

Some Words on Media and Meaning

Public opinion research is used for mainly two reasons: 1) to legitimize or create momentum for or against a policy or action; and 2) as a planning device to develop media messages and strategies based on the “current” public opinion “terrain.”

Media strategy versus a good soundbite. Too often, we reduce our media strategy down to what we *say* into the microphone. So, we tend to focus the discussion on what *words* we think might work. As in: “Let’s talk about working families, yeah, that works...” This is not a strategy; this is a soundbite that works for the moment. **A strategy is an overall plan that takes into account how you want the terrain (discourse, power balance, etc.) to change -- and the images, data or evidence, personalities, ideas, stories and values that you can leverage to make that change occur. Framing is how you pull all those variables together to cut your issue and its accompanying message – like a picture composed in a frame.**

Given this understanding, one would not, for example, talk about family values because the right is winning with this frame. That’s like shooting yourself simply because it’s working – whether or not it’s working for *you*. You start with where you *really* want to go and plot the ride along the way. A good media strategy strikes the balance between taking advantage of short-term opportunities and the long-term goal. It should get you where you want to go with a minimum of detours. Focus on the long term and persistence in the face of opposition is key because changing public discourse takes awhile. Perhaps you’re old enough to remember when conservative was a bad word...

Messages versus soundbites. In this memo, a message is not a soundbite but an overarching *theme* one tries to communicate through soundbites. For example, a soundbite might be, “We don’t have to worry about the glass ceiling. By refusing us access to education, the Governor wants to keep poor moms in the gloomy cellar.” It’s off the top of my head – but you get the idea. The message, in this case, is that the state should allow education as work credit if they want to see welfare moms succeed. The underlying values communicated are big guy versus little guy, us versus them, family, fairness, education as an important factor in success -- and it links with current concerns about fairness to women in the workplace.

Good messages for our side are affective; focus on the institutional roots of the issue; and offer concrete, understandable “solutions.” For example, organizers working in public housing wanted to shift public perceptions of responsibility for the state of their housing project from tenants to the city housing authority. Their message was that their housing authority should be held to the same standards as any other landlord in the city. The message helped reframe the debate from individual blame (trifling tenants) to an institution that should be accountable to the residents. People forget that public housing has landlords who rarely act responsibly. Further, if they succumbed to the traditional media approach of having a few mothers tell sad stories of life in the projects, it wouldn’t have actually *contradicted* their campaign to force changes at the housing authority.

What the Numbers Are Saying

What follows is based on the data above and other data I did not put into this memo. Hopefully, it will help us think about how to best to develop messages with effective cross-cutting themes so that our individual soundbites reinforce our common agenda and strategy.

We're not in the majority on a lot of issues but there are clear demographic segments that are down with us.

Income is consistently a great predictor of support for initiatives to address poverty. The higher the income, the less likely one will be supportive, the lower the income, the more likely. It's important to note that this is changing a bit. Support of initiatives by lower income people (this definition varies a bit across polls but it is usually around 150% of the poverty line) have dropped a bit (ranging from 2-6% in the polls I read). Still, this drop has shown up in several polls (even ones of Europeans) and appears to be part of a five-year trend in erosion of support. Something definitely to watch and pay attention to.

When people have a structural or systemic understanding of poverty, they will support initiatives to address poverty.

Much of this drop (albeit slight) may be explained by a coincidental drop in respondents' belief in the systemic (versus individual) nature of poverty. It's no coincidence that welfare and other similar social programs were catalyzed by the "Great Depression." The Depression taught many the cruelties of the market and the millions with direct experience of its inadequacies knew that poverty was more than individual failing. The American memory is fading. Still, support for these programs is highest among those who have a structural or systemic understanding of poverty and the economy. Support also goes up among the general population when there are certain economic "events" (i.e., awareness of inflation in the late 1970s and early 80s, local plant shutdowns, etc.) that remind people of the vagaries of the market.

When fears of fraud, waste, ineffectiveness or allocating money to the "undeserving" are allayed, support increases.

What the right understands is that, on the whole, most people want to help others in need. When respondents are comfortable with the "deservingness" of the recipients, support increases dramatically. For example, asking a respondent if s/he would support efforts to "feed the hungry" is much more likely to be greeted affirmatively than the food stamp program. One connotes deserving human beings. The other, government waste.

However, most people have become cynical about whether there is anything much they can do. By pimping the sacred work ethic as well as national fears of "being taken advantage of" by the undeserving poor, the right has managed to effectively smear most social programs. Still, the polls (and other research) show that if you have a concrete initiative that easily understood and can be "proven" effective, folk will tend to support it.

Bottomline: *Talking about the problem is much less important than offering understandable solutions.* Or put another way, concrete action is more important than education (though both are necessary).

Rugged Individualism and triumphant individual frames are not good for our side.

It is extremely seductive, then, to figure out how to make our issues "soft and cuddly." Throw up pictures of adorable children, hard working moms trying to get by, etc. These just reinforce the opposition. Individualistic values (framed as individual responsibility) are strongly correlated with opposition to anti-poverty initiatives. The stronger a person holds these values, the more likely they are to oppose any public initiative to address poverty or other social issues. It doesn't help for us to reinforce these frames with triumphant individual stories of our own. We've got to be consistent in our telling of the structural and institutional roots of these problems -- as a foundation for why we are advocating institution-based solutions.

Racist attitudes and anti-poor attitudes are bedfellows.

Avoiding the race question doesn't help. It hurts. There's a reason why people of color are over represented at the bottom of the income scale. If we don't explain it then we abdicate the explanation to the other side. And you know what they'll say: Culture of poverty, laziness, inferior, lack of role models, poor family structure and so on. The right literally uses people of color (especially African Americans and Latinos) as poverty mascots to reinforce attitudes about the poor by leveraging racist stereotypes on their behalf. We often try to counter by finding white faces to illustrate our stories. That helps a little in the short term but without a long-term strategy to bring people toward a structural understanding of race and the economy, we won't get far.

Although many people think the market is the best system we can hope for, they believe corporations have too much power.

The Preamble Collaborative and others have documented deep anti-corporate sentiment. It seems to have limitations. For example, a lot of folk seem to think CEOs outrageous salaries are "earned" through business acumen and aplomb. Still, a large majority of respondents indicate that corporations need more regulations and they should do more to provide good, stable jobs. This affords us some great opportunities, especially if we can erode the notion that deregulation is good for business in both public consciousness and public policy.