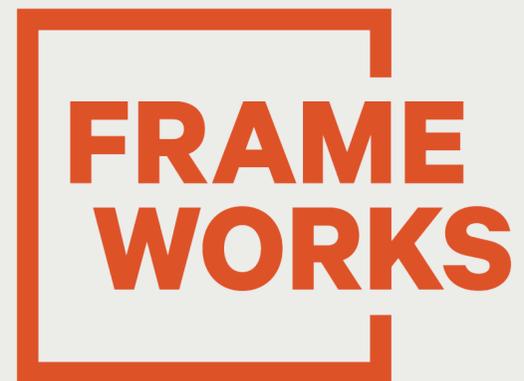


# Trust in Flux

Communicating in a skeptical era

Katy Evans, PhD, Senior Director, Health Justice Program  
Julie Sweetland, PhD, Senior Advisor

Health Justice Framing Forum  
March 17, 2026



# Here's how we'll share space today

- **We are recording today's session.**
- **We will share the recording and slides with registrants as soon as we can.**
- We will remove any AI note-takers.
- To bring a question or comment to the presenters' attention, **use the Q&A function.** Note that others in the meeting will be able to see your question.
- **Presenters probably won't see the chat.** The chat is open for participants to interact with each other or respond to content in real time. FrameWorks may also post links there.
- Presenters will pause in the middle, and at the end, to hear from you and respond to questions.
- For general reactions, please feel free to use the reaction feature.



**Katy Evans**  
Senior Director, Health Justice Program



**Julie Sweetland**  
Senior Advisor

**We can't achieve  
health justice without  
powerful  
communication.**

FrameWorks' Health Justice Program works toward a United States in which all the systems and policies that support health and well-being serve all people, eliminating disparities and advancing justice across communities.



# FrameWorks' Health Justice Program is designed to support the field (you!)



Original Research



Framing & Narrative  
Strategy



Deep Reframing  
Partnerships

# Today's session

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Why does trust matter for health justice?

---

What are we learning about how trust works?

---

What does this mean for our communications?

---

**Why does trust  
matter for health  
justice?**

## Word cloud

When it comes to  
(re)building trust,  
what health topics  
are tricky for you?



**Follow the link in the chat or the QR  
code**  
**Answer in one or two words, please**

# What we heard from you

Themes in answers to the registration question

“When it comes to trust, what's your biggest communications challenge?”

- Addressing real fears & repairing past harm
- Building scientific or civic literacy
- Countering false information
- Overcoming cynicism (like “the system is rigged” thinking)
- Getting our ideas heard in a noisy time (with fewer resources than before)
- Engaging people beyond our usual echo chambers

# Some reasons we think trust matters

- Trust is the foundation for collective action and infrastructure.
- Trust allows our ideas to get a hearing despite a noisy, fragmented, and saturated information environment.
- Without trust, evidence-based positions aren't just ignored; they can be misinterpreted as proof of a hidden agenda or that "the system is rigged."

**What are we learning  
about trust in this  
moment?**

# Our methods for learning about trust

## Qualitative

Cognitive interviews (1:1)

Peer discourse sessions (small group)

