

FRAMING YOUR ORGANIZATION'S STORY

A FRAMING SESSION OVERVIEW

{ story first }

{ STORY FIRST, TOOLS LAST }

In any communication or messaging work, there is a temptation to jump to specific tools and tactics. What will our social media strategy be? Should we use Snapchat? Will we make a video?

Years ago, when more of our business was focused on web design, we regularly got a similar question: “I need a new website. Can you make me one?”

Our response was pretty much the same: “Yes ... but why do you think you need a new website?”

Frequently, the organization didn’t actually have a website problem—they were wrestling with another, deeper-seated problem. But the website was something tangible that they could fix—a problem they could easily solve (or so it seemed), and a budget line item that they could easily justify.

Yet fixing the website wasn’t going to solve their bigger problem.

So before we engaged in any website redesign, we set about uncovering the real problem, understanding the story behind it, and figuring out how to reframe the organization’s story to solve it. Sometimes, a website was part of that solution, but many times it was not.

What we've learned from working with dozens of organizations through the years is that every tool and every tactic will be more effective if used in the service of the right story. Unless you are telling the right story to the right audience, no tool in the kit is going to move your audience, or connect with them in a meaningful way.

That's why, true to our name, story comes first.

This means that before we dive in on any deliverables, we need to get the story right. We want to understand the real struggle, where the real challenge lies, and the story behind that struggle. And we want to know what success looks like, even if you're not enjoying as much of it as you wish you were. Because understanding both sides of that equation—what's working and what's not working—helps us get clarity around the story we need to tell to move your audience where you want them to go.

When you get the story right, you can make smarter, more informed, and more efficient choices about strategy, messaging, and deliverables. When you get the story right, you can spend your time and your money more wisely, because you spend it on the right things in the right ways.

Getting the story right means taking the time and investing the energy to listen, right from the start. We want to understand all of the audiences you need to reach, and the stories those audiences currently tell themselves about the work you do and the environment in which you do it. We want to understand how those audiences are currently responding to the messages you've been communicating—and what you feel those audience members currently aren't quite getting—so we can identify opportunities for connection and influence. And we want to understand the story you want those audiences to embrace.

Once we understand the story, we can tailor the tool(s) to best tell that story, so that it can help you reach your goals and achieve maximum impact.

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true to our
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{ FRAMING THE STORY }

Getting clarity around your organizational story begins with our Framing Process.

PREPARATION

Before any face-to-face meetings, we gather as much background information as possible. We will review this material to gain an understanding of your organization's challenges, successes, history, and current communication efforts. We request that you do the following:

- ◆ Share internal documents (strategy, how you communicate with your staff, partner organizations) and external documents (strategy, brochures, emails, any other communication with target audiences) at least two weeks before the date of the internal Framing Session
- ◆ Reserve session space for Internal Framing that includes whiteboard or flip charts, WiFi, and projection capability

The Story First team will review and analyze the provided documents before the Internal Framing session.

INTERNAL FRAMING

The Story First team meets in person with your team to:

- ◆ Capture the current story as you see it
- ◆ Examine target audiences, establishing audience composition, history, known interests, known resistance to messaging, successful messages, etc.
- ◆ Analyze the challenge as internal stakeholders see it, including examining where communication breaks down with each of the target audiences
- ◆ Examine current language/models used to communicate about the organization and its work

- ◆ Identify the story you want your audience(s) to embrace
- ◆ Identify current challenges/gaps between the current story and the story you want your audience(s) to embrace
- ◆ Identify advocates; analyze advocate relationships to determine causes and effects of advocacy
- ◆ Identify adversaries; discuss the story they tell themselves about your organization

AUDIENCE FRAMING

We will then conduct a series of small-group or one-on-one interviews with audience members you identify, ideally including advocates as well as adversaries.

These discussions will seek to understand the respective audience members':

- ◆ Current perceptions/current story of your organization
- ◆ Awareness of your organization and understanding of its work
- ◆ Awareness of and feedback on existing/prior outreach and communication efforts
- ◆ Priorities; what they value and find important; where they have common cause
- ◆ Perceptions of initiatives or communication campaigns that have been effective (and those that have not been effective) with them and other members of the target audience in shifting their perceptions or changing their minds

Note: These sessions should be 60-90 minutes in length.

