

Communications Framing for Food System Change with Local Governments

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Abstract

Persuading individuals and organizations in the planning field to make changes to policies, systems, and environments—particularly in a new arena, such as health equity and food justice—requires thoughtful, targeted, consistent, and strategic communication. The Minnesota Food Charter Food Access Planning Guide (FAPG) illustrates the importance of communications framing with local government audiences. A resource designed to impact comprehensive plans of local governments, with a target audience that encompasses over half of the state’s population, the FAPG provides policy language designed to increase access to healthy food and advance health equity in the Twin Cities metropolitan area. The strategic intent of this effort focuses on the integration of food systems policy language into comprehensive plans, ultimately shaping the long-term priorities of communities. A key factor in the design of communications to achieve this outcome entails an evidence-based approach to strategically identify target audiences, frame messages, and use appropriate tactics, all grounded in scholarship from the fields of intercultural development and cognitive elicitations associated with food systems. In addition to this evidence base, a diverse, inclusive engagement process shaped the messengers, messages, and strategy for this communications campaign. For the family of Minnesota Food Charter documents, the communications frames of *legacy, protection, fairness, improved health, and prosperity* guide the discourse. Though the audiences and policy goals may change with different community contexts, strategic communications framing is critical to consider when approaching food systems change in local governments.

Introduction

Effective community planning is at the heart of creating environments that foster health. Incorporating food access policies into local government plans can improve the health and well-being of all communities. Local planning can prioritize transportation investments to increase access to affordable, healthy food on foot, bike, by car, or bus. Plans can prioritize farmland preservation and investment in healthy food infrastructure, like farmers markets or aggregation and distribution facilities. These plans can also guide actions of staff to focus economic development on healthy food and farm-related enterprises or recommend ordinance changes for pollinator-friendly municipally-managed landscapes.

Doing so requires a comprehensive approach—one that spans the entire food supply from seed to table and beyond—with many partners, sectors, and agendas. To ensure success, planners and partners must emphasize policy, systems, and environmental changes that create healthier food environments and food system infrastructure. And, the *language* planners and partners use in their work can be a key to success.

Increasingly, we find ourselves working in highly politically charged environments. Across our country, our local governments are affected by the polarizing nature of the current political discourse. It's clear that the words we choose to communicate our policy positions can make the critical difference between an open or closed door. Planners work closely with local elected and appointed officials, who ultimately have the power to approve or denounce every aspect of a plan. Using the Food Access Planning Guide (FAPG) as an advocacy tool with local government

planners, we have learned that many elected officials perform searches in documents for words or phrases they oppose. For conservative elected officials, searches that have sent policies back to the drawing board included “equity”, “justice”, and “root causes” (Private communications, Metro Healthy Comprehensive Plan Meeting. Nov. 17, 2017).

That’s why the FAPG was developed with careful consideration to the communications framing and the intercultural developmental progression of its target audience.

Strategic Communications Framing I: Cognitive Elicitations and Public Support

The FAPG is part of a family of documents under the umbrella of the Minnesota Food Charter Network. A statewide initiative, the Food Charter is a shared roadmap of 99 proven policy and systems change strategies developed by thousands of Minnesotans and designed to ensure reliable access to safe, affordable, healthy food for all the state’s residents (Minnesota Food Charter, 2015).

Because the constituency of this initiative is so large, broad, and diverse—encompassing numerous sectors, geographies, cultural backgrounds, and ideologies—the strategic communications infrastructure for the Food Charter is based on two strands of important research. This evidence demonstrates how certain, tested master frames that evoke specific cognitive elicitation, combined with message delivery tailored to the developmental stage of a target audience’s intercultural competency, are more likely to result in the target audience undertaking a desired action.

Frameworks Institute, a non-profit think tank that conducts commissioned strategic communications studies for large agencies and foundations, focuses on how

specific message frames can inhibit or encourage public support for policy or systems change initiatives. Master frames are value-laden terms that elicit specific cognitive responses in people (Frameworks Institute, n.d.).

