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Communications Strategies to Galvanize Support for Youth

Adapted by Ada McMahon from audio conference presentations by Kristin Grimm and Ann Lochner

The Forum for Youth Investment

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Communications Conference Call: February 14, 2007

As part of our ongoing series of conference calls for child and youth advocates, the Forum for Youth Investment, along with Voices for America's Children and KIDS COUNT, hosted a call on communications. The call was requested by a number of advocates who expressed interest in the topic, and was particularly timely for the Forum itself, which has recently been exploring how to best communicate its mission and vision for youth in a way that will gather broad-based support and inspire action. The Forum uses the phrase "Ready by 21™ - Ready for college, work and life" to describe its vision for youth, both to imply positive development across the domains of youth development and to be accessible to a general audience. Recognizing that many youth advocates struggle with communications, the Forum invited Kristin Grimm, president of Spitfire Strategies, and Ann Lochner, director of the Applied Research Collaborative on Youth Development at the University of Minnesota and former director of the Minnesota Commission for Out-of-School-Time, to share their expertise and offer concrete advice. Though this advice was tailored for youth advocates, the lessons Ann and Kristin conveyed may be useful to a wider audience of youth-serving organizations, policy makers, community leaders, parents, and young people themselves. This memo is a synthesis of the lessons and advice from the call.

Introduction to Framing

(adapted from presentation by Ann Lochner)

Framing can have many meanings. According to the FrameWorks Institute's strategic frame analysis, frames are mental shortcuts, small sets of internalized concepts and values which allow us to accord meaning to new information. Frames are triggered by choices of language, messages, and images. It is important to realize how much these three things (language, messages, images) can profoundly effect policy decisions.

The strategic frame analysis approach to communications research is designed to promote long term policy change. It was developed by the FrameWorks Institute as a multidisciplinary, multimethod research model that documents dominant frames in public discourse, determines their impact on public opinion and suggests how public thinking can be re-directed or re-framed to support positive policy solutions in keeping with the recommendations of scholarly research and policy experts. Applying the strategic frame analysis to youth policy (as The Minnesota Commission on Out-of-School-Time did recently), the conversation or new narrative becomes one focused on supporting all young people in a pivotal time of their development as opposed to preventing a particular deficit behavior.

Framing in Youth Issues

(adapted from presentation by Kristen Grimm)

Groups need to answer three main questions when getting ready to talk about an issue:

1. What frame are you reinforcing? Is it good or bad for you?
2. What is your position within the frame?
3. What messaging do you want to get out to reinforce that position?

FrameWorks Institute Resources

The William T. Grant Foundation funded research on Americans' attitudes about youth and how advocates might best engage Americans in a discussion about positive youth development. Read reports on the research findings: www.frameworksinstitute.org/products/youth.shtml

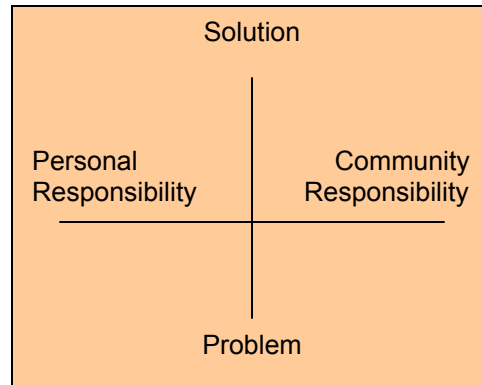
E-Workshop offers online training to familiarize children's advocates with the core principles of framing a message for public understanding and support. Click on "Access the E-Workshop" and register to use this tool: www.eworkshop.frameworksinstitute.org/

E-zines, short briefs covering a number of topics: www.frameworksinstitute.org/products/kids.shtml

Positioning Within the Responsibility Frame

(adapted from presentation by Kristen Grimm)

This diagram (*see right*) illustrates how to think about positioning youth messages within a dominant frame: responsibility. The horizontal line is **personal responsibility vs. community responsibility**. The majority of conversations about youth are about personal responsibility: “Youth get into trouble;” “youth drop out of school.” These imply personal responsibility, instead of community responsibility. Compare “dropping out” to being “pushed out” of school. The latter is a shift towards community responsibility: schools and communities (not just youth themselves) are responsible for youth leaving school prematurely. “Readiness” is a good way to shift the focus to community responsibility as well. Youth advocates should try to avoid narratives that blame youth and parents and excuse communities. This shift isn’t reframing, because the message still relies on the responsibility frame (which can be very strong). It is repositioning: holding communities responsible and avoiding the “pulled up from the bootstraps” narrative.