Message testing focus groups

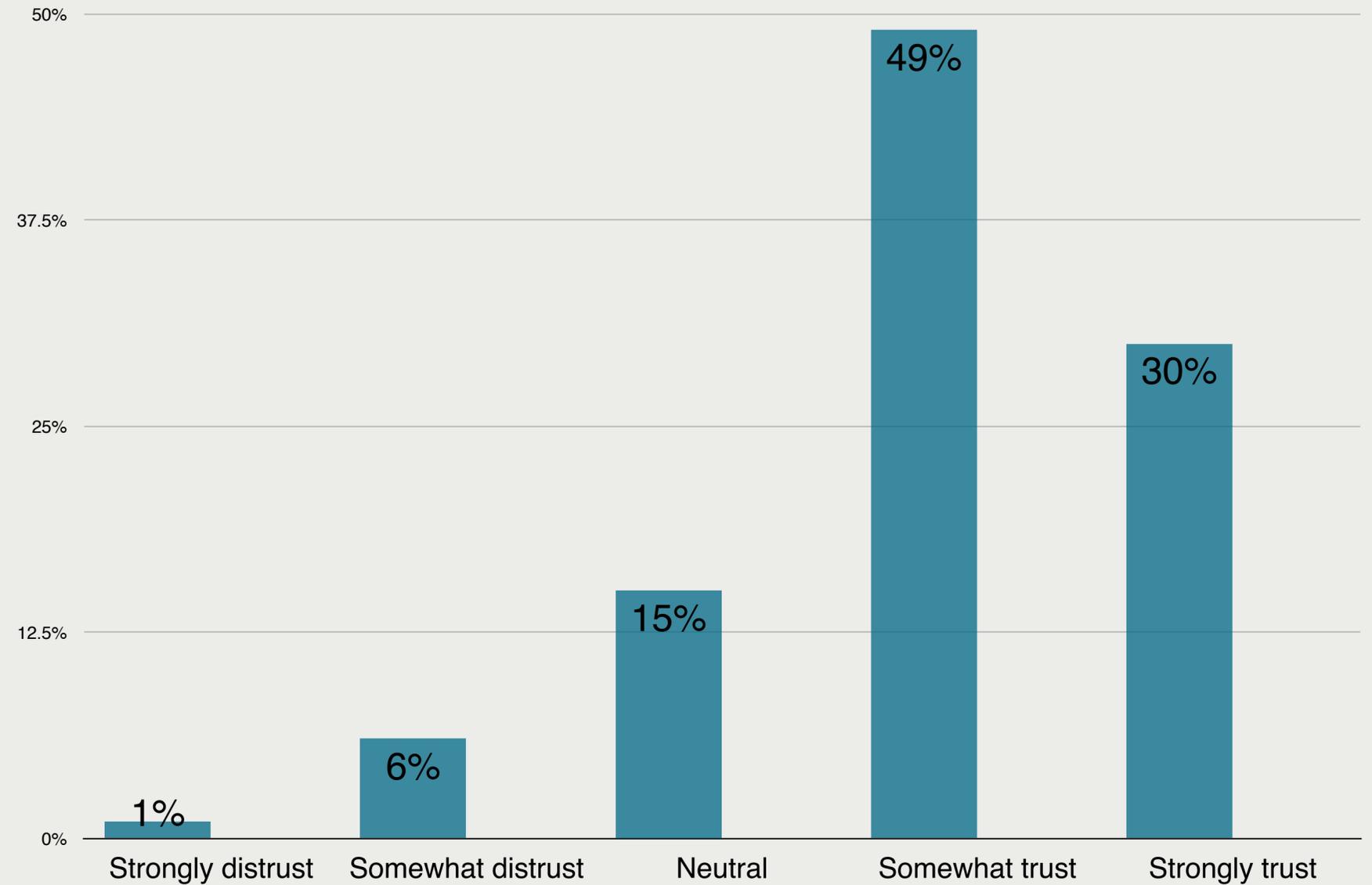
