



301 W Northern Lights Blvd, Ste 400  
Anchorage, AK 99503  
907 297-2700  
907 366-2700 (toll free in Alaska)  
907 297-2770 (fax)  
[www.rasmuson.org](http://www.rasmuson.org)

## CONTENTS

### 1 FRAMING DEFINED

### 2 STRATEGIC FRAMING

### 3 VALUES: FUEL FOR YOUR FRAME

### 4 STORYTELLING, PITFALLS TO AVOID & NEWSHOOKS

### 5 READING LIST

© Some rights reserved. This tutorial is licensed under a Creative Commons license. You are free to use its contents for any non-commercial purpose, provided that you credit Rasmuson Foundation and the SPIN Project.

## *What's in the picture?*

### Framing

A frame lays the conceptual groundwork for creating winning messages that advance your work. It drives the story you'll tell that will cause people to act. While it's true that framing is an art that can take years to master, no organization can afford to ignore it.

To help remove the guesswork from framing and start you on your way to framing mastery, we put together the accompanying [Framing Template](#). The following tutorial will guide you through some of the concepts behind framing, explain the specific steps in the Template, and prepare you to build a winning frame. Use the following sections as a companion to the Framing Template.

#### What Is Framing?

First, a few useful definitions: "Framing is a process of selective control over media content or public communication. Framing defines how a certain piece of media content or rhetoric is packaged so as to allow certain desirable interpretations and rule out others." *Wikipedia*

"A frame is a thought organizer, highlighting certain events and facts as important and rendering others as invisible....Like a picture frame, an issue frame marks off some part of the world. Like a building frame, it holds things together. It provides coherence to an array of symbols, images, and arguments, linking them through an underlying organizing idea that suggests what is essential – what conse-

quences and values are at stake. We do not see the frame directly, but infer its presence by its characteristic expressions and language. Each frame gives the advantage to certain ways of talking and thinking, while it places others 'out of the picture.'"

Charlotte Ryan and William A. Gamson, "The Art of Reframing Political Debates," *Contexts*, Winter 2006

"Framing is telling the truth as we see it: ...forcefully... straightforwardly...accurately...with moral conviction...without hesitation."

George Lakoff, author of *Don't Think of an Elephant*

You can think of framing in terms of the metaphors the word evokes: as the conceptual scaffolding on which you build your communications, the "picture frame" in which you present your worldview and your argument, or the camera's frame defines what's in the picture. Whichever way you choose to think of it, the most important thing to remember is: frame to win the change you envision. Accordingly, the first step to framing is to



Created for the  
Rasmuson Foundation by  
The SPIN Project  
149 Natoma Street  
San Francisco, CA 94105  
<http://www.spinproject.org>

## Strategic Framing: A Powerful Concoction

An effective advocacy frame contains three elements:

### Your Truth

Your analysis, perspective, or how you “cut” the issue

### Strategic Considerations

Puts you in the driver's seat on your issue

Defines the issue and players to control debate

Focuses and clarifies your issue

### Newsworthiness/Broad Interest

- Includes hooks, that is, elements that increase the likelihood of media coverage or that your target audiences will be interested in hearing your story.

understand very clearly what that change looks like – in other words, to clearly articulate your goals.

### Goal

Communication never happens in a vacuum. We take the time and energy to build strategic communications because we have clear visions about the world we are building. What is your vision of a better world? What are some of the specific milestones you will pass on the way to that vision? Do you need to establish a new government or corporate policy? Do you need to change behavior? How long will it take to get there? Are your goals realistic given your resources?

The Framing Template can be used for either long-term or short-term purposes. If you want to build a frame for long-term work on an issue, think of a big goal. If you want to build a frame for a shorter-term campaign, envision a more specific goal for the next few years.

### Target Audience

The concept of targeting an audience – knowing who you must address to achieve your goals – is a fundamental element of strategic communications. Here are the basics:

- Your audience can never be “the general public.” Unless you have Coke and Nike’s marketing budget, you will never significantly reach all six billion of us.
- Since you can’t influence everyone, it’s essential to recognize specifically who you must influence to achieve your goals – this person or group of people is your *campaign target*. You can’t always influence people in power directly, so usually you must communicate to a group of people who do influence your campaign target, such as voters or donors. The group of people you choose to communicate to is your *target audience*.
- Different audiences are influenced by different messages. You can’t address 14-year-old boys the same way you’d address 63-year-old women.

Frames must be built to influence specific target audiences. Master framers can build frames that strongly influence broad audiences, but they always know their audience.

Examples:

#### *Saturday Morning Cartoons*

When your children watch commercials for Sugar Bombs cereal during Saturday morning cartoons, you are the *campaign target* and your children are the *target audience!* Advertisers communicate to your children, who in turn nag you to buy the cereal.

#### *Influencing Elected Officials*

If you need the mayor to approve your antismoking ordinance, but don’t have direct access to her or her inner circle, she is your *campaign target* but not your *target audience*. In this case, your *target audience* would be a group of people who can influence her, such as a key constituency of voters or campaign donors. Does she get most of her campaign money from the construction industry? Then the builders’ community is your *target audience*. Is she concerned about votes from District 3? Then your *target audience* is residents of that area.

