



A FrameWorks Institute eZine

Frequently Asked Questions about Framing and FrameWorks

This eZine focuses on frequently asked questions about framing – the questions about the process that advocates find hard to put into practice, hard to explain to others – or both. *Strategic Frame Analysis*[™], developed at the FrameWorks Institute, uses a multi-disciplinary approach to analyze the public's deeply held worldviews and widely held assumptions in order to improve public understanding of social issues and support for collective solutions. We have tried to keep this eZine straight-forward and simple, distilling the advice that has been offered in previous eZines, toolkits and workshop materials.

Q: How is Strategic Frame Analysis different from other communications techniques focused on social policy, such as spinning, connecting with your audience, explaining, or confronting?

Strategic Frame Analysis[™] asks the following questions and develops answers based on a rigorous research process:

- How does the public think about a particular social or political issue?
- What is the public discourse on the issue? How is this discourse influenced by the way media frames that issue?
- How do these frames affect public choices?
- How can an issue be reframed to evoke a different way of thinking, one that illuminates a broader range of alternative policy choices?

Strategic Frame Analysis[™] offers policy advocates a way to work systematically through the challenges that are likely to confront the introduction of new legislation or social policies, to anticipate attitudinal barriers to support, and to develop research-based strategies to overcome public misunderstanding. This approach is strategic in that it not only deconstructs the dominant frames of reference that drive reasoning on public issues, but it also identifies those alternative frames most likely to stimulate public reconsideration and enumerates their elements (reframing). The contributions of social and cognitive science to Strategic Frame Analysis[™] – understanding how people construct meaning about their social worlds - makes FrameWorks' perspective unique among current schools of communications thinking.

Spinning is a term used by political communicators and public relations practitioners to describe the process of taking a position and calling it something else in order to distract the public or put one's opponent on the defensive. Spinning is an attempt to manipulate public opinion, rather than to educate people so that they might weigh options more realistically. This communications technique differs dramatically from framing both in its intent and its practice, and is not research or theory-based.

Connecting with your audience is a popular recommendation from public relations experts. "You have to start where your audience starts," they say, "or they won't trust that you understand the issue from their perspective." From a framing perspective, reminding the audience of what they already believe is rarely a good opener. You may succeed in connecting with your audience, and they may like what you have to say. However, once you've reminded them of what they already think about the issue, you will fight an uphill battle to invigorate alternative considerations/solutions.

Explaining an issue in depth, with all the details familiar to experts, is a common communications approach. It assumes that there is a "tipping point," at which the listeners will finally have enough information or will receive the one "silver bullet fact" that will change their minds. This leads to lengthy dissertations on issues, with no big ideas, no values, no simplifying models or metaphors, just the facts. What this technique ignores is that, without organizing the information within an appropriate framework, people will simply default to the frame most familiar to them when confronted these statistics and information. There are no frameless transactions. Either you frame, your opposition frames, or people's minds will frame the raw material based on their default understandings and habits of thinking.

Confronting people with facts that dispute their positions or with highly charged rhetoric to frighten or shame people into changing their minds is an often used and rarely successful tactic of advocacy communications. If the tone of the communication is argumentative, it is even more likely to reinforce the partisan or ideological beliefs that the listener holds. (For more about tone, please see eZine Issue 17, "Taking Tone Seriously as a Frame Cue.")

<http://www.frameworksinstitute.org/products/issue17framing.shtml>)

Q: Don't we need to have different messages for different audiences? Business, the general public, issue supporters, etc. each need their own message, right?

Our work at FrameWorks is grounded in an understanding of public opinion formation. As our colleague, Stanford political psychologist Shanto Iyengar, has written, "The media sets the public agenda which, in turn, sets the policy agenda."

Most people don't think about most social issues most of the time, as political scientists Nelson Polsby and Aaron Wildavsky have observed. But when they do, they tend to think about them in the same ways, following a finite set of frames. This constitutes the language or cultural narrative of a particular social issue. The goal of our

communications efforts is to influence that story in such a way that specific policy solutions become a *natural* part of people's thinking. This requires influencing the culture, not marketing a specific message to a particular audience. You want to invigorate an existing but latent pattern that advantages your policy solutions. Alternatively, you might want to tell a new story that seems natural to people but also forces them to re-examine their old dominant pattern of thinking.

That said, in addition to the dominant cultural models available to everyone, certain subgroups *will* have other strong ideas available to them. Research tells us that Native Americans, for example, have a more developed sense of interdependence; and business executives have more understanding of risks and cost-benefits. Communications can be nuanced to certain groups to take advantage of their particular cultural understandings. But this is literally a nuance – the same frame and the same story needs to be in place across these groups if you are to change the culture toward your way of thinking. Effective framers talk about Global Warming as requiring stewardship of our earth's resources when they address a religious audience, and as requiring responsible management with a business audience – but it's the same frame.

In our opinion, few, if any, organizations have the luxury of supporting multiple messages on a social issue. You need to unify your message, not dilute it, and you need to teach it to masses of people so that it is reinforced in daily conversation and in the media. If you have conflicting messages, you can never dethrone the dominant frame.