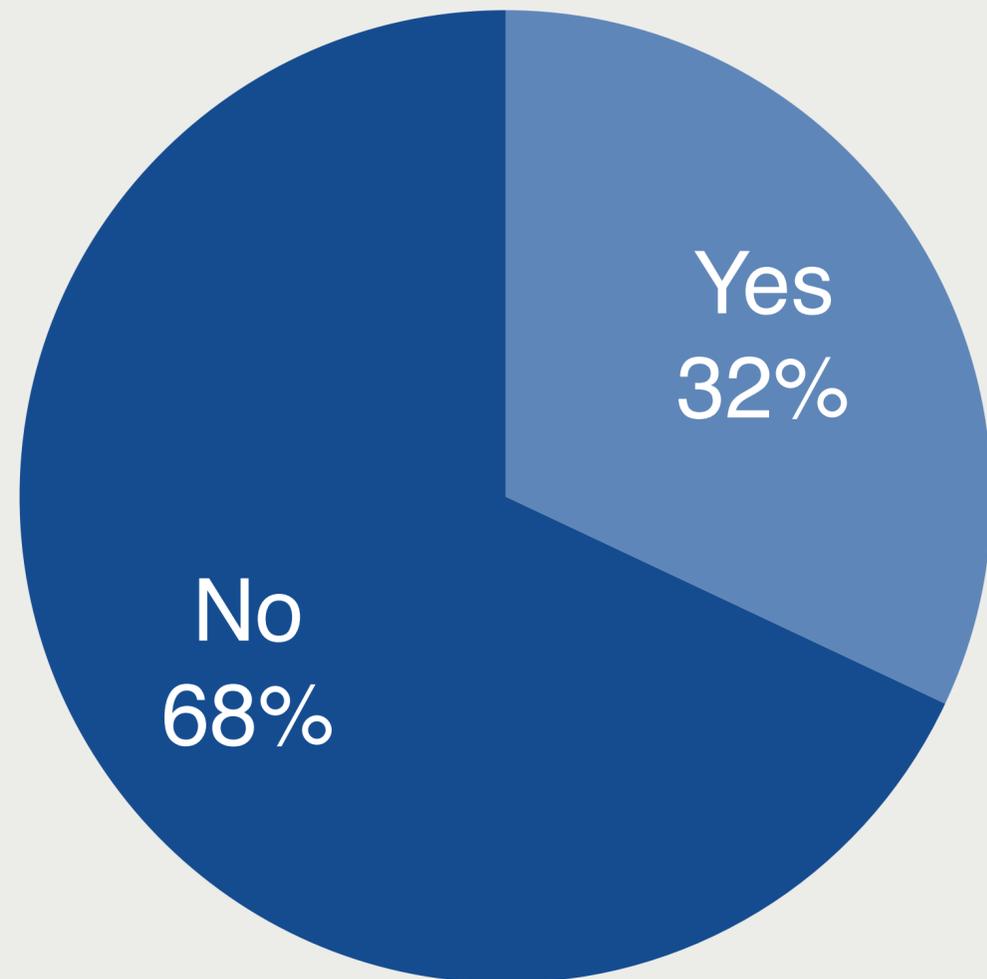
## Quantitative

