

Changing the Conversation

Strategies for Nonprofit Human Services Messaging

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Introduction

- Human service and community development agencies are experiencing cuts from all sources
- Our work is misunderstood, if noticed at all by the general public
- During the FY2011 budget battles we missed an opportunity to change the conversation
- Contemporary research sheds light on messaging in the political environment



The Need & Call to Action

- A disproportionate amount of federal budget cuts are slashing domestic discretionary funding
- The American people need *more*, not less support in these difficult economic times
- Agencies must use this as an opportunity to lift up the work of the entire field



Framing: A Potential Solution

- Frames
 - Systemic cognitive structures that store our preferences, beliefs and values
 - Subconsciously processes all incoming information to determine “best fit”
 - Engrained by education or long term exposure
 - Correspond with specific emotional responses attached to that concept
 - Activated by key words and phrases

Examples of Framing

- Language Use
 - “Solutions” vs. “problems”
 - “Opportunity” vs. “poverty”
 - “Vulnerable populations” vs. “poor”
 - “Economic security” vs. “safety net”
 - “Workforce housing” vs. “affordable housing”
 - “People power” vs. “the power of government”

What the Research Says

- Solutions-oriented stories can change minds and build support
 - Stay clear of jargon tied to our industry, since most people won't understand what it really means. Leads to misconceptions as people use the most readily available frame to categorize. (Rankin, Jargon vs. Actual Meaning)
- Framing is real and unavoidable
 - Brain imaging technology has allowed more precise observation of the neurological/psychological properties of human brains engaged in political thought (Lakoff, Disaster Messaging)

- Activating specific frames releases specific emotions
 - When we come into contact with external information, our “gut reaction” is determined by a tally of past associations. These previous experiences help to translate newly received information into cues that trigger emotions. (Brader, Striking a Responsive Chord)
- Use of myths evokes the framing paradox
 - Because words activate frames, denials and clarifications on contentious issues can paradoxically contribute to the resiliency of popular myths. (Vendantam, Persistence of Myths Could Alter Public Policy)

Recommended Strategies

- Target specific emotional responses “what feels better?”
- Cut down on the jargon
- Don’t lose your message in an attempt to appeal to a wider audience
- Tailor messages to specific audiences
 - Constituents
 - Policymakers
- Repeat, repeat, repeat!



Messaging to Constituents

- Use strong, compelling facts in moderation
- Incorporate elements which appeal to both conservative and progressive frames
- Address wider community impacts, not a specific group
- Focus on solutions
- Avoid moral reasoning



Messaging to Policymakers

- Evidence-Based Results
- Return on Investment
- National Prosperity and Competitiveness
- National Security



Amplifying our Messages

- Communicate the interdependence of needs and services
- Maintain a coherent, consistent narrative
- Build a “big tent”
- It’s bigger than the brand



Additional Resources

- [“How Do We Make Up the Difference?” by Irv Katz](#)
- [RWJ’s “Social Determinants of Health” Report](#)
- [Lake Research Partners’ “Cross-generational Perspectives on Economic Security”](#)
- [First Focus’ Online Messaging Resources](#)
- [“Disaster Messaging” by George Lakoff](#)

