
FRAMING SOCIAL ISSUES

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Our thinking is guided by schema

Schema are mental shortcuts of preconceived ideas, assumptions, and beliefs that help us efficiently make sense of new information and situations.

Frames activate our schema

Our framing challenge is that the public discourse on social problems makes certain schema more accessible than others. In America, we are fed a steady diet of stories that activate **individual responsibility, privacy and personal freedoms**, and **broken government**.

These classic American storylines obscure the public and systemic dimensions of social problems.

It takes intentional framing to activate other core American ideals (that are more conducive to policy thinking!), such as **collective responsibility, community and interdependence, and government/NGOs as part of the solution**.

KEY PRINCIPLES:

1. Social issue communications should be informed by the rich science of framing – an evidence-base on frame effects from social and cognitive science. According to that science, effective social issue frames have a particular structure. They:
 - Explain **WHY** the issue matters – by appealing to **values** that show how the issue is a collective, not just a personal, concern .
 - Explain **WHAT** the problem/challenge is and **HOW** it can be solved – by telling a **causal story** that links the problem, the consequences, and the solution(s), and broadens the attribution of responsibility.

7 Dos and 3 Don'ts for Issue Communications

DO:

1. FIRST, explain: **Why does this matter?**
 - USE MORE "WE" and "SOLUTION" VALUES: ingenuity and innovative thinking, interdependence, future prosperity,
 - USE LESS OF THESE: sympathy, care, and charity.
2. SECOND, explain: **What is the problem and how is it solved?** Connect the dots among causes, consequences and solutions.
3. **Appeal to people's sense of community and civic responsibility.**
4. Make sure **visuals** reflect your frame; don't use a photo/image just because it's appealing.
5. Be positive and solutions-oriented in **tone**.
6. Don't lead with data/numbers, and **always interpret the meaning of the data**
7. Make sure that the **messengers** you choose will be viewed as credible but unbiased

DON'T

1. Use jargon and expert-ese, such as acronyms, abbreviations, and technical language, without explaining the terms.
2. Reinforce crisis and problems at the expense of hope and solutions. Crisis framing disengages and makes problems seem unsolvable.
3. Rely only on vivid personal stories if your goal is policy change. Personal stories have repeatedly been shown to reinforce stereotypes about those portrayed and often make systemic/structural causes and solutions more difficult to see. The measure of a good story is not whether it compels emotions, but compels people to support solutions.

MORE FRAMING RESOURCES:

My blog: daveystrategies.com/blog

Opportunity Agenda: opportunityagenda.org

Topos Partnership: topospartnership.com

Berkeley Media Studies Group: bmsg.org