



Environmental Health Toolkit:
A Brief Intro to Strategic Frame Analysis

Promoting Meaningful and Robust Conversations about Environmental Health: Strategic communications to advance the field

As the National Environmental Health Partnership Council points out, “there is strong and growing evidence that links the places and conditions where we live our lives—our playgrounds, child care facilities, workplaces, homes, schools and neighborhoods—to the modern challenges associated with preventing and managing disease,” but the general public lacks understanding of the issue and what’s at stake. Practitioners across the spectrum of the environmental health field recognize that talking with the public about the important, but often invisible, work of fostering strong environmental health is critical to the wellbeing of all of our nation’s communities.

Those conversations can’t wait—yet at the same time, beginning them can feel difficult or even daunting. Strategic Frame Analysis™, an evidence-based approach to communications on complex social and scientific issues developed by the FrameWorks Institute, is one way that environmental health practitioners across the country have begun to build public awareness. For example, strategic framing is part of the American Public Health Association’s efforts to provide its member and partner organizations’ leadership and staff with proven communications techniques, so they can build a national discourse about environmental health that is more informed, more urgent, and more focused on meaningful solutions. Communicators trained in this approach learn to make intentional, research-based choices about how to frame these issues for members of the public—how to start, what to emphasize, what to leave unsaid, and how to make an understanding of environmental health issues as “sticky,” or memorable, as possible. As a result, practitioners trained in strategic framing develop the confidence to communicate about the impact of their work on Americans’ health and wellbeing.

To this end, APHA sponsored a series of studies that distilled a set of important concepts and messages that environmental health leaders and experts believe are critical to move into the public square; charted the landscape of public thinking and media narratives that communicators should consider in crafting messages; and used quantitative and qualitative research methods to empirically identify the most reliable, consistent, and powerful ways of reframing the conversation on environmental health issues. A brief overview of some of the resulting framing recommendations and tools are included in this article. The research behind these recommendations draws on social science theory and involved extensive testing throughout the US; researchers analyzed more than 350 media stories and 85 scholarly articles, surveyed 4,400 registered voters, and interviewed dozens of experts and nearly 175 members of the public.

If You Can Predict, You Can Prepare

The first step to becoming a strategic framer is to recognize that the public will bring a strong set of assumptions to bear on information about environmental health and related issues. These assumptions have implications for environmental health policy options that are “easy to think” and “hard to think.” Put another way: these perceptions have the power to limit the public’s support for measures to improve people’s access to good environmental health. It is imperative therefore that communicators know the public’s default patterns of thinking as they begin to engage their fellow citizens on the topic of environmental health—their default understanding about what it is, how it works, who’s responsible for it, and how it can be improved. Communicators need to be especially attentive to these cultural models when they want to talk about policies and regulations that create the conditions for good environmental health:

Black Box of Environmental Health

A critical point to bear in mind is that a majority of Americans are unfamiliar with the term “environmental health” and when asked to think about it, tend to default to the more familiar but separate terrains of environmentalism and health care. Although Americans express concern about environmental health *threats*, which they conceive of in terms of contaminants, they are less likely to think about environmental health *work*. As a result, efforts by environmental health professionals to protect the public from environmental health hazards such as air, water, and ground pollution, unsafe built structures, and foodborne illness often fly under citizens’ radar. Consequently, their work is often taken for granted or misunderstood.

Determinist Thinking about Environmental Health

Americans across the ideological spectrum default to the assumption that poor environmental health is the unfortunate but inescapable consequence of modernity. This “price of progress” model of thinking about environmental health hazards limits the public’s ability to engage in solutions-oriented thinking about these problems or to imagine what role communities might play in promoting and protecting good environmental health. When solutions do enter the conversation, the emphasis falls on remediation rather than prevention.

Health Individualism

In discussing issues related to environmental health work, the public employs a “distributed model of responsibility,” locating responsibility with government, businesses, and individuals. However, while the public expects government to provide reliable information and take protective regulatory action, public discussion about environmental health consistently returns to steps individuals must take to increase their awareness and improve their decision-making. This hyper-focus on individual choice and personal action is partially attributable to the pervasive media narrative in which regulation comes at the expense of economic prosperity, pitting government and business against each other and encouraging people to default to individual-level solutions.