The vertical line in the chart illustrates **problem vs. solution**. Messages are more effective when they are positioned around solutions, not problems. Problems seem unsolvable when they are harped on so much.

So, youth advocates need to deliberately refocus on solutions and community responsibility. If you look back over your organization’s materials you might find that you are unintentionally reinforcing the personal responsibility frame, and you need to ask yourself if this is beneficial.

Messaging

(adapted from presentation by Kristen Grimm)

Once you know you are positioning yourself in the community responsibility and solutions quadrant, think about your messaging. Be careful about messages that won’t help your cause. Often people talk about the education system being broken and in the next breath ask for tax dollars to go into the education system. People don’t want to fund a broken system, so that’s a counterproductive message. A similar message is saying that government hasn’t done its job. People don’t want bigger government (especially if you portray it as inept), so *a good way to send a message about government spending is to talk about priorities*. Ask “what are our government’s priorities?” Focus the message on what’s working, remind people of good programs. (People are doing this around SCHIP reauthorization. To expand SCHIP coverage, advocates are conveying that the program has been enormously successful.) Too often people talk about something “falling short” and “not getting the job done” when they want to expand it.

Additional Messaging Tips

If you are going to use visuals in a campaign, it is best to illustrate the solution setting as opposed to the problem. Show youth actively engaged and looking productive in a community setting, as opposed to hanging out on a street corner.

Choose messengers who have the most credibility. These are not always the most obvious choices. For example: coaches, mentors and community leaders might be more ideal messengers than parents on certain issues.

Use sympathetic language (e.g., youth rather than teens). Specific language options have been well tested, so pick language that research suggests is most effective for the audiences you are targeting. Check out the FrameWorks resources cited above for more information on research findings about specific language.

Avoid exceptionalism. People prefer it when everyone is included, rather than a focus on some youth, some people. When a message focuses on specific populations, people often ask how it affects them or their children directly. If there is no clear connection or benefit to them, they tune out the message. They also don't want to see that some are getting things that others aren't. So talk about how *all* children matter, and make the conversation be about what *all* young people need. Not only do people respond better to it, this kind of messaging promotes better policy: the conversation becomes asset rather than deficit based. It sets the stage and carries a movement farther than focusing on specific problems. You can focus on target populations, such as foster youth, as long as it doesn't sound like they are getting special treatment and things that you don't advocate for other children. Talk about what all children deserve, and say that since foster youth are under state custody it is the state's responsibility to give it to them.

Understand what your message really needs to do. People often think that the purpose of a message is to inform. But at a certain point you don't need to inform anymore. This is the case with early childhood development. The message about the importance of this developmental time is now well understood by the public. Often you don't need to inform, you need people to take action and provide opportunities. Here are two examples of what a message could do:

- **Start a debate**

If there is no attention to your issue and your message isn't gaining traction, you could start a debate. For example, the #1 question campaign in Kansas, where the advocates got community leaders to agree to ask this number one question in community sessions: "Is it good for the children?" They would ask this question to start a debate and get children into the picture. Think about messaging that focuses on a question if you want to start a debate.

- **Redefine perceived social norms**

Sometimes in debates advocates come across real misconceptions that we need to sort out. For example, the National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy found that teens thought their peers were having sex a lot more than they actually were. So they focused their message on how, in reality, a lot of people were waiting. That was a very important cultural shift to make.

Discovering the Activation Point, by Spitfire Strategies, focuses specifically on strategies for mobilizing concerned people to supportive action by identifying and leveraging their activation points. In Appendix C you will find case studies on the #1 Question Campaign in Kansas and the teen pregnancy campaign. Download the book for free: www.activationpoint.org/downloads

Overcome barriers. In order to overcome barriers to action on your issue, you need to understand what the barriers are. For example, in early childhood brain development, people often try to get parents to do more to teach their kids, and throw the science of early childhood brain development at them. But it turns out that a lot of the parents just don't have time. Understanding that the barrier is time, not parental ignorance, led to a new messaging campaign: "everyday moments are learning moments." Your message has to address the right barriers to be effective.

Create political cover for tough issues. This is especially important for issues like juvenile justice that focus on less sympathetic youth. In these situations you need to develop political cover so that people think that it really is a good idea. Talk about reclaiming the futures of the youth rather than serving this unsympathetic population. Example: Reclaiming Futures in California (www.reclaimingfutures.org/).