Mindset survey

# Trust is strong when people are aware

Findings from FrameWorks' Health Justice Mindset Survey - Fall 2025

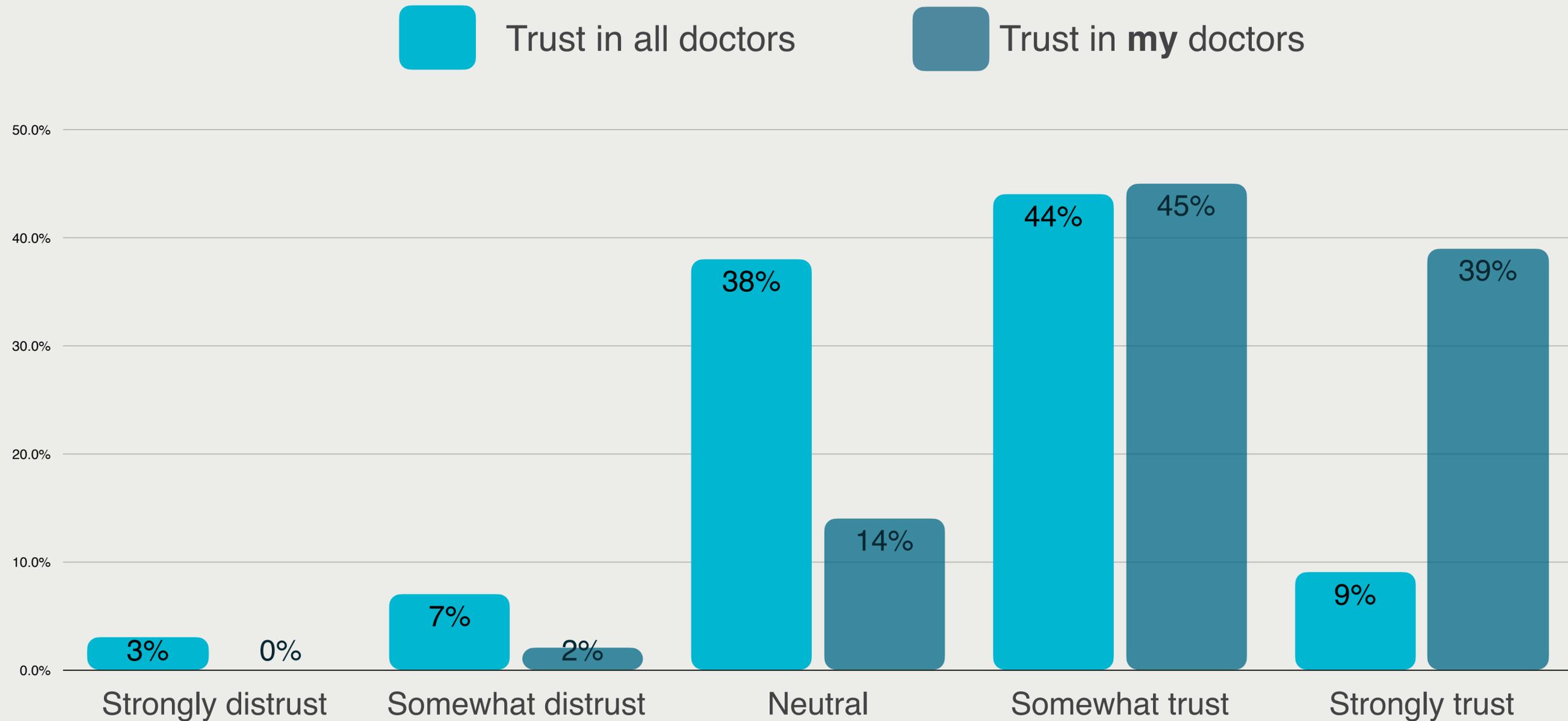
Have you heard anything about your local health department and what it does?



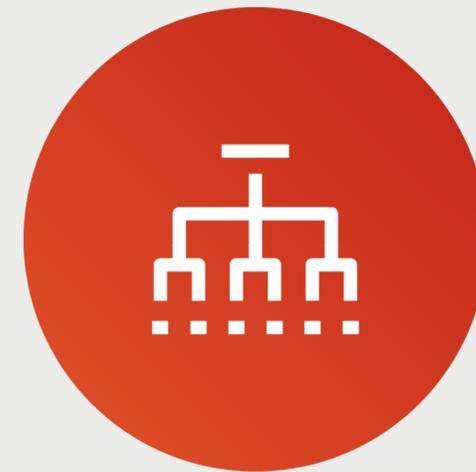
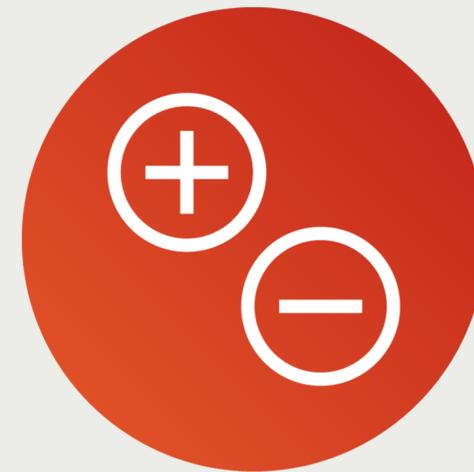
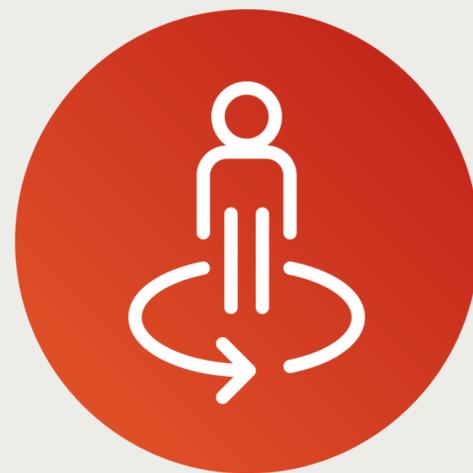
Trust in local health departments