#### *Changing Behavior*

If you are trying to encourage local teens to exercise more, then they might simultaneously be your *campaign target* and your *target audience*. However, if you feel you can more effectively communicate to their teachers or parents who could in turn influence the teens, then those adults become the *target audience*, while the teens remain the *campaign target*.

## Values

If frames are the structural framework of your communications machine, values are its fuel. If you prefer to think of a frame as a story, remember that every story reflects moral values, as in “the moral of the story.”

Values are core beliefs from which people act. Understanding the values that drive your issue is an essential part of your frame. First, what values cause you and your supporters to care about your issue? What values does your audience hold strongly? Can your frame show how your issue ties to your audience’s values? Later, when you begin to craft a message, your frame’s values will point audiences toward the actions you propose. Here is a sampling of commonly held values in the U.S.:

- accountability
- compassion
- cooperation
- courage
- creativity
- democracy
- dependability
- discipline
- education
- excellence
- fairness
- faith
- forgiveness
- freedom
- generosity
- health
- happiness
- honesty
- honor
- hope
- independence
- integrity
- kindness

## Storytelling as a Communications Tool

Communicating your message has everything to do with the ancient art of storytelling. One way of defining a frame is “how you set up your story.”

The most critical considerations for storytellers, and for framers, are:

- Characters

Are they compelling? Does their experience resonate with your audience? Who is in the right or a hero? Who is in the wrong or a villain? Who can do something to change things? How does the audience figure into the story?

- Plot

Where does the story take place? What happens?

- Narrative Drive

Do you highlight the most meaningful, evocative scenes that will lead your audience to action? How easy is it to understand your story? Is it similar to classic stories that have already been burned into your audience’s mind? What values does the story tap into or leverage?

- nonviolence
- personal responsibility
- self-interest
- tolerance
- tradition
- truthfulness

### Characters

People communicate primarily by telling stories. Begin to think of your frame as a story that leads its audience to specific conclusions and actions. An essential component of storytelling is understanding your characters. The most important characters in a frame are the following:

#### *Heroes and Heroines*

These people embody your frame. They may or may not be leaders. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and Rosa Parks are civil rights heroes. Which heroes will resonate with your target audience?

#### *Innocents/Damsels in Distress*

When you see the headline, “Rat Bites Baby,” you know the baby, or the innocent afflicted party, is

in the right, and the rat is the villain. Does your story have an injured party?

#### *Narrators*

Who tells the story? Are they telling their own powerful stories? Often, the identity of the storyteller is more important than the contents of their message.

#### *Institutions and Systems*

Does your frame highlight the systemic causes of a problem? Often, this is the best way to point audiences toward more effective, important action. If you only call out individual actors, the proposed solution can only focus on those few people. When highlighting that institutions or systems are at fault, be clear to provide audiences with hope that they can act to hold those institutions accountable or to change those systems.

#### *Your Organization*

What is its identity or “brand”? How would you like to see it represented? Effective? Authentic? Innovative?

### Neutral Characters

It can't hurt to have a few of these in the picture, ready to be converted to hero or villain status depending on your strategic needs.

### Who's Telling the Story?

The identity of the spokesperson is often more important than their words, and choosing your spokespeople is a central part of framing. The Ketchikan Area Arts and Humanities Council recognized this in creating a [worksheet](#) designating letters to the editor writers who carry different perspectives and voices.

### The Story

What classic stories does your issue or campaign correspond to? Think in terms of classic stories that cue the listener to take a side, like Cinderella or David and Goliath.

Metaphors bring ideas to life for people. What metaphors will you invoke to represent your perspective? Do you want to compare your issue to a war or to a moment in sports? Do you want to cast your opponent as a classic villain from a story everyone in your audience knows? Is your issue a "third rail"? Are your opponents engaged in "sandbox" politics? Is your hero a "pioneer"? Have fun being poetic, but keep it simple!

### Make Your Data Human-Friendly

It can be useful to offer data to bring your frame to life and make your case. However, numbers

don't communicate well, so it helps to translate statistics into "social math." Instead of saying, "32.8% of people aged 6-11 in the North Haven area are in the 95<sup>th</sup> percentile of body mass index," try, "One in three kids in our community is obese." Or better yet, turn it into a story: "When you carpooled three kids to Lakewood Elementary this morning, chances are one of those children struggles with obesity."

### Item: Newsworthiness!

Most of us think our issues should be on the front page of the newspaper *and* the six o'clock news every day. Unfortunately, editors and producers don't agree. They can only run our stories in the news – and thus promote our frame – if they are newsworthy.

Our best bet is to stud our frames with "hooks" that will entice journalists to tell our stories and spread our frame. The more hooks you can build into your frame, the more likely you'll succeed in amplifying it through media.

Try to build at least four hooks

into your frame. The more the better, but make sure your hooks would really appear newsworthy to your target media outlets. Below is a list of classic hooks.