These are a lot of examples from different youth issues and approaches. But *the key is figuring out the communication conundrum that you are trying to solve with your messaging.* And don't just assume that because the information you are putting out is factual it will persuade people to do what you want them to do. Ask yourself: "what exactly do I want people to do and what messaging will compel them to do it?" This links back to positioning: you want people to think

about a community's responsibility for the readiness of their youth. And emphasize the frame that the community is responsible for getting our youth safely into adulthood with education and the ability to hold a job, etc.

Discussion of Recent Minnesota Research

(adapted from presentation by Ann Lochner)

In Minnesota, state youth leaders and a growing body of research validated the essential role of high quality out-of-school-time opportunities in the lives of young people, but there was still a lack of public will for policies supporting these programs, partially because of a lack of public understanding about the developmental process. In response, the Minnesota Commission on Out-of-School-Time and its Minnesota collaborators sponsored a FrameWorks Institute study about the attitudes of Minnesota citizens and parents toward youth and youth programs. Specifically, commissioners wanted to understand how to go about building public will that would effectively engender public support for positive youth development programs in communities across the state.

FrameWorks' Minnesota Research findings in brief:

Three critical frame elements that can greatly aid in public appraisals of youth programs:

- **Brain development** is a vibrant, on-going dynamic in the overall maturation process for young people. Specific phases of brain development are activated by particular features of programs in which they are engaged. This concept engaged focus groups and gave them a better understanding about what adolescent development is about.
- The **role of youth** in community development—positive youth development relates to community, state and national future viability. These connections were found to make Minnesotans re-think their reactions to youth programs if they are understood in the context of community development. High quality youth programs provide a pathway through which young people are transformed and are actively engaged.
- The **role of community** in youth development—it is in community settings that developmental opportunities take place. The use of strong, concrete developmental metaphors—like the stages of brain architecture that accompany development—help people understand that young people are experiencing a stage of growth and change that lasts two decades and is interconnected with the environment of developmental opportunities available in their communities.

How to message effectively for youth development programs:

- Place the solution up-front, indicate what readers should understand as the central need, reasons they should be concerned and the change needed.
- Make explicit the relationship between the role of parents, youth programs and communities by framing them as interconnected and interdependent.
- Make explicit the developmental benefits of youth programs and how they support young people's developmental needs by employing brain architecture as a simplifying model.
- Position community as the place young people naturally navigate as their maturation process progresses, and as the locus of developmental activities.

Resources on Minnesota

The Minnesota Commission on Out-of-School-Time Web site: www.mncost.org

Journeys into Community, the final report of the commission:

www.mncost.org/MNCOSTfinal_report.pdf

Much of the information in this section can be found in the more extensive article *Framing Youth Issues for Public Support*, by Ann Lochner and Susan Nall Bales, from the Winter 2006 volume of *New Directions in Youth Development*:

www.forumfyi.org/Files/framing_youth_issues_article.pdf

- The value of developmental opportunities is elevated when correlated with practicing roles they will later play as adults as integrated community members and contributors.

Questions and Answers

(answers adapted from responses by both Ann Lochner and Kristen Grimm)

Q: What's the best way for those without any intentional communications strategy to get started? What if they don't have funding?

A: It isn't about whether or not you have money, because you are definitely going to be communicating whether you are intentional about it or not. Most communication actually goes on in meetings, not big media campaigns or advertising. So you have to go into meetings thinking, "this is who I am talking to, this is what they care about, this is how I can relate my issue to theirs, and this is what I want to ask them." For advocacy purposes, you have to get your "ask" in. Understand which audiences are important to you and how you are going to talk about your issue with them. You can come up with these strategies quickly and they don't involve a lot of money. Money comes in when you have a lot of target audiences. But one thing we have found time and again, especially on youth issues, is that a lot of decisions are being made by relatively few people, so you don't need to mobilize your entire state. You often need to get just three people to say yes. And so really think strategically: "How do I get these three people to say yes? Who is influential to them?", and then talk to those people. Spitfire Strategies did develop a free tool online, www.smartchart.org, which helps people come up with communications plans once they have an organizational goal. If you are strategic about your goal it also becomes more doable, because you realize you don't need everyone on your side, you only need to target your communications to certain people. Look for a strategy with the most impact. Think about the number and which people you need, and get those people deeply active, rather than passively supporting you. And think about strategies and methods to get these people on your side. For example, policy makers tend to ignore 1,000 identical form letters, and pay attention to five handwritten letters. Getting those five and those 1,000 probably took the same amount of time, but the latter had much more impact.

"Most people know who the decision makers are, but they really never go and ask them what it will take to get their support. Instead they wage this whole campaign having never asked that key question, and the truth is you should always start there. Find out from the decision maker what would make them support what you are looking to do, and that will give you a lot of direction about how to communicate around your issue."