# Trust is relational

Findings from FrameWorks' Health Justice Mindset Survey - Fall 2025



# Cultural Mindsets Are...



# Three patterns of thinking about trust



**Trust as default**



**Distrust as default**



**Trust but verify**

These patterns do not reflect three distinct audience segments.  
They are three distinct mental models that people reason with at different times.

# Patterns of public thinking on how to discern trustworthiness



**Give It Test of Time**



**Assess Source's Integrity**



**Look for Motives**

These patterns do not reflect three distinct audience segments.  
They are three distinct mental models that people reason with at different times.

# Other widespread mental models of “what earns trust”

- Empirical evidence
- Credentials
- Consensus
- Outcomes
- Relationships

# Key Takeaways

- Outright distrust is low.
- Trust is strong when people are aware.
- “Neutral” on trust = risk and opportunity for our field
- People attend to many different signals of trustworthiness.
- Relationships are the the strongest (but not only) signal.

# Let's chat

Any questions, comments, or other reactions?



**What does this mean  
for our  
communication?**

**Declaring trustworthiness**

**Signaling “authority”**

**What won't  
work**

**Asserting (rather than  
explaining)**

**Laying low**

## You Say...

“Your pediatrician knows your child and cares about their health. When they give advice, it’s because they want what’s best for your child. Pediatricians choose this job because they truly care about kids and families. You can trust that they’re focused on keeping your child safe from diseases.”



## They Think...

“Doctors are people, pediatricians are people... there’s good pediatricians, there’s bad pediatricians, and probably the fact is that most pediatricians are very average... this is trying to convince me that every pediatrician is great and only wants what’s best for my child, and it’s just not true.”

White father, 35, Democrat, Chicago

# Framing strategies to shore up trust

We can...

- Frame our work in terms of relationships with communities.
- Build trust through explanation, not appeals to expert authority.
- Adopt a partnership stance.
- Embrace the reality that trust is dynamic, not fixed.
- Respond strategically (not defensively) to deceptive discourse.



**We can frame our work in terms of relationships with communities.**

## Framed with “we care about data”

“The Pregnancy-Associated Mortality Review (PAMR) program was established to improve data collection and reporting of maternal deaths in our state.”



## Reframed with “we care about people”

“When our epidemiologists noticed an increase in pregnancy-related deaths, we knew we had to take action to protect the health of our state’s residents.”

**2**

**We can build trust through explanation, not appeals to expert authority.**

## Framed with “trust the science”

Research tells us...

Numerous studies show that...

Consistent with the literature...

Consensus among experts is...



## Reframed with “let’s look at how we know

We were curious about that, too — so we looked into it. We were surprised to find...

That’s a great question. Can I share what I’ve learned about it?

There was this cool study that explored that question in the most interesting way...

## Framed with assertion of facts

Researchers agree that gun ownership doesn't make people safer or more secure. Rather, it makes people more vulnerable to firearm-involved injuries, child deaths, homicides, and suicides in the home.



## Reframed with explanation of mechanisms

When people have unlocked firearms in the home, it's easier for unintentional child shootings to happen, or for someone to reach for a gun in a volatile moment.

