mission, like planning. Again, if the chamber executives we observed are typical, they are relying more on intuition than empirical evidence when it comes to communications, largely adapting what they know about communications from the business world to this brave new world of community engagement.

This article argues that making this transition successfully will require every bit as much strategy and expertise as do the regional plans that chamber executives craft with input from demographers, city planners and marketing experts. Acting on old information and perspectives in the realm of communications is just as risky to your outcomes as planning a development without a current map. By rethinking what communications are being asked to accomplish, what communications tools are germane and which are inappropriate to that mission, chambers can chart a far more effective course toward the kind of impact they seek in the public square.

RETHINKING COMMUNICATIONS

Encouraging people to solve social problems is not the same as selling soap. Think about it logically. Engaging in social issues entails activity on a long timeline; it does not result in a point-of-purchase decision between two or even a handful of options; and frequently those who have the most power to make change are those with the least to lose or gain. By contrast, buying a product is a rather instantaneous decision made between a finite group of alternatives; and those who buy are presumably those with a direct need (or desire) for the product. Citizens and

consumers act in different ways and these ways are influenced by different kinds of communications.

Confusing issues communications with product marketing can be a recipe for failure. Consider the well-intentioned and resourced efforts of groups like Rock the Vote and Declare Yourself to register young people to vote. Public service ads featured rock star after sports star in messages modeled after product advertising. Running against the adult world, these ads “positioned” voting as a slap in the face of the status quo or an act of rebellion against the world of their parents. This is, of course, standard marketing wisdom for positioning youth products. The result? Virtually no effect on turnout among youth.

Apart from errors of conceptual gimmickry, the more profound mistake made by campaigns like this one is that they assume that citizenship is just another form of consumption. Chambers should know better. Citizenship is about participating in a messy process that is devoted to winnowing down a broad array of purported solutions to achieve the broad public good. And bringing people into that process requires an understanding of their prior orientations toward civic life, “priors” that are far more complex than whether they like the green package or the red. Once we move away from marketing business to the masses and into engaging people to see what can be done to improve quality of life through private-public partnerships, we leave the world of marketing and enter the world of public issues.

USING SCIENTIFIC RIGOR TO EVALUATE COMMUNICATIONS

Most people are not interested in most issues most of the time, famously intoned political scientists Nelson Polsby and Aaron Wildavsky.² That lack of interest does not, however, preclude Americans from taking positions on many issues about which they know little or care less. They are able to achieve judgment with very little information because human reasoning is, as the past decade of research in the social and cognitive sciences makes clear, frame-based, not fact-based.

What is a frame? “Frames are *organizing principles* that are *socially shared* and *persistent over time*, that work *symbolically* to meaningfully *structure* the social world (emphasis in the original).”³ Our experiences, both direct and mediated, provide the engine for assimilating new information. Like Molière’s ▶

“Human reasoning is frame-based, not fact-based. ... And if the facts don't quite fit the frame, it is the frame that triumphs over the facts.”



bourgeois gentleman, who discovers to his amazement that he has been speaking prose effortlessly for most of his life, we are all framing all the time. This means that we are selectively responding to certain parts of a speech or a news story that literally cue up the networks of associations we have stored to help us make meaning of our world. Faced with the new, we map on the old in ways that appear to us to “fit.” And if the facts don’t quite fit the frame, it is the frame that triumphs over the facts.

Let’s bring this scholarship home to our hypothetical chamber executive. Standing in front of an audience of Rotarians or community activists, about to urge them to consider the sustainability of the current transportation system in that com-

the right, efficient thing? Is this good for my community or that other community over there? Is government going to decide what car I can buy? Without making the concept concrete, the audience members are likely to use different, familiar lenses to see the information presented—from the perspective of consumers, for example, or taxpayers.

This is what might be termed the “swamp” of frame associations. The unsuspecting chamber executive believes the assembled audience sits before him like rows of empty vessels, waiting for pertinent information to fill their minds. But a mind is not an empty vessel. It is, as cognitive scientists attest, a swamp of pre-existing patterns of thinking that will have as much to do with what your



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munity, he will be understood in terms of the way the speech evokes or redirects the audiences’ thinking about such bundled issues as: sustainability, modern life, the economy, transportation, sacrifice, quality of life, community, government, etc.

Let’s say our chamber exec is a bit distracted on this occasion and talks repeatedly about sustainability without providing more concrete explanations to help the audience grasp the essential concept. The expert understanding is something along the lines of the fact that the infrastructure necessary to carry people long distances from housing to work and home again has never been built, with the consequence that roads that were built for a certain traffic pattern will not hold up much longer under the current stress. A new plan needs to be developed that is more realistic and may well require reorganization of the entire commuting equation.

