

Defensive Framing: When It Seems They Are Really Out to Get You

There are many factors that contribute to tough, negative media. It may be that your opposition has effectively dominated the frame; or stereotyping of your issue or community makes any frame that contradicts those stereotypes difficult to get through. This briefing memo outlines steps to take when perceptions held by the public or particular media outlets are getting in the way of your policy goals. Defensive framing should only be undertaken if the issue is “under attack” (i.e., receiving consistently negative coverage) in spite of facts to the contrary. Repairing these situations take time and persistence but take heart: in media advocacy, change is the one constant.

How to Use this Memo

This is not a recipe or cookie cutter that will guarantee uniform results. It is, however, a guide to shaping an effective media advocacy counter strategy. Use the steps to develop strategies that fit your organization’s unique resources, barriers and opportunities. Start with an assessment of where the group is and develop a plan with timelines to address any issues that arise. Most of all, take time to discuss these issues throughout your organization to ensure that everyone is “on the same page.”

Assess the damage. Occasional misquotes or quotes taken out of context, although troublesome, are not enough to justify a defensive framing strategy. Make an accurate and honest assessment of media coverage -- and don't forget to look critically at your organization's or coalition's role. Some key questions:

- Did we adequately prepare for interviews?
- Did we contact authors, reporters and/or editorial boards when negative stories or editorials were published/broadcast? Did we provide solid, credible information to counter these pieces?
- How strong is our opposition? What role do they play in coverage?
- Is coverage balanced and fair (even if we don't like it)?
- Are there certain outlets that are more *consistently* negative than others? Are there negative experiences with specific reporters?

Identify patterns of coverage. You should spend some time monitoring recent media coverage to identify the extent and source of the damage. By reviewing a sample period, you can determine if there is a pattern of negative portrayals of the issue, a particular community, or your organization. Start with the last six months if there has been a lot of coverage. Review a longer period if there's been less. If coverage has taken a recent turn for the worse, review at least three months before and after the shift.

Once you've determined the extent and source of the damage, you are ready to develop a defensive framing plan. The following are some common challenges and effective counter strategies. Remember, good strategies are formed by accurate assessments. Make sure you've done your homework. Your organization's particular problem may be one, none, or a combination of any of the following scenarios.

Stereotyping

The Problem: Researchers have well documented that the news industry is as likely to fall prey to negative stereotypes of race, gender or cultural groups as any other segment in society. Unfortunately, such framing can lead to scapegoating and dehumanizing images that make framing stories from a broader public health perspective difficult.

Counter Strategies: Start by documenting bias in your media outlets. This is a great project for community members -- especially youth. See *Additional Resources* section below for where you can get tracking forms and other tools. Once you have identified the bias, meet with key leadership in the targeted media and advocate for concrete steps for change (i.e., changes in hiring and editorial practices, attention to a broader range of stories, community forum, etc.). Follow up any meetings with organized letter writing campaigns and press advisories to keep the issue on the front burner. Some groups release their findings directly to the media and then meet with outlets. How your organization proceeds will depend on your assessment of the political terrain. Remember, shaming outlets is only a means to the real end: changing the situation for the better.

They Just Don't Get It

The Problem: They keep calling you an anti-gun/anti-alcohol/anti-anything but the pro public health group you are. Each time you spin your frame on policy and environmental causes, they ask more questions about families and individual responsibility.

Counter Strategies: This is an education campaign pure and simple. Start by practicing ways to clearly capture your perspective in neat, visual soundbites. Try messages out on people who are unfamiliar with your issue. You can peruse news stories to see how similar groups have framed these issues and "borrow" liberally. Once you've identified an effective message, put together data and other supporting information along with the bios and contact information of diverse but supportive perspectives in a press packet.

Some basic steps in repair: 1) meet with key reporters and producers individually (when possible) to discuss your perspective away from the pressure of deadlines; 2) immediately call to provide feedback/give more information on (both "good" and "bad") stories and mail the packet as follow up; 3) if funding is available, hold a well-organized press briefing -- this works better when there's a recent or upcoming news event to peak media interest; and 4) stay on message -- repetition is still the most effective means of penetration.

Dominating Opposition

The Problem: Well-funded opposition is dominating how the issue is framed. They may be buttressing an effective news strategy with paid advertising. If an industry, they may be using traditional pro-business frames (i.e., anti-regulation, freedom, individualism, etc.) to good advantage.

Counter Strategies: Start by thoroughly researching your opposition. How are they funded? What are their real interests? What's at stake for them? Do they have front or "astroturf" organizations posing as grassroots groups or "concerned citizens." Delegitimizing false claims and undermining their "moral" authority can be an effective strategy.

Sometimes, the problem is simply getting covered in the face of such high profile media. This is the time to be creative. Develop innovative media events that can help draw attention to your issue. Some groups engage in street theater, youth-focused events or non-traditional venues to get media attention. One group conducted a mock funeral in front of a target's home to dramatize a company's impact on the local environment. Also important, but often ignored, are "alternative" media outlets. These weekly publications and magazines often do a more in-depth job of reporting and are more willing to take on vested interests than corporate-owned dailies. They are also widely read by local "mainstream" print and electronic media professionals for story ideas.

It is also important to re-evaluate your message: What symbols or shared values should your frame be evoking? Are there false claims or myths you should be countering directly? Who's best to deliver the counter message? It is important to strike a balance between being reactive and being responsive to obstacles and opportunities as they develop.

Tough Customer

The Problem: Every once in a while, you get a reporter or producer who is just plain hostile. Oftentimes, they have a personal relationship with the issue or a past beef with the organization that affects their ability to do fair reporting. Of course, the vast majority of media professionals rise above their personal feelings and put their job first.

Counter Strategies: The best strategy is to avoid the individual. Think creatively about reframing the story in ways that facilitate cultivating new relationships. For example, forego another pitch to a recalcitrant city desk editor and try a business or health reporter instead. In most cases, balanced coverage from other sources will reduce the impact of bias.

Additional Resources

We Interrupt This Message provides training, technical assistance and materials for media activism and defensive framing including tracking and bias detector materials (415) 905-4527.

Fairness and Accuracy In Reporting (FAIR) provides media activism kits and technical assistance (212) 633-6700.