FRAME WORKS

HEALTH+ STUDIO

STRATEGIC FRAMING & COMMUNICATIONS FOR CHANGE

Framing Success Stories

The "V.I.P." Approach

Talking about impact

For coalitions, sharing information about positive impact isn't a luxury; it's a necessity. Knowing that the work is making a difference helps to keep coalition members motivated. Hearing about the coalition's momentum can inspire more people to join the effort. And when coalitions are known for catalyzing and driving change, they have more credibility with the decision-makers who they need to influence – and the supporters they need to attract.

This resource is designed to help local public health coalitions identify and share more effective success stories – and to avoid ways of talking about impact that are underpowered or unproductive.

Framing impact

THE SHAPE OF THE STORY MATTERS

Because every coalition needs to talk about its impact, it's important to keep in mind that some ways of talking about success can fall flat or undermine other goals. If evidence of impact is shared only through numbers – without narrative – the communication is likely to have little effect.

Yet, not any story will do. Stories that reinforce negative stereotypes about marginalized communities and populations slow the journey toward equity. Stories that position the coalition as a superhero, leaping long-standing social obstacles in a single bound, usually come off as too self-congratulatory. Feel-good stories that revolve around a nonprofit "rescuing" people who are experiencing challenges may spark warm responses, but offer only a little-picture view of social problems that we need to tackle in bigger-picture ways.

When we learn to reshape our stories, we can help to shift mindsets in ways that bring structures and systems into view – while highlighting our role in changing them.

> **Every coalition needs to share its impact. The way those stories are framed makes a difference.**

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Story elements

THE INGREDIENTS THAT MAKE A STORY A STORY

For something to count as a *story,* it must involve change over time. Stories, as compared to other ways of organizing and sharing ideas, are more memorable and compelling. The first step to getting better at sharing your impact is to make sure that you're taking advantage of the power of story.

Numbers need narrative. Many communicators dress up their data in with slick fonts, attractive colors, and other graphic design elements – only to find that it doesn't make a splash. To dress your impact data to impress, wrap it into a narrative with a beginning, middle, and end.

The basic elements of a true story are already familiar to you: setting, characters, and plot. To arrange these ingredients to tell a success story, follow this outline:

- Setting: There was an important problem to be solved.
- Characters: The right group came together.
- Action: The group put in effort, using its mix of skills and know-how.
- Outcome: Things changed for the better!
- Moral: We can learn from this.

The sections that follow show how this outline can be used to create success stories on three winning themes: Victory, Ingenuity, and Progress.

Meet the VIPs

THREE THEMES FOR COALITION SUCCESS STORIES

Your impact stories will have more impact if you build them around one of three winning themes: Victory, Ingenuity, or Progress.

- Victory: Together, we stopped a problem from causing harm.
- Ingenuity: Together, we solved a puzzle.
- Progress: Together, we moved forward.

The "Victory" theme is helpful for showing off successes that involve a clear positive outcome – a definitive change with compelling evidence behind it. By shaping the story to focus on the triumph of a coalition over a social problem or condition, the story arc leads people to understand the underlying factors at play. Take care not to use this theme to tell a story of victory over an opponent. This framing can lead people to assume that your work is just "politics as usual," then dismiss it as partisan posturing.

The "Ingenuity" theme can work well when the win is highly technical, or when you worry that the fix might seem inconsequential to people who don't know the issue well. By focusing on the puzzle or dilemma your coalition was solving, you draw audiences into the plot and help the success make sense in context.

The "Progress" theme is helpful for highlighting incremental progress toward a longer-term goal. By lifting up both what has been accomplished and what is left to be done, you remind people that major change takes sustained effort and support.

By relying on these themes, it's less likely that your coalition will fall into the trap of telling stories that reinforce negative stereotypes, anti-government sentiment, or other unproductive ideas.

If you aren't sure which theme works best for a particular story, don't overthink it; just get started. The next section, which explains how to integrate the story elements and these themes, might provide the inspiration you need!

VIP Story Arcs

Once you've decided on a theme, it's time to elaborate on it and turn it into a story. The outlines below can help you decide what to include and what can be left out. We don't recommend repeating them word-for-word; they are intended to illustrate the points that should be put into your own words, with details from the situation you're talking about.