Unless that exec has spent time relating sustainability to important concepts like leaving the world a better place for our children, responsibly managing the resources we have, etc., many people will “default” to other ideas about sustainability. Without research on this topic, one can only speculate that such default associations might include such thoughts as: How long can I continue to buy gasoline at this price? How effective do I think carpools have proven? Do I really believe other people would choose to do

audience takes away as anything you say. Communications is, in the end, an interactive process. If you have not considered what is in people’s heads to begin with, you will rarely achieve the goal of moving the public conversation in the direction you had hoped.

The FrameWorks Institute pursues an iterative process of qualitative and quantitative research to: (1) identify the dominant frames in public discourse, (2) evaluate their effects on public thinking, (3) develop frame elements that can redirect public thinking to elevate the salience of effective public policies; and (4) verify the positive effects of these reframes. We then apply these research findings to the creation of better frames, incorporating these findings into the development of multiple frame elements to help prime better thinking. In effect, we “map the swamp” so that communicators know what frames lie in wait to swallow their purposes. It is this process of research that allows a communicator to test a communications strategy and to be confident that the way he is explaining the issue is actually providing the cognitive tools people need to see the issue in roughly the same way that experts see it, and to distinguish sound policies.

Does it matter? Research on issues as diverse as rural economies, race, early child development and global warming demonstrate that these frame elements can be configured in ways that either help or hurt specific policies. Toxic combinations of values, models and messengers have been shown to reduce support for some policies by as much as 20 points. Put another way, you can lose entire constituencies on policies they would otherwise endorse by the way you orchestrate these basic frame elements: who speaks, how they explain the problem, and what values they invoke.

FRAMING INTENTIONALLY

What is our hapless hypothetical chamber exec to do after answering an onslaught of questions that reveal an audience skeptical, uninformed and mistrustful of the messenger? “Was it something I said? Or didn’t say?,” he might ask. Yes to both hypotheses. 



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As James N. Druckman has pointed out,⁴ “a framing effect is said to occur when, in the course of describing an issue or event, a speaker’s emphasis on a subset of potentially relevant considerations causes individuals to focus on these considerations when constructing their opinions.”

The good news for our chamber exec is that he had a framing effect. The bad news is it wasn’t the one he wanted. Framing intentionally means having access to a body of research that systematically explores people’s habits of association and deeply held worldviews on any given topic. It means ridding oneself of ill-conceived and little-proven communications techniques (tell a human interest story, appeal to self-interest, challenge their thinking with exceptions, etc.), none of which are supported by the research literature.⁵

But perhaps most important of all is the realization that what you dump in the public square, for good or ill, comes back to haunt you. What goes around comes around in framing, just as in real life.

MAKING PUBLIC LIFE GO WELL

When frames are invigorated over time, they become chronically accessible. They rise out of the swamp of public thinking with reliable predictability. In fact, all you need is a very slight frame cue to get most Americans to tell you that government is too big, too bloated, too inefficient. There is, moreover, an expectation that business will often be on the opposite side of government. And businesses play into this trope and use it to some advantage. Consider the full page ad that ran in *The New York Times* recently. Entitled “Who should benefit from your life’s work?”, it shows a small child hugging a teddy bear with the Capitol in the background. “Take care of your grandchildren instead of Washington,”⁶ it warns. The clear implication from this frame is that government is anti-family and that the prudent parent must work against greedy government to provide for the next generation. It is, as political economist Robert Reich has written, an invocation of the political trope of “The Rot at the Top.”⁷

The problem with this ad, and with the dozens of others that pit private against public, is that it lies in wait for the next time you wish to put forward systemic solutions that involve anything larger than the individual. What happens when you need government to work? To reform health care coverage so that industries like the American automobile industry are not put at a disadvantage against international competitors? To bail out a company that threatens to take down part of the economy? To create public-private ventures to improve schools? Even though these responsible actions may be in the public interest, may improve quality of life, and can be shown to increase the local tax base, that teddy bear is going to come back to haunt.

“Placing blame is among the most comforting cognitive acts, for it allows one to cast away responsibility,” writes Robert Reich in an explanation of the myths that inform American politics. “The cycles of righteous fulmination, first against corporate malfeasance and then against government intervention and then back again, have enabled us to keep at bay some troubling questions regarding how a complex economy is to be organized, and how responsibilities should best be divided between public and private realms....[They] distract us from the need to enforce joint responsibility for our collective prosperity....We will know our mythology of the Rot at the Top is evolving appropriately when we tell fewer stories that sweepingly denounce either the



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EVIDENCE-BASED FRAMING

By understanding that framing can be improved with the aid of research, we can evaluate our work from the perspective of science, not just as art. Having just finished a multiple-year study of how Americans think about healthy communities, we can see strong evidence of positive frame effects from this passage developed by the **Metro Atlanta (GA) Chamber of Commerce**,¹⁰ which explains issues in simple but causal terms:

“As empty nesters and singles out-pace the growth in households with kids, the region is seeing an increasing demand for walkable, low-maintenance communities, conveniently located to shops, jobs and recreation. Where, how—and whether—we will meet this demand are the key questions for the future...”

