



A FrameWorks Institute eZine

Testing Frames, Talking Frames: Framing as Experiment and as Execution

Advocates sometimes find it hard to navigate the cusp of framing as science and framing as art. The way frames are tested in the laboratory should not be confused with the way that advocates need to execute them in the field. This eZine explains the difference between these two aspects of framing with the goal of helping communicators work confidently and creatively from FrameWorks' research recommendations.

- *Framing as Experiment* refers to the way that FrameWorks Institute tests different frame elements in its multi-method iterative process of cultural models interviews, media content analyses, peer discourse sessions, simplifying models development and experimental surveys. It is over the course of this process that different ways of framing an issue emerge as ineffective or effective, based on their ability to move public thinking toward policy and program support.
- *Framing as Execution* refers to the way that advocates who inherit FrameWorks recommendations make use of the research reports, summary MessageMemo, framing toolkits and eWorkshops to create new materials that intentionally incorporate the recommended frame elements. In these materials, the goal is to use the reframes as a kind of roadmap or outline and to nuance their application according to the task or audience at hand.

Both aspects of framing require careful attention to, and manipulation of, frame elements¹: values, messengers, tone, simplifying models, visuals, causal chains, social math, etc. The confusion emerges because framing as experiment is necessarily reductionist – each frame element is tested in isolation from the others – while framing as execution is profoundly additive, as messages gain force from the synergistic arrangement of mutually supportive frame elements.

¹ For more on elements of the frame, see the explanation of Strategic Frame Analysis™ at: <http://www.frameworksinstitute.org/perspective.html> There are also framing digests on particular elements of the frame, which can be found here: <http://www.frameworksinstitute.org/ezines.html>

FrameWorks believes, based on results across the issues tested in our research, that different frame elements accomplish different cognitive tasks. Values, for example, have a profound effect on policy support. Simplifying Models may not affect policy support as much as inoculate against bad policies because of their concretizing effect in filling a missing “hole” in thinking. Messengers credential the frame and help people see it as being knowledgeable and unbiased. Thus, in testing frames, it is important to hold each element accountable to its potential contribution to the whole. FrameWorks has sometimes been puzzled by low performance in quantitative tests of frame elements that we observe to work powerfully in conversation; this is because we have been testing them for the wrong impacts. As our own practice has evolved, we have become more sensitive to the precise contribution that each frame element makes to the message and have found ways to isolate and focus our tests to reveal these effects.

But this realization requires researchers to strip out any conflation among frame elements during testing. If you want to discover the impact of a Value, for example, you cannot incorporate a Messenger into the paragraph you propose to test or you run the risk of not knowing whether the Value worked because it was powerful or because the Messenger contributed to it. Similarly, you can’t incorporate examples into the Values frames or you run the risk of contaminating people’s policy support; if you get people to think about Prosperity, but you use examples from banking and workforce, you might find that the value worked to make people more cynical about policy reforms. That would not be an indictment of your Value so much as confusion in your execution; we just wouldn’t know what affects what – the whole purpose of the experimental method. Alternatively, if examples are absolutely necessary to flesh out the Values, then the same set of examples need to be used across all the treatments tested, so the dampening or elevating effect of the examples is uniform. So FrameWorks “scrubs the treatments,” reviewing each version we take into testing (a treatment) to ensure that it speaks as directly as possible to one frame element.

This explains the somewhat contorted version of the Values frames we report back in our research findings. For example, here are two Values frames as tested in a food and fitness experiment sponsored by the California Endowment and W.K. Kellogg Foundation:

Ingenuity

Lately there has been a lot of talk about social conditions in America. Some people believe that [we as a society are not devoting enough attention to effective policies and programs](#) that would get American communities in good shape. According to this view, [smart states have been able to build communities](#) where people can breathe healthy air, exercise safely and conveniently, and get nutritious foods. [These innovative investments](#) have significantly improved conditions by raising school test scores, improving physical fitness and workforce participation in these areas. Please tell us if you have heard this particular explanation of why we should allocate societal resources to [creating better solutions](#) to improve conditions that shape the quality of life in American communities. And do you agree with this notion of a [solutions](#) orientation to improving social conditions in America?