Two studies, conducted by Frameworks Institute and commissioned by the WK Kellogg Foundation, have guided communications for the Minnesota Food Charter generally and the FAPG specifically. The first study explored master frames that elicited deeper understanding of and positive support for food systems change, which included health/obesity; environmental damage; justice/oppression; and more (Bales, S. N. 2006). “*Legacy*,” or creating a healthy food system for future generations, was the most effective master frame tested. “*Protection*,” making sure the food supply is dependable and trustworthy, was the second most effective master frame tested (Bales, S. N. 2006).

The second study was designed to determine what master frames evoked support from rural people for policy change that may benefit them. This study revealed that the master frame of “*fairness*,” ensuring that everyone has a level playing field when it comes to access to resources, resonated far better with rural audiences than frames such as “equality” or “justice” (Bales, S. N. & Grady, J.,2005).

Finally, Minnesota is a Big Ag and Big Food state; some of the world’s largest agribusiness and food companies are located here. Thus, during the conceptual phase of the Minnesota Food Charter, strategists and staff with the lead agency, the Minnesota Department of Health, determined that grounding this food systems change initiative in *improving health* and *increasing prosperity* of Minnesota communities would also prove legitimate as master frames, seeming less threatening and more inviting to constituencies with significant influence in agriculture and the food industry. Key

strategists involved with the Food Charter with extensive policy-making experience concurred that a focus on economic prosperity and health would appeal to both rural and urban legislators.

Strategic Communications Framing II: Developmental Language and Intercultural Competency

Just as the Minnesota Food Charter and FAPG employ these master frames as the foundation for strategic communications and the discourse employed in both documents, so too do they incorporate a discourse strategy based on the estimated developmental phase of intercultural competency demonstrated by the majority of Minnesotans in decision-making positions in local and state government.

The Intercultural Development Continuum describes a set of knowledge/attitude/skill sets or orientations toward cultural difference and commonality that are arrayed along a continuum from the more monocultural mindsets through five stages: Denial and Polarization, transitional orientation of Minimization, to the intercultural or global mindsets of Acceptance and Adaptation (Hammer, 2011).

We know from American Planning Association demographics that the majority of planning professionals in Minnesota's local governments are European American, middle-aged, predominantly male, and straight. Because of this reality in target audience, the FAPG consultants, staff, and a diverse advisory committee spanning multiple professions, gender identities, sexual orientation, and ethnicities determined that the FAPG document should be based on the five master frames used by the Minnesota Food Charter and should also employ a discourse based on the

“Minimization” phase of the intercultural development continuum. Minimization is a transitional mindset that highlights commonalities that can mask a deeper understanding of cultural differences (Bennet, 2017). Strategically, minimizing language allows for those with more monocultural mindsets to still hear messages without withdrawing into deeper polarization or denial mindsets that can silence dialogue.

The below description of the Food Access Planning Guide, drawn from its introductory text, is a cogent example of minimizing language that employs master frames for strategic communications purposes:

“In Minnesota, state and local governments and regional planning agencies now recognize the important role that comprehensive planning plays in creating a *level playing field* for all Minnesotans. Equity can be embedded in a community’s plans for its built environment (like plans for land use, transportation infrastructure, community amenities and services, and housing) and economic development.

Planning professionals, healthy food advocates, and elected officials can partner on long-term planning and policy initiatives at local and regional levels, creating *healthy food environments and a robust food infrastructure*. These efforts can go a long way in *reducing rates of preventable diseases, improving health, fostering community and economic development, and achieving equity for everyone.*”

(Minnesota Food Charter, 2016, p.5.)

The discourse employed by the Food Charter and Food Access Planning Guide is intentionally minimizing and grounded in tested master frames that evoke positive

feelings with similar audiences. By using these master frames and minimizing messaging in the FAPG and associated strategic communications tactics, local government planning staff are far more likely to integrate FAPG policies focused on health equity and healthy food access.