Q: The people we need to convince are legislators and policy makers. Isn't what works with them different than what works with the general public?

FrameWorks has conducted several years of research among elected officials. The results of this research clearly underscore the importance of public opinion in providing politicians with the "safe space" to initiate policy and forge bipartisan consensus. Put simply, unless an issue appears to be on the public agenda, most public officials will not address it. The media end up setting the public agenda, and are often read by policy makers as a proxy for public opinion. Moreover, unless an issue is framed in highly memorable ways, most officials will default to the dominant frame and partisan positions. In the highly oral and immediate culture they inhabit, politicians lack the ability to learn new issues in new ways. The goal of framing research is to identify reframes that can be transported from the public to its elected officials.

FrameWorks' research is oriented to influential community members. In our qualitative work, we typically look for informants who are active in community organizations, who have expressed an opinion on a social issue to an elected official, and who are highly attentive to the news media, in other words, people who are the "first responders" to ideas in their communities, and who are likely to be those who convey and shape these ideas within their communities and to their elected leaders. We do this because this group is essential to elevating an issue in public discourse and building the public will to engage policymakers, so we need to understand how their thinking is informed.

Q: Where do Level One Values come from and how can we do a better job of coming up with them?

Many social and cognitive scientists have asserted the power of “big ideas” or as we know them, Level One Values, to provide the organizing principles on which people reach decisions about everything from policy preferences to child-rearing practices, an assertion that FrameWorks supports. In contrast, the “rational choice model” assumes that people use one predominant value – self-interest – as the lens on most actions. (For more background, see FrameWorks eZine #28, “What’s Wrong with Rational Choice?” <http://www.frameworksinstitute.org/products/issue28framing.shtml>.) From the perspective of the cognitive sciences, whether innate or learned, the Level One Values are nevertheless “in” us; they are habitual and culturally shared. When you connect with them, you tap into familiar patterns of higher-level reasoning.

The beauty of this approach is that Level One Values should be available to the widest array of people; they are the “language” of ideals. The difficulty is that policy advocates often equate “values” with “moralism”; they feel more comfortable talking about asset development or tax credits than they do talking about opportunity. Another stumbling block to Level One identification comes from the closed nature of some advocacy communities. When everyone you know thinks School Readiness or Child Abuse is a “big idea” and can converse about it fluidly, it is easy to forget that most of the public does not share this view.

You can enumerate Level One ideas in a number of ways. You can use the list from the “Framing Public Issues” guide to get started: *freedom, justice, choice, responsibility, stewardship, opportunity, future*, etc.

(<http://www.frameworksinstitute.org/strategicanalysis/FramingPublicIssuesfinal.pdf>).

You can observe the way that issues are being framed in politics and the news. You can try out a few Level One Values with your neighbors and non-expert associates and see how they react.

Q: I still don’t get Level Two – what's that all about?

When we talk about Level Two, we are more focused on issue categories, and how an issue is categorized in people’s minds is critical to informing their thinking about policies. Let’s use oral health as an example - if advocates begin by talking about good oral health from the standpoint of providing an opportunity (a Level One Value) for all children to succeed in school, you have incorporated a Level Two issue area (*education*), which will logically lead to policy solutions such as increasing dental services provided in schools. Without considering that you have choices about Level Two messages, you might automatically assume that oral health is simply a *health* issue (or even a *dental* issue) and miss an opportunity to invigorate important policy options. How an issue is categorized in people’s minds is critical in informing their thinking about policies.

Q: Does FrameWorks believe that there is only one way to frame an issue?

Usually, the way the public thinks about a particular social issue is already monolithic – this is part of the problem that advocates must address. The research and practice of framing is not so much about finding the one perfect way to talk about an issue, but to open up people’s minds to new ways of thinking, to give them more conceptual options about a particular issue so that they can make thoughtful and informed policy decisions.

Our research usually identifies several potential reframes for a specific policy area. Some of these reframes are stronger than others, and some reframes actually hurt advocates’ messages, hardening already formed beliefs and opinions even further. By the end of the research process, we are able to determine which reframes will likely be most successful in advancing policy goals, along with some additional frame components, such as a strong simplifying model, that will contribute to a more complete public discussion of public policy options.

Q: Remind me again...why shouldn’t I tell personal stories? The media wants them, legislators love them, and I think they can really touch people’s hearts.

Public relations experts commonly advise advocates to communicate their messages through vivid case stories. Materials from advocates are devoted to the heroic struggles of individual clients who have triumphed in the face of great odds. The accompanying pictures routinely depict the hopeful faces of the downtrodden and neglected. However, scientific research shows that, if this technique works at all, it probably doesn't work the way advocates think it does.

There are three primary reasons why this kind of storytelling doesn’t work to promote policy solutions to social problems:

"Not all examples are good examples" — distortion effects. People tend to generalize from the example you present, and to overestimate the extent to which the specific situation portrayed occurs in the overall population.

