Anticipate Public Thinking

FAQs: Staying on Frame in Real Time

Advocates and communicators in the aging field can prepare to talk more effectively about aging-related issues with the public by:

- using [cultural models research](#) to consider what sorts of questions the public is likely to ask about aging

- identifying what communications challenges these questions may pose, and

- applying framing strategies to craft responses that generate more productive thinking about aging.

The sample question-and-answer sequences below model how framing can be used to answer common questions about aging-related issues without reinforcing the public's widely shared assumptions or misperceptions. In each example, the "False-Start Answer" reflects current communications practices in the field and the "Reframed Answer" demonstrates what a reply might look like if framed using FrameWorks' recommended strategies. Both responses are annotated with pointers that identify what works, or not, in each response, and why. Use these model FAQs to build your capacity to communicate strategically and effectively about aging.

Q: What does an aging population mean for programs like Social Security?

THE FALSE-START ANSWER

The demographics of this country are about to change dramatically, and this represents a major shift in our country's make-up. The population of people over 65 is quickly growing and is expected to double in the next 50 years. As this age group continues to expand and more and more people reach retirement age, we will all be challenged to accommodate the needs of the elderly. Demographics also tell us that the trend toward an increasing population of citizens past retirement age is not going to reverse. This will put an additional strain on benefit systems. We need the government to take steps to make troubled programs like Social Security and Medicare more efficient and sustainable in the face of upcoming challenges.

THE REFRAMED ANSWER

Our society has a long tradition of finding innovative approaches to challenges. An aging population is an opportunity to use our social and technological ingenuity to develop solutions to our changing needs that can move America forward. As more Americans live longer and healthier lives, the longevity and productivity of our society will also expand. By restructuring public policies on issues like work and retirement, transportation, housing, health care, and community-building, we can make the most of this important source of social energy. Social Security and Medicare are examples of how innovative public policies can support better aging outcomes. We need to be smart about strengthening it as well as developing other ways to make sure we all have what we need to age well.

THE FALSE-START ANSWER ANALYSIS

- Relying on demographics to explain the impact of aging on society is a common communications trap that frames these changes as an impending crisis. This kind of fear-based messaging fuels anxiety about aging and the costs associated with it.

- Describing social supports as "under strain" and "troubled" are crisis-oriented ways to talk about government policy. These kinds of cues tap into the public's strong default perception that the government is inefficient and unable to offer real solutions—a framing strategy that defeats people's willingness to engage with the issue.

- This answer misses an opportunity to explain how and why social supports for older adults do and should include more than just financial resources.

THE REFRAMED ANSWER ANALYSIS

- This reframed answer begins with an appeal to the value *Ingenuity*—we are resourceful and can find solutions for the challenges that come up as we get older— to prime people to think about how we can take meaningful, concrete steps to improve our society. This is the opening of an *Ingenuity Narrative*, which explains why and how policy solutions support aging.

- The *Building Momentum* metaphor draws on the public's widely shared, positive view of older adults as possessors of accumulated knowledge to emphasize the positive aspects of aging and development, which helps to foster optimism about the future.

- Facts about changing demographics are reframed to point to the civic benefits aging provides.

- By naming the kinds of policies—transportation, housing, etc.—that can improve aging outcomes, this reply nudges people's thinking in the direction of systems change.

Q: Is ageism really a problem?

THE FALSE-START ANSWER

Ageism is prejudice against older people that often involves the assumption that older people are less competent and less equipped to succeed compared to the rest of the population. One place where ageism is visible is workplace discrimination. Aging workers are competing with younger employees who have a newer set of skills, particularly digital and technological skills. Employers may often practice workplace discrimination when they plan to hire candidates they see as faster and more productive. Just like sexism and racism, ageism is a problem in the workplace, and beyond, because it leads directly to social inequities that intrude upon people's rights to equal treatment and opportunity.