Prevention

Lately there has been a lot of talk about social conditions in America. Some people believe that

[we should prevent further damage](#) to our nation’s quality of life by helping American communities get in good shape. According to this view, preventing unhealthy air quality, increasing safety and convenience in environments where people exercise, and increasing regular access to nutritious foods would save money and lives in the long run. [And, by devoting more resources to addressing these problems before they become even more serious](#), we may be able to reverse declining school test scores, improve physical fitness and workforce participation. Please tell us if you have heard this particular explanation of why we should allocate societal resources to [preventing](#) negative conditions that shape the quality of life in American communities. And do you agree with this notion of a [prevention](#) orientation to improving social conditions in America?

What is notable about these experimental treatments?

First, the logical role of Messenger is reduced to the bland phrasing “some people believe” – great for experiments, disastrous for executions in the field.

Second, the idea that constitutes the Value is reduced to a handful of words that vary in the generally uniform construction of the frame. A necessary purity in experiments, but admittedly lacking in creativity for field execution.

Third, there are no helping frame elements to be found here – no social math, no simplifying model, etc. The treatment is a highly distilled version of a single idea: the Value. As such, it constitutes a good starting place for executing the Value frame, but a skilled communicator could figure out how to get many more frame elements into this paragraph quickly and powerfully.

What should communicators take away from this experimental treatment? The essence of the Value, the idea being executed, and the numerous ways to drive home the central premise:

- **Ingenuity:** Smart states and communities have been able to implement effective policies and programs that would get American communities in good shape.
- **Prevention:** We should prevent further damage to our nation's quality of life by helping American communities get in good shape, saving money and lives in the long run.

While naming the Value is important, and repeating that Value helps, in execution you can add numerous examples (historic, local, issue-specific) to illustrate the idea. This is what the Union of Concerned Scientists did when they infused the idea of Ingenuity with the examples of the Manhattan Project and the Apollo Program (see www.ucsusa.org/global_warming/global_warming101/common-sense-solution-5.html). Making Values realize their power, by infusing them with examples that resonate for your audience is a key creative challenge that communicators can and should tackle. Moreover, this is an appropriate place to bring in other elements of the frame. For the values above, one might ask: What Messengers would drive home the ideas of Ingenuity and/or Prevention? Business entrepreneurs and pediatricians, for example?

This treatment scrubbing also applies to the way FrameWorks tests its simplifying models, i.e.

they are contorted to allow for rigorous comparability in the laboratory. The task of the communicator is, again, to resuscitate them from this rigidity by aligning them with other frame elements. Here are two treatments of simplifying models tested in the FrameWorks survey experiments on food and fitness:

Public Structures

Now I'd like to ask you a question about a term in the news. Experts have observed that every town, neighborhood and region in America can be evaluated in terms of its **Public Structures**. These include, for example, adequate transportation, markets with healthy foods, and schools with physical fitness requirements. Without these structures, however, **community success is undermined**. **When they are well maintained, they form a kind of machinery that makes it possible for Americans to maintain their health and quality of life**. **When we improve the Public Structures** in a place, the health of the people who live and work there improves as well. Please tell me if you have heard of **Public Structures**. Does this idea of **maintaining Public Structures** make sense to you?

Food and Fitness Environment

Now I'd like to ask you a question about a term in the news. Experts say that every town, neighborhood and region in America can be evaluated in terms of its **Food and Fitness Environment**. Where we live or work is one of the most important things determining whether we end up fit and healthy or not. **When people do not have access to a healthy environment or opportunities to make healthier choices, they have worse health and a lower quality of life**. **When we improve these Food and Fitness Environments** by creating adequate transportation, markets with healthy foods, and schools with physical fitness requirements, the health of the people who live and work there improves as well. Please tell me if you have heard of the **Food and Fitness Environment**.