### Controversy

- Controversy sells stories. Frame the controversy to put the opposition on the defense.

### Dramatic human interest

- Include the stories of real people – their triumphs, tragedies, adventures, and anecdotes.

### Trends

- Stories that suggest new opinions, behavior patterns, and attitudes.
- To most journalists, three is a trend; find at least three examples to assert that a new trend is emerging.

### Timeliness/Calendar

- Captures something coming up on the calendar. "Back to school" can be a hook for toxic pollution on your children's playgrounds.

### New announcement

- "Unprecedented" or "ground-breaking" or "first-ever." Re-

### Do No Harm: Pitfalls to Avoid

Frames should do no harm to their issue or to allied issues and organizations. Consider a few ways your frame might have repercussions beyond the immediate campaign or program:

How does your frame promote or dissolve ingrained prejudices based on our culture's faultlines? Consider its analysis of:

- Race
- Ability/disability
- Class
- Religion
- Age
- Gender or sexual orientation

Does this frame "blame the victim" or, alternatively, narrowly blame a few specific individuals in power? Can you craft it to point accountability toward a broader responsible institution or system? What institutions or systems could this frame highlight as either guilty or virtuous?

Does this frame make audiences feel apathetic or empowered? In what way?

porters are only interested in new news, not old news. Make your news fresh.

*Localize national story (and vice versa)*

- Take a nationally breaking story and emphasize its local impact, i.e. how a welfare reform bill is affecting people living in your community.

*Anniversaries/Milestones*

- One year later, one decade later.

*Fresh angle on old story.*

- Take an old story and put a fresh twist on it.

*Profiles and personnel*

- Feature individuals, community leaders, or galvanizing spokespersons who may become news themselves because of their fascinating stories.

*Special event*

- A huge conference, rally, or gathering. Frame event to capture the issue and importance.

*Respond and react to news others have made*

- Was a recent celebrity gaffe or business development relevant to your issue? If so, it's a chance to make news!

*Celebrity*

- If you have a celebrity on your side, someone known in your community, make sure they are included in the story.

*Strange Bedfellows*

- Have unlikely allies come together in solidarity over your issue? Highlight it in your story.

## Last Step: Know the Other Side's Frame and Reframe

There are two sides to every story. Above, you detailed the frame that is strategically powerful and feels authentic to you. But that probably differs in many ways

from how your campaign or issue is currently framed in your target audience's mind. What elements of the current frame do you want to dissolve, and which will you reinforce?

As Ryan and Gamson suggest, a good rule of thumb is that "we should be able to describe a frame so that an advocate [of the opposing frame] would say, 'Yes, this is what I believe.'"

### Reach for the Stars

When you create your frame, imagine the best way your organization could be perceived. What's the ideal? Then go for it! When the **Haines Library** was named Best Small Library in America, it added to its frame prestige and credibility that attracts funders and other supporters, while bringing its community great pride. However, in order to win the award, the library had to reach for the stars and submit an application. You can read an article about the library in *Library Journal*, a national trade publication that reaches important audiences for the Haines Library, [here](#). What awards can your organization reach for?

*Thanks to Charlotte Ryan and William Gamson of the Media/Movement Research and Action Project, Makani Themba-Nixon of the Praxis Project, Susan Bales of Frameworks Institute, Susan Strong of the Metaphor Project, and Andy Goodman of Andy Goodman Consulting for ideas for this resource.*

### Framing Resources

The following sources are useful next steps on your path to framing mastery:

*Don't Think of an Elephant and Moral Politics*, by George Lakoff.

*Prime-Time News*, by Charlotte Ryan.

*Talking the Walk*, Makani Themba-Nixon, and Hunter Cutting, eds.

Rasmuson Foundation is a private family foundation located in Anchorage Alaska that works as a catalyst to promote a better life for Alaskans

! Founded in 1955, the Foundation invests approximately \$26 million annually in both individuals and well-managed nonprofit organizations dedicated to improving the quality of life for Alaskans primarily in the areas of arts and culture, community development, health, and human services

! Our grantees are passionate about their work. Given today's crowded media environment, their ability to effectively advocate on behalf of their constituents and tell their story is of critical importance to their success. The Foundation supported the development of this toolkit to provide a comprehensive and accessible resource for its

grantees both to build internal capacity and to work more effectively on a day-to-day basis with strategic communications

---

In today's crowded media environment, organizations working to build a fair just and equitable society can scarcely be heard. Organizations hoping to shape debates and shift public policy must embrace strategic communications to achieve their goals. The SRN Project strengthens nonprofit social justice organizations, small and large, to communicate effectively for themselves.

# THE SPIN PROJECT

The SRN Project provides accessible and affordable strategic communications consulting, training, coaching, networking opportunities and concrete tools such as this online communications toolkit. Our skills and expertise are blended with our commitment to strengthening social justice organizations and helping them engage in communications to achieve their goals.

We develop communications skills, infrastructure and leadership strengthening organizations to achieve their social justice goals.