- Kristen Grimm

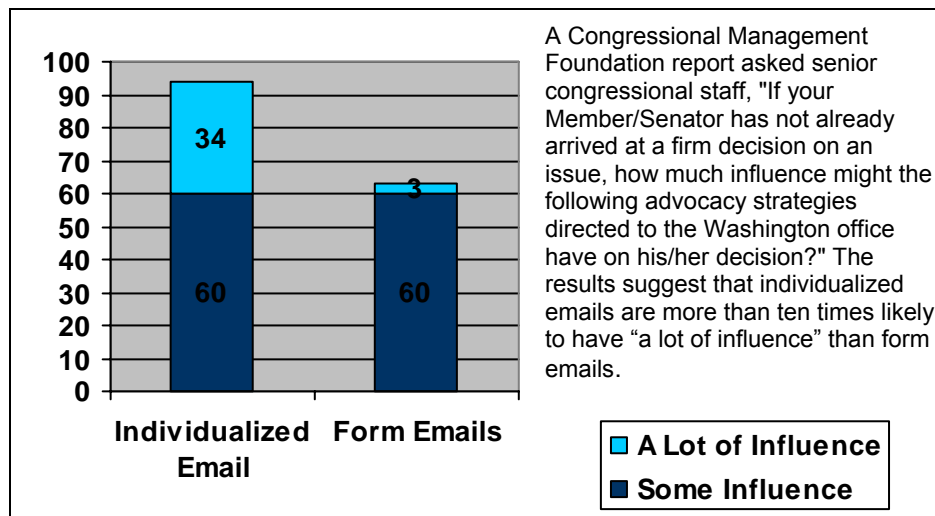


Chart adapted from *Communicating with Congress* by Congressional Management Foundation © 2005

Q: A lot of polls ask questions like “do you support high quality after-school programs for kids?” and produce numbers that make it look like 70 to 80% of people support after-school, without judging these people’s priorities or interest in policy change. How can polling be used strategically? What are the best kinds of questions to ask?

A: Polling works on issues that you know will poll well. Often when you go deeper with your questions and ask about raising taxes, etc., support for your issue softens. Polling is useful if you can take it to a politician and say, “Look, there is a lot of support for our issue; it is not a political liability.” But politicians are still going to want to know that they won’t get in trouble down the line, when the time comes to pay for it. Hold stakeholder interviews to find out what the barriers to the issue are. A policy maker might say, “I really need to know that the Chamber of Commerce is with us on this,” and then your whole campaign focuses on getting the Chamber on board. Or mobilize people from a certain district. Bigger polls are not that helpful for targeted advocacy. They might show what misconceptions are out there. They allow you to know generally whether you have a politically popular or unpopular issue.

Additional Tips on Polling

- There are many polls available for free online. Do an internet search for polls on your issue, especially before diving into original research.
- Talk to your funders, who might be supporting organizations with the polling data you need.
- Use free electronic surveys for your own internal messaging purposes. If you have access to a group and would like to get a sense of their thinking, barriers to their support of your issue, or you want to test out messaging you are considering, develop and send a free survey using a service such as www.Zoomerang.com or www.SurveyMonkey.com.
- Not all polling is created equal. Make sure to hire a company with a good reputation.

As soon as kids pass age 12, suddenly people think very differently about them, people think these kids are “bad,” and they are even scared when they encounter some teenagers in everyday life. And a lot of this experiential understanding doesn’t come out in polls, but it does come out in focus groups, when you are really trying to figure out what people’s belief systems and experience are. Also, you cannot overcome people’s “common sense” feeling with just data and polling. People reject polling information if it doesn’t fit with their experiences and beliefs. So polls are good to reinforce what people already think, but you can’t just release a poll to change people’s minds. They don’t trump everyday life.

Sometimes numbers overshadow the message. Numbers can be that overwhelming point at which people tune out because problems can sound so big and so horrible that it can seem that there is nothing we can do about them. Explain what the numbers mean, otherwise you aren’t giving the audience a chance to grab onto anything.

Q: Do you know of any communications campaigns and strategies happening around the 2008 election?

A: Many candidates are figuring out their platforms and positioning themselves, so now is a great time to get in touch with them and have a conversation. It is a great time not only to get your issue on the agenda, but also to reframe issues and change the debate. Figure out when presidential candidates are coming through your state or where their state offices are, and set up meetings with them to talk about your issues. Be warned that they may ask you or your group to participate in an event, so think about that strategically. And of course, be sure to stay on the right side of lobbying and electioneering laws.