What makes this framing effective? First, the pragmatic tone—there is nothing preachy or moralistic about the presentation. Nothing to suggest that the messenger has a particular political agenda.¹¹ Second, the use of a causal sequence—an interconnected string of cause and effect that explains how a problem or process works. Third, the invocation of a value—stewardship or responsible management of the future—that provides the lens through which we will view all the information that follows.

The authors also invented their own “simplifying model,” an analogy that helps to make a process concrete that might otherwise remain abstract:

“Zoning is the ‘DNA’ of our growth patterns, because it determines what is allowed to get built, and where. If misapplied, many of these regulations drive up prices and restrict the choices our citizens have in the type and cost of housing.”

Why is this good framing? It allows us to think very vividly about an abstract concept like “zoning.” And also because it makes the point that the outcome is “man made,” and therefore amenable to human solutions. Finally, it shows us the consequences of inaction.

What could these intuitive framers have learned from FrameWorks’ research findings? More attention to the value of ingenuity and more emphasis on solutions could have added even more frame power to this presentation, especially on policies related to development and zoning.

While this is a great example of good framing instincts, it helps to have a blueprint so that you know whether your instincts are trustworthy on any given topic. That’s the role of communications research.

greed of businessmen or the meddlesomeness of government—the chaos of markets or the scourge of planning—and when our scorn falls instead on private power that is willfully unmindful of the public interest and public power that neglects the importance of harnessing private initiative.”⁸

To realize the ambitious reframing goal that chambers have embraced, they will need to return to an old and powerful frame about American life in which the public square is populated by responsible managers, both public and private, who confer and collaborate on innovative options for improving our quality of life. In the *Book for the Citizens*, published by the **Cincinnati (OH) Chamber of Commerce** in 1916, this view of mutuality and interdependence was assumed to be cognitively accessible: “For the citizen who would know what his city was, what it is and how it became so; for the citizen who wants his city to grow better, who has ideals for its improvement, or who is seeking for such ideals; for the citizen who is willing, working with others, to help make Cincinnati a community which contributes the greatest possible good to each of its members.”⁹ To the degree that this goal sounds antiquated and naïve, there is frame repair work to be done.

As chamber executives take on that task, they should be aware both of what they need to do in the public square and how they need to explain these tasks so that the public comes along. Framing is not spinning, and communications is not a substitute for action. But the right frames, carefully chosen and applied, can help you talk the walk. ☐

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¹ See American Chamber of Commerce Executives (ACCE), “Chamber Image Campaign: Maximizing the Message,” 13 August 2005, http://acce.org/uploadedFiles/Chamber_Profession_Initiatives/MIToolKit.ppt, Accessed 10 April 2008.

² Nelson Polsby and Aaron Wildavsky, *Presidential Elections*, 7th Edition (New York: The Free Press, 1988), 1.

³ Stephen D. Reese, O. H. Gandy, Jr., and A. E. Grant, *Framing Public Life: Perspectives on Media and Our Understanding of the Social World*, (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associated, 2001), 11.

⁴ James N. Druckman, “On the Limits of Framing Effects: Who Can Frame?,” *The Journal of Politics* 63 (2001): 1042.

⁵ See FrameWorks Institute’s E-Zines series, especially #28 and #33, <http://www.frameworksinstitute.org/products/kids.shtml>, accessed 10 April 2008.

⁶ www.AdvancedStrategiesGroup.com in *The New York Times*, March 31, 2008: A5.

⁷ Robert B. Reich, *Tales of A New America*. (New York: Times Books, 1987).

⁸ *Ibid*, p. 250–251.

⁹ *The Citizens Book*, Cincinnati Chamber of Commerce, 1916.

¹⁰ Metro Atlanta Quality Growth Task Force, “How Can We Expand Choices, Slow Sprawl and Reduce Traffic?” undated pamphlet.

¹¹ For more on the effects of various messengers, see the FrameWorks Institute, “Framing Public Issues,” 2002, <http://www.frameworksinstitute.org/strategicanalysis/FramingPublicIssuesfinal.pdf>, Accessed 10 April 2008.