DELIVERABLES

After completing the Internal and Audience Framing, Story First will deliver two documents:

Story Summary report, to include:

- ◆ Key insights from internal stakeholder and audience interviews.
- ◆ Analysis of strengths and weaknesses of current storytelling efforts.
- ◆ Recommendations on how to reframe the story, including how to effectively connect with each of the target audiences.

Strategy Recommendation document, to include:

- ◆ Specific strategies for telling this reframed story effectively, including both a long-term approach and specific tactical ideas.
- ◆ No-cost strategies, strategies that leverage existing resources, and strategies that would require additional funding.
- ◆ Language that can be used in grant applications for strategies where additional funding is needed.

After we have delivered these documents, we will work with you to help develop a strategic plan that best implements the ideas and recommendations proposed, and will work with you in an advisory and consulting role to help implement these storytelling strategies.

TESTIMONIALS



{ Nicole Hudson }
Lead Catalyst
Forward Through Ferguson }

When we started working with Story First at the beginning of 2016, our challenges were myriad. There was the issue of what the [Ferguson Commission] report was in the first place, because a lot of people hadn't paid attention to that. There was what had happened, what was happening now, that there was life after the report was delivered that was confusing people. Then the complexity of the transition hand-off [from the Commission to Forward Through Ferguson, a new organization], that it was supposed to go one way, and it went a different way. Then, once you got past all of that, there was the traditional set of challenges on who we are, why we're here, what we're here to do, how we're going to do it, and what our preferable outcomes are.

The Framing Process gave us an opportunity to get out of our own heads, and swim out of the muck of conflicting, confusing, complex messages that were our reality, to get in the heads of the audiences that we needed to most clearly communicate to, and to understand what the priority messages were for those audiences. Just going through the process of framing started to give us a set of phrases and language that became immediately useful in speaking to those audiences. It also gave us a lens through which we could see new pieces of information as they arose. Something new comes up you hadn't planned for, and [when you've gone through this process] you can say, "Okay, how does this fit within the frame of what we're here to do? Oh, it doesn't. Okay, so now we can deal with it in that way."

The idea of being intentional and strategic about the story we're going to tell about the organization seems like a table stake, especially dealing with the types of issues that we deal with. Having a new story to tell, being clear about the story, the narratives that you're battling, and being solid about what your story is ... I don't see how we could do business without them.

Note: In May 2017, Nicole was named by new St. Louis Mayor Lyda Krewson as Deputy Mayor for Racial Equity and Priority Initiatives.



Vladimir Oge, MPH, CHES
Director, Health Promotion
Georgia Institute of Technology

Our mission is to empower students to make healthy decisions, and so that requires us to use a lot of traditional and unconventional avenues of communication, social media, print media. And really, we have a complex issue to talk about. A number of the things that we need to discuss are pretty sensitive—sexual health, sexual assault, alcohol and other drugs.

It was really important for our students—who think they are invincible—to re-frame what health and wellness is, what it can mean for them as college students.

I think what made the Framing Process effective was, instead of positioning the issue of student health as, “You should do this because it will make you a healthier student,” you re-framed it as, “You should actually do this because it will help you succeed better academically.”

Understanding that some of our students are so driven, that they have such a competitive nature, and they’re not necessarily inclined to think of themselves as sick people, finding the direct motivations that drive human change in general, but particularly for that audience, was a better re-frame for us.

{ REFERENCES }

NICOLE HUDSON

Lead Catalyst
Forward Through Ferguson
nicole@forwardthroughferguson.org
20 South Sarah Street
St Louis, MO 63108
314.974.8372
<http://forwardthroughferguson.org/>

VLADIMIR OGE, MPH, CHES

Director, Health Promotion
Georgia Institute of Technology
vladimir.oge@health.gatech.edu
Joseph B. Whitehead Building
740 Ferst Drive NW
Atlanta, GA 30332
404.894.4869
<http://healthpromotion.gatech.edu/>

INDIA HARRIS-JONES

Prevention Coordinator
Ohio Domestic Violence Network
4807 Evanswood Drive, Suite 201
Columbus, OH 43229
614.781.9651 ext. 234
<http://ohman-ohio.org/>