VICTORY
- Setting: There was a situation that wasn't in line with our shared values.
- Characters: A group of us came together.
- Action: We each contributed different skills and expertise to tackle the problem.
- Outcome: The problem was solved!
- Moral: We can learn from this! With teamwork and solidarity, we can make a real difference.

INGENUITY
- Setting: There was a tricky situation that was hard to figure out.
- Characters: A group of us came together. We took a fresh look at the situation. We came up with new ideas, and we borrowed some good ideas from elsewhere.
- Action: We gave the new approach a try. (Optional: It didn't work right away, so we made adjustments.)
- Outcome: It worked!
- Moral: We can learn from this! With ingenuity, we can make a difference, even on problems that seem unsolvable.

PROGRESS
- Setting: Conditions were changing – but the way things were handled hadn't caught up.
- Characters: A group of us came together.
- Action: We updated things. We got rid of what wasn't serving us anymore. We embraced more modern, forward-thinking ideas.
- Outcome: It worked better!
- Moral: We can learn from this! By making changes together today, we create a better tomorrow.

Putting It All Together

SHAPING AND SHARING STORIES

Begin by articulating your story in a single sentence, using the story arc for the theme.

If your coalition was instrumental in the adoption of a new regulation on tobacco retailer density, your story sentence on the theme of Victory might be, "Together, we eliminated the sale of tobacco products near elementary schools." Or, you could talk about the same win in terms of Ingenuity: "Together, we figured out how to keep tobacco companies from saturating our communities with ads for their deadly, addictive products."

With the basic story arc in mind, flesh out the various story elements, following the outline. Each section of the outline may take a sentence or two. An example is provided on the next page.

Add details that are unusual or surprising when you can. Find turns of phrase and images that help the story come to life for the reader.

When you have a draft of your story, ask others in your coalition to review it before sharing it externally. Others may notice opportunities for sharing the credit more broadly, or be able to offer ideas that improve the story. And once the story is polished, be sure to share it across the coalition– to remind them of their impact, and to equip them to share with others.

While working with this outline and themes should make it easier to generate stories, it still takes time and effort. Be sure to make the most of each story you create. Translate a single story into multiple formats – it can live out multiple lives as a slide in a presentation, a short piece of content on your website, a guest blog post, and a featured narrative in your annual report. You can point to each of those iterations through social media – creating at least a dozen posts that point to the same content over time.

Sample Success Story

Story Arc: "*Together, we eliminated the sale of tobacco products near elementary schools.*"

The Healthy Northside Coalition represents our community's commitment to creating an environment that promotes health and wellbeing. Yet, each morning on the way to school, Northside Elementary students were seeing up to two dozen ads for cigarettes, e-cigarettes, and cigars. Research shows that when kids see advertising for tobacco, it makes them much more likely to try tobacco products – and develop a dependency on nicotine that can be hard to break. [Setting]

Looking at the data on youth vaping rates, our coalition knew we needed to take action. We joined forces with the Northside Families Association – which had already noticed the uptick in sixth graders getting detentions or suspensions for vaping. [Characters]

Because tobacco companies give vendors strict rules for displaying promotional materials, the fix was more complicated than just asking store owners to take down the ads. Our legal team developed a model zoning regulation that would restrict the sale of tobacco within 1000 feet of a school. Our advocacy team helped the family association figure out how to organize parents to reach out to their city council members. Room parents from kindergarten to sixth grade got families from every background to learn about the effects of tobacco advertising and support the zoning change. [Action]

With such a wide chorus of voices calling out for change, the community council couldn't help but listen. Despite a last-minute legal challenge funded by the tobacco industry, the zoning restriction passed and went into effect on January 1. Now, no tobacco products are sold near the school – which also means that children aren't being pressured by the advertising that tobacco retailers post. [Outcome]

This story shows how, when we work together - and tap into the strengths and skills in our community – we can restore and reinvigorate Northside, making it the healthy environment we know it can be. [Moral]

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STRATEGIC FRAMING & COMMUNICATIONS

Acknowledgments

FrameWorks Institute

FrameWorks' mission is to advance the nonprofit sector's capacity to frame

social and scientific issues effectively. We do this through research, training,

and strategic partnerships.

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Health+ Studio

Health+ is a social impact strategy design studio. We work to advance the

health and well-being of children, adults, families, and communities.

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