Changing the Conversation

One takeaway from the preceding overview of dominant patterns of thinking is that communicators should avoid activating these cultural models. For instance, highlighting an individual's story about a waterborne illness to talk about environmental health work would only reinforce these patterns of thinking. When the public is reasoning from these highly familiar, chronically accessible mental shortcuts, collective, preventive solutions to environmental health problems are “harder to think.” However, that doesn't mean that advocates for change should give up on engaging the public—in fact, FrameWorks believes quite the opposite. When advocates have an intentional, evidence-based strategy for shaping public discourse and guiding conversations with the public, communicators can circumnavigate these top-of-mind cultural models and move toward recessive beliefs that are “in there somewhere” but need to be pulled out through strategic framing.

Below we outline a handful of key framing techniques that will help communicators engage with the public about environmental health work and its relationship to public health.

Practical Tools for Effective Environmental Health Communications

Strategic Frame Analysis™ points to three powerful reframing tools—Values, Explanatory Metaphors, and Solutions—that help the public to understand why our communities' environmental health is important, how a diverse group of professionals tend to it on our behalf, what that work looks like, and what role the public might play in addressing it.

Using Values to Establish What's at Stake

Values, or broad ideals about what's desirable and good, act as a starting point on a topic, guiding attitudes, reasoning and decisions that follow. Opening communications with a value can orient people's thinking on the topic, setting up for success in the interaction that follows. Among several values that FrameWorks tested experimentally, *Fairness Across Places* showed broad appeal. These values descriptions capture the essence of the idea; they aren't intended to be used verbatim.

Fairness Across Places

We need to make sure that all Americans, regardless of their ZIP code, have the opportunity to live in healthy communities.

Values can be used to open conversations about local projects to improve community health (“*How we move through the world directly affects our health; in some neighborhoods, safe pedestrian paths encourage people to walk more, which reduces the number of vehicles on the road and improves air quality. If more of our neighborhoods were walkable, we would all benefit.*”) Or, they might be called upon to expand narrow thinking about environmental

threats (“Yes, water quality is one important environmental health concern, but have you thought about the ways our whole environment affects us every day? Enforced building codes, plenty of public transportation, and readily available, safe, healthy food all play a role in good environmental health, but many neighborhoods lack these basic supports—and that can negatively affect the wellbeing of those who live there. We need to make sure all Americans have access to safe environments.”) Whether used at the beginning of a conversation or elsewhere, values are a more effective way of engaging people in an issue than framing it as a crisis or making other hyper-emotional appeals.

Using an Explanatory Metaphor to Explain the Problem

FrameWorks research supports the findings of many other studies into public knowledge of environmental health: the American public simply doesn't understand what it means or how it works. As a result, their thinking about it focuses on issues like water contaminants and air pollution or confuses the role that environmental influences play with the role of health care or individual lifestyle choices. Teaching the basic concepts and range of phenomena that define and contribute to environmental health is therefore a critical step that should be built into every communication—it should never be taken for granted.

Metaphors are familiar to us all as poetic devices, but FrameWorks’ research shows that they can also be uniquely powerful devices for thinking. An explanatory metaphor is a simple, concrete, and memorable comparison that quickly and effectively explains an abstract or complex topic. They are particularly useful when a topic is one that suffers from a lack of public awareness—such as the need for a robust, well-trained field of environmental health professionals. Among the explanatory metaphors FrameWorks tested for communicating about the field of environmental health, *Ground Crew for Environmental Health* was the most consistent and reliable in expanding public understanding of the diverse groups of professionals who are responsible for making sure our environments are healthy:

Ground Crew for Environmental Health:

An airport ground crew uses its technical expertise to repair, maintain and coordinate the planes at an airport to keep them working and safe—and this takes skill, planning, and highly specialized training. Just like the ground crew at an airport makes sure everything goes smoothly on the runway and, eventually, in the air, there is a ground crew for environmental health. People on the environmental health ground crew use their expertise and skills to help ensure we build and maintain environmental conditions that are healthy for people to live and work in. We need to make sure that our “ground crew” for environmental health has diverse skills, is highly trained and can work together to ensure that our environmental conditions are built and maintained for people’s health.

In just a few sentences, this metaphor can develop an audience’s comprehension of the complex network of professionals whose work is necessary to keep our environments safe and why that work is important. The idea of an environmental health ground crew moves Americans away from thinking about environmental health as an individual lifestyle choice—nobody expects individual passengers to be able to fix the plane to ensure its safety, for example, and the array of responsibilities that must be handled by different people to get an airplane safely from one place to another is “easy to think.” The stickiness of the metaphor and the entailments it readily generates allows environmental health communicators to pack more (and more powerful) explanation into their conversations with the public.