What is notable about these experimental treatments?

First, the important confirming role of Messenger is reduced to the generic "experts say." Does this mean you have to align every simplifying model with some expert? No. In fact, some models and values perform better when they are aligned with ordinary people. This phrasing is merely an artifact of the laboratory condition.

And, as in the Value example above, the difference between these two simplifying models is reduced to a handful of words and isolated from any helping frame elements. Again, once communicators have the essence of the model well in mind, they can and should begin to figure out ways to make it even more vivid by using local examples and imagery. Communicators should also tease out the consequences of the models via clear causal chains – or explanations of causes and consequences. The important consideration here is to ensure that the examples are consonant with the central premise of the simplifying model.

In both of the simplifying model treatments above, there are a series of characteristics that are absolutely imperative to faithful executions of the model:

- The problem is structural.
- Access to the normative structures shapes outcomes.

- Attention is drawn away from individuals and groups, their internal motivation or external characteristics.
- The answer requires collective, not individual, action.
- The solution is to repair and maintain vital structures and reconnect communities with them.

Can I make up my own simplifying model, advocate ask us? The simple answer to this question is no (For more on the theoretical reasons that inform this conclusion, see www.frameworksinstitute.org/ezine37.html). While many candidate simplifying models emerge from experts' and advocates' communications (colony collapse disorder, brain chemistry, complete streets), it is in the testing and refinement of metaphorical constructs like this that FrameWorks learns what works to accomplish what objective and how it works to do that. FrameWorks routinely involves several thousand informants in the winnowing process to isolate effective simplifying models. First, FrameWorks researchers identify a series of serious "cognitive holes" where expert understanding of key socio-political or scientific phenomena is greatly at variance with lay understanding. Linguists are brought in to develop candidate models in several of these categories. On-the-street interviews are conducted to see how these models fare when informants are asked to explain, apply and remember these candidate simplifying models. The models that seem most effective at bridging the gap between expert and lay understanding, as well as those that can be "fixed" to get rid of derailing cues, are taken into experimental survey research where they are tested for: comprehension, application, policy inoculation, attribution of responsibility and other important aspects of impact. Finally, the emergent models are taken back into talk back testing sessions – in which participants learn and then teach the simplifying models to other individuals - to ensure their communicability and to refine them colloquially. This is a laborious and costly process – but, at the end of the day, when FrameWorks recommends, "use this simplifying model," we can stand behind the recommendation and demonstrate how it serves to plug those cognitive holes observed earlier.

Many a candidate simplifying model hoped to constitute a "silver bullet" among FrameWorks' researchers has found its way into the "graveyard of framing hypotheses" as a result of these tests. There are complex entailments or consequences of the metaphors that often do not surface until one observes the associations that ordinary people make. The short videos that are included in some of FrameWorks' issue toolkits are abbreviated examples of a more lengthy process in which many candidate models are explored and rejected or refined.

Is there room for creativity in any aspect of executing simplifying models? Absolutely. The simplifying models that emerge from testing can be further illustrated by nuancing them for particular contexts, or aligning them with messengers. One example of such nuance emerges from our work with health care advocates in Arizona and subsequently in Texas. One simplifying model that had emerged from FrameWorks research was the idea of Missing Pillars:

In our communities, as in our health care system, we are all pillars that hold up the structure. When people cannot participate, the burden of holding up the structure falls on fewer and fewer of us. By shutting people out, we become weaker, not stronger. This is what has happened in our health care system, where people who are dropped from the system can no longer contribute to the overall structure. We need to get them back in the

system, not shut them out.

