FRAMING

STORIES

FOR CHANGE

STORIES

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STORYTELLING

IS ALL THE RAGE IN NONPROFIT COMMUNICATIONS.

Everyone, it seems, is jumping onto the storytelling bandwagon, driving trends in interactive, virtual, and visual stories, story-banking, and science-based storytelling. And for good reason: Stories have remarkable power to drive social change. They appeal to us on a core emotional level and lodge deeply in our minds. Social science and cognitive research show they are more effective than facts, explanations, or arguments in influencing thinking and behavior.

Yet not all stories work the way we think they do. We are fed a steady diet of stories that are, in fact, counterproductive. For example, being exposed continually to individual stories of trial and tribulation makes it easy to see effort and drive as the factors that account for success. But, at the same time, this makes it exceedingly difficult to see a bigger picture and recognize systemic causes and the need for collective solutions to social problems. Similarly, stories that focus overwhelmingly on the extent of problems with little by way of solutions can sap issue-engagement and undermine efforts to mobilize movements. These stories do not build support for our issues, and some even trigger unproductive thoughts or depress support. "Narrative" and

"story" are popular terms in our industry, but not any story will do. We need new and better stories that can advance our issues.

So, how can we make sure that the stories we tell advance our issues?

Let's start with what those of us working for social change want: a society where everyone has a fair and equal chance to reach their full potential and experience positive well-being now and in the future. How can we achieve this and create a society that embodies these values? Part of the answer is that we need public policies that support fairness and equality for all. We know that changing policies in deep and durable ways requires

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building public understanding of social problems—and the will to solve them. To make this change, we must move people to see, think, and feel differently about social issues and how they work so that they respond differently to social problems.

That's where stories come in. Stories are an important part of social change because they have the power to shape the way that people think and feel about their worlds and how they act in them. People understand, communicate, and remember in story. Humans, in fact, are hard-wired for stories. If we want to connect with people, if we want to win their hearts and minds, we need to tell stories. We talk about the importance of story in the communications industry because we all think in story.

Effective stories don't just happen. We need to develop, test, pilot, and disseminate them to make sure they can help create the change—and the society—we are working toward. We need to make sure our stories are well framed. The way we choose to present information shapes people's perceptions and behaviors, and is a critical component of effective storytelling. All stories are framed, whether we realize it or not. Thinking about how to frame stories can help us find narratives that "work," that expand the public conversation and change its terms, educate people about complex issues, and help them evaluate proposed solutions.

The way we frame stories shapes and constrains the effects they have. Some stories open up space for discussion, while others shut it down. Some stories shed new light on

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an issue, while others remind people of what they already think and reinforce their existing beliefs. Some stories motivate people to act, while others depress engagement and dampen hope. The way we frame our stories, in other words, can determine whether our initiatives succeed or fail.

Framing research shows that narrative choices make the difference between stories that are memorable—that stick—and change thinking

and those that fall flat or even backfire. Sometimes these choices are small, such as which pronouns we use in an op-ed or speech. Other times they are big, such as which values to build our communications practice around to explain why our issue matters, or which metaphors to use to explain how it works.

Our research shows that these choices have measurable effects on public thinking. For example, in research in Alberta, Canada, we found that framing addiction issues around the value of interdependence—the idea that we all depend on one another to achieve our full potential—increased support for addiction programs. On the other hand, using the value

CORE PRINCIPLES TO FRAME STORIES FOR SOCIAL CHANGE

1 **Stop communicating like you are your audience.**

It is normal to overestimate the degree to which other people think like we do—this is called false consensus bias—and experts and advocates working on social issues frequently fall into this trap. They assume that what convinces them and moves their thinking is the same set of things that will convince and move those with whom they are trying to communicate. For example, advocates in the field of child abuse and neglect in the United Kingdom may be moved by subtle differences in the prevalence of neglect between Scotland and Northern Ireland. But members of the British public don't give a biscuit about these kinds of statistics. They are moved by values, explanations, and solutions that they can see themselves taking part in.

of empathy to advocate for addiction policies depressed support for these same programs.

We can study the frame-understanding response to create and tell more effective stories. That's what we do at the FrameWorks Institute: We expose research participants to different frames and measure how they affect understanding, salience, efficacy, and engagement. We no longer have to guess which stories work. These are empirical questions with empirical answers.

In the course of this work—and by studying the larger body of framing research—we've developed a set of core principles to frame stories for social change.

2   Facts *do* matter.

The idea that we live in a post-fact world is a popular meme, but our research shows that facts play an important role in effective storytelling. In isolation, data about racial disparities in the criminal justice system, for example, are not incredibly powerful in boosting support for reforms. But these same facts are quite powerful when integrated into a story that is framed with a productive value—the idea that we need to design a system that solves problems and is in line with the goals we have for society. In this case, values and facts together create a story that is much more powerful than the same message without facts. Facts alone won't win the day, but don't give up on them—they have a place in your stories.

3   Use explanation, not logic.

Communications science clearly shows stories that use rhetorical strategies to counter opposing viewpoints or ideologies reaffirm existing beliefs. Explaining how social or scientific phenomena work helps people reevaluate solutions and accord issues greater salience. We have found, for example, that explaining how chronic stress affects developing brains helps people understand a set of core principles of child development and increases support for solutions to mitigate adversity.

4 Avoid crisis messaging.

Social issues have experienced "emergency inflation" in recent decades and, as a result, the public has become numb, or even averse, to crisis. Phrases like "housing crisis," "silver tsunami," or "broken education system" don't carry the motivational weight they once did and don't move people to action. Messages high in urgency but low in efficacy produce powerful feelings of fatalism and futility and depress issue engagement. Stories that balance urgency with well-developed explanations of solutions and efficacy are more likely to engage audiences and move people to action.

5 Watch out for "resonance."

Popular television shows like *Mad Men*, the dial-testing polling craze, and the unrelenting "horse race" political coverage have conditioned us to believe that we should develop messages that "resonate" with the public. But when social change is our objective and resonance is our end goal, we open ourselves to danger in message testing. From a strategic perspective, not all resonance is good resonance. Some messages may be highly resonant—they may connect with people in deep and powerful ways—but lead in directions that do not align with our strategic objectives as communicators. Crisis messages are a notorious example of this. Crisis and other fear-inducing messages are emotionally resonant, but whether on climate change, aging, or immigration, they can actually depress people's support for social policies, tank efficacy, and send engagement down the tubes. Go beyond resonance and test outcomes like understanding, efficacy, and engagement. Good stories need to resonate, but that resonance needs to move people in positive directions.

As strategic communicators, we need stories that allow people to think and talk in different ways about the important issues of our time and that have the power to change policy and, ultimately, culture. The good news is we don't have to guess which stories have the power to do this. We can find the answers by focusing on the frames. ■