**3**

**We can adopt a partnership  
stance.**

## You Say...

“As a parent, you know your child and what they need to thrive. Your pediatrician has medical training, specialized knowledge, and scientific evidence about how to support children’s health. Working together, you can create a plan for what’s best for your child. If you have questions about your child’s immunization, have a conversation with your pediatrician.”



## They Think...

“Yes — that’s what I want. Communication between the parent and the doctor, not just trust the doctor. I want to feel you can actually work with the doctor, as opposed to just yielding to the doctor.”

Native Hawaiian, 45, leans R, San Jose

# Painting a picture of mutual exchange

“Ask your pediatrician”



“Talk with your pediatrician”

“What you need to know”



“What communities are asking”

“Recommendations”



“Steps you can take”



**4**

**We can embrace the reality  
that trust is dynamic, not  
fixed.**



Photo by Tom Coe on Unsplash



## Framed with “no one’s responsible”

“The data show that residents in specific zip codes face disproportionate rates of chronic respiratory and cardiovascular issues. These outcomes are the result of a complex mix of social and environmental factors in our city’s under-resourced neighborhoods, which are disproportionately home to residents of color.”



## Reframed with “acknowledging harm”

“Health patterns, like high asthma rates in Northside, are not random. They come from policy choices we’ve made over time. Discriminatory “redlining” maps devalued Black neighborhoods. Officials then chose to put highways and incinerators in these areas. Pollution affects people’s hearts and lungs. A history of systemic racism helps to explain the health disparities we see today.”

**5**

**We can respond strategically  
(not defensively) to deceptive  
discourse.**

# The “new basics” of managing misinformation

- Avoid restating harmful ideas, even to debunk them
- Instead, say what is true. Make it clear and compelling.
- Don't be polarizing.
- Don't play in “their” frame.
- Repeat, repeat, repeat.

## Playing in opponent's frame

You may have heard that pediatricians recommend vaccines because they get a kickback from pharmaceutical companies. Not only would this be illegal, it just doesn't happen. Giving vaccines to kids is an important part of a pediatrician's job, but many doctors actually lose money on vaccines. Despite this, pediatricians still encourage you to get your child vaccinated on time because their priority is to keep kids healthy.



## Advancing a productive frame

Being a parent means dealing with a lot of information. Sometimes it's hard to know if what you see or read online is true. It can feel confusing, overwhelming, or even alarming. Don't fall for misconceptions or myths that could hurt your child's health. If you hear something that makes you unsure or worried about your child's vaccines, talk with your pediatrician. Stay curious, but make sure you're getting the facts.

# Framing strategies to shore up trust

We can...

- Frame our work in terms of relationships with communities.
- Build trust through explanation, not appeals to expert authority.
- Adopt a partnership stance.
- Embrace the reality that trust is dynamic, not fixed.
- Respond strategically (not defensively) to deceptive discourse.

**What's on your mind  
and what's next?**

# Let's chat

Any questions, comments, or other reactions?



**We want to hear from  
you**



# We want to stay connected with you

## Join us next time

Health Justice Framing Forum  
Wednesday, May 6  
1pm ET/10am PT

## Subscribe to our new monthly newsletter



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# About FrameWorks

The FrameWorks Institute is a nonprofit think tank that advances the mission-driven sector's capacity to frame the public discourse about social and scientific issues. The organization's signature approach, Strategic Frame Analysis®<sup>®</sup>, offers empirical guidance on what to say, how to say it, and what to leave unsaid. FrameWorks designs, conducts, and publishes multi-method, multidisciplinary framing research to prepare experts and advocates to expand their constituencies, to build public will, and to further public understanding. To make sure this research drives social change, FrameWorks supports partners in reframing, through strategic consultation, campaign design, FrameChecks®<sup>®</sup>, toolkits, online courses, and in-depth learning engagements known as FrameLabs. In 2015, FrameWorks was named one of nine organizations worldwide to receive the MacArthur Award for Creative and Effective Institutions.

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