



A FrameWorks Institute FrameByte Order Matters

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. In short, order matters. In this FrameByte, we will look at the importance of how messages are ordered in your communications, and review a new research study that cautions against using the common "myth/fact" format to share information. (For a discussion about the importance of order in communications, see the FrameWorks E-Zine "Don't Think About Elephants", at www.frameworksinstitute.org.)

There are several important things to remember when you are organizing your communications. First of all, frames about social issues are powerful and durable. Once a frame is established in people's minds, it will crowd out subsequent frames, especially if it is a dominant or highly accessible frame. This means that it is important to lead with your reframe, and not wait until the end of your document or conversation to bring it up.

Secondly, rebutting is not the same as reframing. When you restate a commonly held belief followed by contrary information, the latter is not sufficient to establish a new frame. For example:

In the early 1990s, New Hampshire, like many other states, was gripped by fears of teenage "super predators" amid surging juvenile violence. But monsters failed to materialize, and the national juvenile murder arrest rate dropped 68 percent from 1993 through 1999, reaching its lowest level since 1966, according to the U.S. Department of Justice..("Seventeen an Awkward Age, NH Juvenile Justice Finds." Washington Post, March 27, 2002.)

By playing on the popular notion of teen perpetrators, you have conjured a very powerful model that won't be easy to dismiss. It will certainly not stick in readers' heads that the national juvenile murder arrest rate has dropped.

Communicators often use a "Myth/Fact" format in an attempt to address the dominant beliefs in the public's mind. However, cognitive science research shows that using this format does not effectively convey new information to readers.

As reported in the article "Persistence of Myths Could Alter Public Policy Approach," By Shankar Vedantam, (Washington Post, September 4, 2007) University of Michigan social psychologist Norbert Schwarz recruited volunteers to read a flyer from the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) containing a series of myths and facts about the flu vaccine.

For example:

“Myth: The flu shot can cause the flu.

Fact: The flu shot cannot cause the flu. Some people get a little soreness or redness where they get the shot. It goes away in a day or two.”

According to the article, Schwarz “found that within 30 minutes, older people misremembered 28% of the false statements as true. Three days later, they remembered 40% of the myths as factual. Younger people did better at first, but three days later they made as many errors as older people did after 30 minutes. Most troubling was that people now felt that the source of their false beliefs was the CDC.”

The reason that this myth/fact format is ineffective is because people do not absorb information in a deliberate manner; the brain uses subconscious "rules of thumb" that can bias it into thinking that false information is true. Research suggests that once an idea has been implanted in people's minds, it can be difficult to dislodge. As the article notes, “Denials inherently require repeating the bad information, which may be one reason they can paradoxically reinforce it.”

A much more effective way to communicate your message is to start by articulating your frame. It is completely unnecessary and, in fact, counter-productive to repeat the dominant frame that is already operating in people’s minds.

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