This model had the advantage of helping people understand that as more and more people are forced out of the coverage system the system as whole is weakened. Costs of coverage go up for everyone, and eventually the infrastructure of health care itself suffers. Rather than drawing attention to the growing pool of uninsured people, the paragraph shifts the focus to the diminishing pool of payers. The Arizona Ecumenical Council found this idea to be synergistic with communications they were already using about shared responsibility. So they married the model to a Biblical reference, “When Moses was too tired, he shared the responsibility with 50 elders (Exodus 18:13-27)”:

We are taught in scripture that rugged individualism does not lead to health, but a sharing community does. In our communities, as in our health care system, we are all pillars that hold up the structure. When people cannot participate, the burden of holding up the structure falls on fewer and fewer of us. By shutting people out, we become weaker, not stronger. This is what has happened in our health care system, where people who are dropped from the system can no longer contribute to the overall structure. We need to get them back in the system, not shut them out.

Finally, the way FrameWorks tests Messengers leaves much creativity to be applied in the field. As with other frame elements, to test the impact of Messengers, we have to scrub the tests of all but that difference. In our research on global warming in Canada, for example, the following treatment was ascribed to a Scientist, an Ordinary Citizen and an Environmentalist:

“_____ like me are convinced that global warming is a problem we must and can address,” says John M. Smythe, _____ who took part in a recent town meeting in Perth, Ontario. “When you understand how global warming works, and what solutions are available to us, you want to do all you can to get Canada started on the right path to reducing global warming....”

We then aligned each Messenger treatment with a Value to see how the synergies between Values and Messengers shaped up. Put simply, the only difference in this test was the identification of the Messenger. The results are striking.

- The Citizen messenger increased global warming policy support in conjunction with Stewardship, but decreased support when combined with the Kyoto Accord. This makes sense, given what we know about Messengers as frame elements; ordinary people were seen as knowledgeable and credible about the Value of stewarding the planet but not about the intricacies of an international treaty.
- The Environmentalist messenger increased support in conjunction with a Value that stated that Science should drive sound policy. The Environmentalist messenger decreased support when combined with a Crisis treatment. Given that our Scientist Messenger did not show positive effects on policies when combined with the Science value, we concluded that this represents what is often referred to as an “unlikely messenger,” as the Environmentalist is expected to talk Crisis but instead delivers a more practical and pragmatic appeal for global warming policies. One might infer here that Tone is also at work here.

What should communicators conclude from these framing tests?

First, choice of Messenger is a key consideration in executing a frame. But the creativity comes in breaking out of the narrow construction that inhibits FrameWorks in the testing, and aligning the Values and other frame elements to more suitably support the Messenger. Messages about Ingenuity and Prevention should sound different when executed by business leaders, ordinary people, physicians and community leaders. It falls to communicators to figure out how to execute a frame with frame elements that bolster that Messenger's unique experience, expertise and vision while remaining true to the central premises captured in the FrameWorks' recommendations on Values, Visuals, Simplifying Models, etc.

In sum, the FrameWorks research deconstructs the relative contributions of frame elements – Values, Messengers, Simplifying Models, etc – and provides guidance on what needs to be packed into those elements, and what needs to be avoided. Following this identification, communicators can work from an outline that suggests an embryonic narrative:

- The reason we need to care about this issue as a society is (Value).
- The way this problem works is (Simplifying Model, Messenger, Visual).
- Here's how big this problem/solution is (Social Math).
- What prevents it from working as it should is (Simplifying Model, Messenger, Visual).
- The consequences for society if left unchecked are (Causal Chains).
- The potential benefits for society if repaired, maintained, etc. are (Causal Chains, Simplifying Model, Messenger).
- Here are the solutions that experts recommend (Messenger).

In each part of this narrative, FrameWorks research can provide important do's and don'ts that can determine the success or failure of the story as a whole. But it is in the execution of this narrative, drawing from the situation in which it is to be delivered, that communicators can turn the Cliff's Notes into a bestseller.

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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