"Can't see the forest for the trees" — episodic framing. Episodic frames are those that focus on discrete events happening to specific people at particular places and times. The more vivid the examples, the more likely they are to draw the audience to miss structural and environmental causes and conditions. In contrast, we are trying to get people to understand social issues in a “thematic” way, focusing on the trends, context, and broader societal forces that underlie the problem.

The "Cosby Effect" — invigorating global stereotypes. Advocates must be extremely careful not to activate a global and/or negative stereotype when utilizing exemplary examples of individual successes. In other words, when people see a successful depiction counter to the prevailing stereotype (such as a successful, middle-class African-American

family like the one shown in the popular 80's television show about the Cosby family) it does not map onto their thinking about other members of the group. On the contrary, research shows that people are left wondering what's wrong with those who do not live up to the example, and the existing stereotypes are actually reinforced.

Three questions to ask before you use a vivid case example are:

1. Is the case I would choose, or the press would be drawn to, likely to result in a distortion of my broader policy goals?
2. Is the case likely to narrow the discussion away from themes and systems to individual characteristics of particular people, or likely to set up a charity response?
3. Is the case connected in any way to global stereotypes associated with the issue, and thus likely to backfire?

This doesn't mean that you can't tell stories about people. There are many powerful stories of cause and effect, environmental conditions, and policy solutions that are often neglected in the focus on vivid case examples. Much of FrameWorks material is devoted to teaching about how to tell stories that will actually accomplish your goals and change how people think about your issue. This kind of storytelling is more difficult to do at first, but will ultimately result in the communications outcomes we seek.

(For more information about the dangers of vivid case examples, please see FrameWorks eZine Number 33, "Vivid Examples: What They Mean and Why You Should Be Careful Using Them." <http://www.frameworksinstitute.org/products/issue33framing.shtml>)

Q: What is the difference between Strategic Frame Analysis and Social Marketing?

Social marketing is generally used to reach behavioral goals, whereas Strategic Frame Analysis™ focuses on the potential of communications to build public will to further social change. In general, we believe that the science with which we study the communications of social issues differs markedly from the science applied to electoral politics and product marketing.

While social marketing may be effective for changing individual behavior (getting people to exercise more, stop smoking, give blood, etc.), it is not the best approach to build public support for policy change. Given the fact that efforts to address social issues involve long time-lines, do not entail a "point of purchase" decision, and require acceptance of their "public" or collective nature (i.e. they are not assailable by private actions alone), they require communications strategies that are particular to public policies.

Q: Very few organizations focus on policy change as the only lever for change. We might work on policy change but we also work on individual behavior change or market-based change to give consumers different choices. We are looking for a message to overarch all of our work, not one that works only on policy change. Does

this mean we need a different approach for our individual work and another for our policy work?

FrameWorks research and materials focus on changing the public conversation about social problems. Our research has found that, for many issues, the public already holds an individual-level understanding of the problem. Actually, it's the public and policy levels that people have more difficulty articulating. People tend to attribute *all* the causes and the solutions to a social problem to the individual (or sometimes the family), and have great difficulty incorporating other players into solutions, such as policymakers, community members, schools or other public institutions.

Another way to think about this question is to consider that even individual behavior change or market-based change happens in a larger environment. If you are going to create an environment supportive of individual behavior change, you need a public that has a better understanding of the causes of, and solutions to, a problem, including the ways that the environment and community interact with and support individual behavior choices. Too often, these causal links are simply not there in public thinking.

Q: I really appreciate your approach and I think I grasp the basic principles, but it doesn't seem like you've done any research on my particular issue. Now what?

Everyone involved in communicating about social issues can learn to pay attention to the dominant public conversation about their issue. Notice how your issue is discussed in the national and local media. Pay attention to the kind of language you hear at public presentations, radio call-in shows, conversations with policy makers, and at Thanksgiving with your Uncle Phil.

Developing strong Level One frames is also useful regardless of the specific policy issue. Don't be afraid to brainstorm the values you want to inform people's thinking as they come to your issue. At the same time, a warning to the framer: not all Level Ones work to set up your policies. That is why FrameWorks does research – to test the impact of the frames. In the absence of this research, ask yourself these questions:

- ⌚ What value is most likely to help people see the issue in a way that sets up solutions?
- ⌚ What value brings the most people on board?
- ⌚ What are the consequences of reasoning in this value frame – are there any negative consequences of the frame choice?
- ⌚ Can you easily see the issue from this value, or is it contorted?
- ⌚ Is the value easy to iterate and adapt to different Level Three Policies and different audiences? If not, go back to the drawing board. You don't have the time or the resources to support many Level Ones.

Also, much of our research about the elements of the frame – messenger, tone, visuals, etc. - would improve communication efforts about most social issues. And many of the

techniques we teach – e.g. using social math, bridging, developing simplifying models and causal sequences, not rebutting the opponent’s argument, etc. – would be good strategies for advocates to use across the board on every issue. Our eZines, on-line workshops and ToolKits are a valuable resource for developing your skills on these topics.

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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