



A FrameWorks Institute eZine

Don't Think About Elephants: Avoid This Trap in Your Communications

Many people believe that the very structure of a conversation must be organized to "start where your audience starts." Research from the cognitive sciences suggests that this tactic is a trap, and is likely to result in your reinforcing old frames, not helping your audience appreciate new ones. What follows is a simple outline of the interaction between speaker and audience, using a traditional pattern of discourse. It is followed by a critique and a suggested reframing.

SPEAKER SAYS: Today I'm going to talk to you about the animals of Africa.

AUDIENCE THINKS: Animals of Africa? What do I know about animals of Africa? Not much. Any cues here for how to think about this?

SPEAKER SAYS: But I don't want you to think only of elephants.

AUDIENCE THINKS: Oh, yeah. They have elephants in Africa. Lots of elephants. I can now see elephants in Africa in my mind.

SPEAKER SAYS: Because it's really not about elephants. They are far less numerous than other species.

AUDIENCE THINKS: OK, there are lots of elephants. But also lots of something else.

SPEAKER SAYS: The animals that dominate Africa are really giraffes, not elephants.

AUDIENCE THINKS: Giraffes, huh? Yeah, I know what a giraffe looks like. Smaller than an elephant. I've had several minutes to think about elephants. And I've now got three elephants in my head (count them above), and only one giraffe. It's elephants I see when I close my eyes, not giraffes.

MORAL OF THE STORY: *When you give people immediate cues to help them*

conceptualize and categorize, you are then working uphill to displace that frame. That is especially true when you first reinforce what they already believe or are familiar with, then attempt to contest it.

WHAT THE SPEAKER SHOULD HAVE SAID: I want to talk to you about the animals of Africa, especially the giraffe, the most populous species on the continent. Giraffes abound in all parts of Africa, stretching their giant necks from South Africa to Chad, and from Guinea to Somalia. There are more giraffes per person in Africa than there are cars in California. And while other animals also abound - elephants, lions, tigers, zebras - there are four giraffes for all of these animals combined. Giraffes rule.

MORAL OF THIS STORY: *You have first conjured the image of the giraffe and made it highly visual before bringing in other animals. You have given people cues about "how many" giraffes there are and have given them two "social math" comparisons to bring it home. While you have acknowledged other animals, as you first set out to do in the original example, you have contextualized these animals so that we can dismiss them. And you have summed up your introduction with a clear statement that this is about giraffes.*

FALLING INTO THE ELEPHANT TRAP IN FRAMING CHILDREN'S ISSUES:

It's important to recognize standard advocacy practices or habits of speech that fall into the "elephants" category. Here are five examples FrameWorks sees in many child advocacy communications. In each case, we explain what's wrong and reframe.

EXAMPLE #1: "It's not just minority children who suffer from these problems but other children as well."

What's Wrong With This Framing?: You have first conjured up the image of minority children, then you come behind it with the far less vivid notion that it's also about "other" children, an "add on" that cannot compete with the first statement. Remember: once the audience has identified the story you are telling them (it's about minority kids), they stop processing information.

Reframe: (Assuming this is a widespread problem we are addressing, like children's oral health) Many children suffer from these problems: kids in neighborhoods like your own, kids in middle class and poor neighborhoods. Minority children are most likely to suffer from these problems.

EXAMPLE #2: Most people think that the reason kids can't get good day

care is because their parents don't have the right information to evaluate programs. In fact, there aren't enough good programs to choose from; it's a supply problem, not a demand problem.

What's Wrong With This Framing?: You've just reminded people of the frame they believe to be true, so you've reinforced their dominant frame. You thought you were using it as a "straw man," only to reveal that "it's not what you think it is." But once you've reminded people of the story they already believe explains the phenomenon, no amount of subsequent facts or substitute frames are likely to dislodge it.

Reframe: We have a supply problem in the day care industry, not a demand problem. Parents can't get access to quality day care because it doesn't exist. It is an insult to provide more and more consumer information to help parents tell the difference between bad and good day care, when there are so few good centers to begin with. We're sending parents on a wild goose chase, when we should be fixing the system.