THE REFRAMED ANSWER

We want to be the kind of society that treats all people as equal members and makes sure that everyone has meaningful ways to contribute. Negative stereotypes about getting older (ageism) lead to discrimination against older people—for example, making it harder for older people to find jobs. When we don't talk about patterns that limit people's access to opportunity, we fail to live up to our own core principle of justice for all. We can make the country more just by modifying systems we all rely on throughout our lives—like transportation, health care, and employment policies—to give everyone a fair chance to participate.

THE FALSE-START ANSWER ANALYSIS

- Providing a concrete example like workplace discrimination is a good way to build people's understanding of the problem, but choose your cues carefully: this answer reinforces ***Us vs. Them*** thinking about older adults by maintaining comparisons between "older people" or "aging workers" and "the rest of the population."

- The cues in this answer are likely to activate the public's ***Ideal vs Real*** model of aging by positioning older adults as less competent with technology.

- Comparing ageism to other civil rights is a communications trap because doing so encourages audiences to compare ageism to other, better known, forms of discrimination, which can lead people to conclude that, by comparison, ageism is less serious or worthy of attention.

THE REFRAMED ANSWER ANALYSIS

- Appealing to the value ***Justice***, as this reframed reply does, is an effective way to begin a conversation about ageism.

- Ageism is largely invisible to the public, so by taking the time to define it, this reply helps to make it visible and to establish it as a matter of concern for us all.

- A tangible example like workplace discrimination can build people's understanding of ageism, but also take the time to broaden the discussion by introducing other systems that could be changed to better accommodate older people.

Q: What is successful aging?

THE FALSE-START ANSWER

Experts estimate that many soon-to-be retired people have not actually saved enough money to meet their needs in old age. In this modern era, many people are struggling financially and have a hard time putting money away to retire when they want to. On top of that, it is common for families to be spread out and living in different places. This makes it hard to give aging family members the care and attention they need. However, people can win the battle against time to enjoy their golden years if they make smart financial decisions and healthy choices around things like diet and exercise. Many elderly Americans are fortunate enough to have family and informal networks that they can rely on for support. And, of course, there are plenty of thriving older people who are living proof that with the right supports and smart choices, successful aging is possible.

THE REFRAMED ANSWER

Aging is a dynamic process. As we grow older, we build up wisdom, skills, and insights that power up the communities around us, and how well we thrive as we age is really a question of how well-equipped our communities are to tap into all that momentum by enabling us to be engaged participants. Everyone is more likely to enjoy positive aspects of aging like good health, personal growth, longevity, and expanded productivity if we start to think a little differently about how we shape the places that we live. Income security, for example, is an important contributor to retirees' wellbeing. But other innovative solutions are just as vital—for example, adopting employment policies that help people in caregiving positions, building more age-friendly communities through better transit systems, and opening intergenerational community centers that help keep older people connected. All we need is some resourcefulness and creativity to make sure the right supports are there to promote healthy aging.

THE FALSE-START ANSWER ANALYSIS

- This reply feeds negative views of aging: many American think that modern life presents social and financial challenges for older people and that aging is a battle against time.

- Presenting "smart" personal choices as the key to successful aging reinforces people belief that aging outcomes are the results of individuals' good or bad choices. Encouraging people to rely on families and informal networks also implies that the best solutions are individual instead of collective.

- The **_Living Proof_** communications trap makes older adults who are doing well into outliers. These kinds of examples reinforce the idea that individual decision-making determines aging outcomes and obscures the positive impact of policy-based solutions that help to create social and environmental conditions that are conducive to successful aging.

THE REFRAMED ANSWER ANALYSIS

- This answer steers clear of negative, fatalistic views about aging by maintaining an optimistic, reasonable tone about getting older. Whenever possible, remind people that everyone experiences aging and that positive outcomes are possible.

- In this reply, the **_Building Momentum_** metaphor steers readers towards more positive views of aging and a more community-based, or collective, discussion about our responsibility to create environments in which we can all thrive as we age.

- Non-experts have a hard time seeing how structural solutions can improve aging outcomes. Offering examples of solutions can expand people's thinking.

- A final appeal to the value Ingenuity works to remind readers why a collective approach is needed.