Another tested metaphor, *Upstream Environments/Downstream Health*, performed consistently well in helping members of the public think more productively about the relationship between environmental conditions and human health at the population level:

Upstream Environments/Downstream Health:

We all live “downstream” from a range of environmental factors and conditions that affect our health. By ourselves we can’t control all the things that happen “upstream” in our environments. That is why we need people who specialize in working upstream to create positive environmental conditions for human health. These environmental health professionals understand how upstream factors have downstream effects, and can pay attention and intervene to ensure that what flows and cascades downstream is healthy and safe for all of us.

Upstream Environments/Downstream Effects offers an accessible way to talk about environmental health at a population level and to restructure people’s thinking about control: events that take place upstream are not subject to the control of those living downstream. The idea of upstream events that cascade down makes it easier to conceptualize the broad range of environmental factors that affect health and to redirect thinking away from individual choice. It also helps the public to understand the importance of *early* intervention and *prevention* efforts and the need for environmental health workers who are trained and specialized doing this proactive and preventative work.

Escaping the “Invisible Process” Trap: Building Public Awareness of Systems and Solutions by Explaining How They Work

Explaining how systems work is a vital part of effectively framing social issues. When communicators describe a problem and its solution but neglect to connect the dots in between, the public is left to wonder why the issue matters, or to fill in those “cognitive holes” for themselves, often with limited or fragmented information gleaned from haphazard media coverage. FrameWorks research revealed that, in general, Americans’ understanding of environmental health is limited to thinking about specific environmental health threats, such as contaminants in their homes. The scope of environmental health as a field comprising a wide range of protective, preventative, and regulatory functions—one in which expert practitioners are protecting communities everywhere from harm every day—is missing from public discourse. Media coverage of environmental health issues compounds that lack of understanding by focusing on the causes of, not the solutions to, environmental health hazards; when solutions *are* mentioned in a news story, they are usually framed as the responsibility of an inefficient government or informed individual consumers—making explanatory messages that emphasize collective solutions all the more critical.

However, not all ways of framing solutions are created equal. When working to appeal to the public as citizens with a stake in a consequential issue, it’s important to emphasize the civic or community-wide relevance of actions that may not at first seem related—by explaining, for instance, how policies and programs implemented upstream can enable communities’ downstream efforts.

Currently, the public lacks examples of the diverse kinds of work necessary to protect and promote safe environments across all communities and how this work positively affects public health. Disasters like oil spills may periodically dominate media coverage, but other issues related to the core concerns of the environmental health field—such as sanitation, built environments, or food safety and security—receive little attention. The messaging in most organizations performing this work does not draw clear explanatory chains between their efforts and the positive public consequences of it. What might the impact on public thinking be if agency’s core messages about environmental health issues were rewritten to highlight the importance of public regulation of industry, guided by partnerships, cooperation, and citizen engagement? It could be as simple as, say, substituting a message about how consumers should handle food to avoid foodborne illness with a compelling explanation of how some populations are more affected than others when the food industry isn’t properly regulated or inspection agencies aren’t adequately funded. By shifting the emphasis from personal actions to policy actions, public agencies and their nonprofit and private-sector partners can contribute to reframing the public conversation from one about consumerism and “bad apple” businesses to one about citizenship, from a discourse focused on paranoia to one focused on fairness and effective oversight.

The environmental health field is preparing to take the public stage. As the environmental health community takes on the challenge of communicating more often about its role in regulating our environments for maximum safety and health, it's important to learn about what makes the difference between effective and ineffective outreach on this topic. There's solid evidence that some ways of framing the issue are likely to decrease public engagement—for instance, simply listing the impacts of a new hazardous waste facility on a nearby neighborhood. Instead, effective communication about the field builds people's understanding of what constitutes environmental health, familiarizes them with the systems and experts who support it, explains the problems that practitioners tackle, and introduces them to well-matched solutions, so that the public understands what's necessary to address problems in the system.

These framing strategies, supported by the American Public Health Association, can advance the public's understanding of and support for the work of environmental health practitioners across the spectrum of work their agencies and organizations perform. As efforts to change and expand public discourse on environmental health continue, increasing the number of practitioners in the field who can apply these frames with fluency will contribute to a more robust conversation about these issues. Likewise, these communications strategies can be used within the field to build a greater sense of connectedness among professional cohorts working in different areas of environmental health. Messages that demonstrate how each of these areas shares a common goal of ensuring the health of all the nation's communities can foster opportunities to recognize and make better use of their overlapping agendas and shared values.

This research is sponsored by the American Public Health Association, the Association of State and Territorial Health Organizations, and the Association of Public Health Laboratories, with support from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's National Center for Environmental Health.

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