EXAMPLE #3: Even though our state ranks 49th in the country, we still have some wonderful progress to share with you on several key indicators of child well-being.

What's Wrong With This Framing?: When you lead with a vivid image like ranking low on a ruler, the emotion evoked is likely to be a sense of hopelessness. You have conveyed "Big Problems" to the listener, and then you come in with "Small Progress."

Reframe: We are making some significant progress on a number of children's issues in this state. And that progress should inspire us to tackle more problems, and to bring solutions to scale in this state. We need to think of our state as the Little Engine that Could, and apply some determination to the problems children face.

EXAMPLE #4: You are all familiar with the pictures we see on the evening news of teenage superpredators, kids bringing guns to school, etc. But what you won't see is the fact that youth crime is actually down nationwide and in our state. Your teenager is much safer in school than driving home from school. Teens are much more likely to be the victims of highway accidents than they are to be victims of school shootings.

What's Wrong With This Framing?: In order to get the listener's attention, this communications resorts to sensationalism or familiarity. The essential positioning is: I'm going to talk to you about something you see all the time, instead of

something arcane. But by playing on the popular notion of teen perpetrators, you have conjured a very powerful model, an "elephant" that won't be easy to dismiss. After setting up the boogeyman, this communications then tries to reassure us. But in doing so, it tells us that our child is at risk for a different problem than the one we thought. Far from being reassuring, this just promotes the notion that all children are at risk for everything and likely produces a response of over-protection. Finally, by ending on the note of "school shootings," this communications trumps its own intended reframe by leaving the listener with exactly the image it set out to refute.

Reframe: As parents, our job is to figure out what obstacles and dangers our children are likely to encounter and to help prevent them. We need to pay more attention to highway safety, as it is here that teens are most likely to be at risk and it is here that we can make the biggest difference in personal actions and public policies to prevent harm.

EXAMPLE #5: I want to talk to you today about child poverty. And how it affects the lives of children in urban and rural areas, in working and welfare families, in single and two-parent families, and in many settings across America. There is no one face of a child in poverty.

What's Wrong With This Framing?: When you begin a communication by telling the listener what "this is about," you had better be very careful that the frame you deploy is not one that comes complete with many associated pictures, values and ideas. Child poverty in this communications acts as a prime, that is, it is such a powerful frame - so developed in people's minds - that it colors the rest of the communications. Despite what this speaker intended about diversifying the definition of child poverty, the image s/he has conjured up is likely to be inner city, African American children. Similarly, if we started a communication by saying "I want to talk to you about teenagers," FrameWorks research would suggest that we would be likely to prime the subsequent discussion with an image of silly, self-absorbed, lazy, materialistic kids - all part of the "teenager" frame. When you are trying to address an issue that comes with a highly developed frame (welfare, child care, bad parents, etc.), you may be better advised to come at it by avoiding that frame or substituting a frame that opens people up to a different way of thinking about that issue.

Reframe: As Americans, we believe that everyone should get a shot at the American dream - work that pays, owning a home, having enough to eat, raising our children in communities that are safe, getting an education. But many children start the race with a handicap. And that handicap happens early, even before our schools can help get kids on track for achievement. That handicap is poverty, and

the research tells us that it is sending too many of our children to school ill prepared to learn. A hungry child can't learn, and a child whose brain has not been stimulated early has a harder time learning in school. This handicap can be reversed, but we have to recognize how it affects children and how it denies them the chance of success that is so central to American values of opportunity and prosperity.

SO..before you put out a news release or frame a soundbite or draft a speech, ask yourself if you have any ELEPHANTS lurking in your communications!

About FrameWorks Institute: The FrameWorks Institute is an independent nonprofit organization founded in 1999 to advance science-based communications research and practice. The Institute conducts original, multi-method research to identify the communications strategies that will advance public understanding of social problems and improve public support for remedial policies. The Institute's work also includes teaching the nonprofit sector how to apply these science-based communications strategies in their work for social change. The Institute publishes its research and recommendations, as well as toolkits and other products for the nonprofit sector at www.frameworksinstitute.org.

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