Engagement

The primary criticism with the using minimizing language from an intercultural development perspective is that it caters to white fragility and marginalizes people of color and indigenous experiences by not squarely combating structural and institutional racism within local governments. Indeed, even the creators of the intercultural development spectrum note that, when Minimization exists in organizations, diversity often feels “not heard” (Intercultural Development Continuum, n.d.). This idea was carefully considered by a savvy advisory group.

The development and deployment of the FAPG to integrate healthy food-focused policies into comprehensive plans of local governments was implemented via an engagement strategy, involving a culturally and gender- diverse twenty-five person advisory committee of planners and community food advocates. For example, this group included an African American urban farmer and neighborhood organizer deeply involved in community planning, an African American convenience store owner nationally recognized for his store’s healthy food options, a Hmong Executive Director of a Hmong farmers cooperative, a Latino farmers market manager, and a European American landscape architect with expertise in pollinator habitats. This committee met six times in nine months, identifying preferred policies, content, images, target audiences, key messages, messengers, and approval of master frames and

communications tactics. This group reviewed the FAPG through five successive drafts and affirmed the master framing and minimizing messaging approach of the communications strategy to ultimately achieve the Guide's goals.

Planning for People: Framing "Health"

A related research effort affirms the decisions to use minimizing language and the five frames. As part of the national effort, the Minnesota Chapter of the American Planning Association (APA-MN) is leading an initiative called Planning for People. The objective of the APA-MN Planning for People project is to create effective messaging, a plan, and a set of resources that APA-MN and its members can use to build awareness and understanding of the interconnectedness of community planning, health and equity (American Planning Association, Minnesota Chapter, 2017).

In the summer of 2017, Planning for People conducted a series of five focus groups across the state and an online survey to solicit opinions, experiences, and recommendations from planners across Minnesota. 34 planners participated in five focus groups across Minnesota, and 122 planners responded to the online survey.

Though this project focused more broadly on "health," health is one of the master frames of the Minnesota Food Charter and clearly linked to food access. Those findings highlight many planners' discomfort talking about race, disparities, and equity. They summarize: "During the focus groups, we found that planners were not very comfortable talking about disparities, especially those related to race" (Planning for People, 2017, p.10). Further, they note, "Health equity is an uncomfortable, sometimes controversial, topic for many participants and there were significant differences in level of

understanding and comfort with incorporating equity into their work. Most participants acknowledged the connection between health equity and planning, but this was not universal” (Planning for People, 2017, p.10).

Conclusions

Ideally, we need to get to a place where everyone understands the need to speak plainly about equity, justice, historical trauma, and structural racism in our food system. There are certainly times, spaces, and audiences that require strategic use of a racial equity frame to push discourse and spark change. We must always be thinking about how to employ communications that will be most effective with specific audiences to inspire action and achieve our hoped-for outcomes.

Recognizing the political realities we are working in can lay the groundwork for longer term efforts to increase intercultural competency of planners. This competency grows with relationship, conversation, and experience. Our communications strategy positions us to be in relationship, conversation, and experience with local government staff and elected officials and advocate for many changes over the long-term. For those working on similar efforts, we offer this: Don't change what you say- choose the strategic way to say it. Strategic communications is a new area for many working in the area of food systems change. The Frameworks Institute provides an excellent platform to begin learning this skill.

Over the course of the next year, we will begin analyzing plan language to see if the Food Access Planning Guide did have its intended impact: integrating food access goals and strategies into the plans themselves. We have seen promising early

indications in group meetings and one-on-one conversations that many local governments are indeed adopting language from the FAPG and thinking in completely new ways how food systems are integrated into the built environment. This is the seed we hoped to plant, and we look forward to more concrete conclusions as our eighty metropolitan area units of local governments finalize their 10-year comprehensive plans in 2018.

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