



FEATURE



Frame or Get Framed

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Was the recent legal battle between Apple and the FBI about fighting terrorism or protecting consumer privacy? Yale's David Bach writes that the controversy illustrates the strategic importance of issue framing in public debates. He provides some key ideas that managers can use when trying to promote an advantageous frame.

“The San Bernardino litigation isn't about trying to set a precedent,” FBI Director James Comey declared about his office's litigation against Apple, which sought to compel the company to assist in unlocking an iPhone that had belonged to one of the San Bernardino shooters. “It is about the victims and justice.... We simply want the chance, with a search warrant, to try to guess the terrorist's passcode without the phone essentially self-destructing.... We can't look the survivors in the eye, or ourselves in the mirror, if we don't follow this lead.”¹

Tim Cook, Apple's CEO, had a very different take. What the FBI demanded, Cook explained, was “the software equivalent of cancer.... If a court can ask us to write this piece of software, think about what else they could ask us to write—maybe it's an operating system for surveillance, maybe the ability for the law enforcement to turn on the camera. I don't know where this stops. But I do know that this is not what should be happening in this country.... Our job is to protect our customers.”²

While they took opposing viewpoints, Comey and Cook engaged in the same activity: framing the issue for the public and key stakeholders. Many social and political issues are multidimensional and complex. Yet we know from psychology that humans struggle with complexity. As psychologist Nick Chater explains, confronted with a complex issue, we tend to “choose the pattern that provides the simplest explanation of the available data.”³ This is where frames and framing come in. A frame is a cognitive tool that helps us make sense of an issue by way of simplification. Precisely because many issues are complex and multidimensional, alternative frames are often possible. The FBI's Comey wanted us to think of the government's actions as a one-off, an obligation to the victims, and a necessity to keep the public safe in the face of threats from terrorism. Cook, in contrast, warned that complying with the government's request would do irreparable damage, create a situation beyond anybody's control, and be incompatible with American values. Both sides went all in because influencing how an issue is framed is often the key to winning a public debate.

In “[Frame or Get Framed](#),” a paper just published in the *California Management Review*, my IE Business School colleague [Daniel Blake](#) and I draw on literature in cognitive psychology, linguistics, social movements, and political sciences to illuminate the critical role that issue framing plays for the way firms manage their social and political environments. We argue that frames are powerful because they promote “a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation” for a specific issue or problem.⁴ In other words, a frame not only structures the public debate but also plays a key role in determining the eventual outcome.

Frames shape the way we see issues, but frames themselves are hard to see. The comparison to photography is appropriate: when you look at a picture, attention is focused on what is in the picture, not on what lay outside the image captured by the camera. This is why and how framing is different from persuasion. Persuasion is about changing beliefs through argumentation. Framing is about changing the weight assigned to different beliefs a person already holds by emphasizing some considerations over others.

In the article, Daniel and I show what firms can do to increase the likelihood that their preferred frame will stick. Among the key success factors we highlight are:

- clearly identify the key audiences;
- use emotive language;
- appeal to existing values;

- frame early to seize first-mover advantage; and
- select a frame that plays to your strengths.

The competing efforts by the FBI's James Comey and Apple's Tim Cook to impose their preferred frame on the San Bernardino litigation clearly emphasized these factors. Both focused their efforts simultaneously on the public and on policymakers, the key audiences, even though the actual legal issue was to be resolved in the courts. Comey and his allies used words including "victims," "terrorist," and "survivors," and elsewhere spoke of people having been "slaughtered," all emotionally charged terms. Similarly, Cook used "cancer" as a metaphor because of the powerful emotions of repulsion and alarm associated with the idea of spreading cancer. To connect with the audience's previously held values, Comey invoked "justice" and frequently spoke of the need to keep Americans "safe." Cook appealed to some of the same values when he argued, in a letter to Apple customers, that "we fear that this demand would undermine the very freedoms and liberty our government is meant to protect." Comey and Cook were equally quick out the gate, trying to frame the issue to their benefit before the public's views on the issue settled. And whereas Comey pushed a frame that played to the FBI's traditional strength as a protector, Cook leveraged Apple's famous focus on customers.

Ultimately, the FBI's ability to crack the San Bernardino phone without Apple's help meant that the issue neither got settled in a court of law nor the court of public opinion. But when the issue resurfaces, as it most likely will, perhaps as early as this fall's election campaign, expect both sides and their allies to resume their framing efforts.

We've seen how powerful the effects of framing can be. In our article, Daniel and I present case studies of [Dubai Ports World's failed attempt to acquire a U.S. ports operator](#), the debate over [Lean Finely Textured Beef \(LFTB\)](#), a.k.a. "pink slime," the [Australian mining industry's campaign against new tax rules](#), [Reuters' response to new regulations governing financial information services in China](#), the [debate between the pharmaceutical industry and its critics over the impact of patents on drug availability in developing countries](#), and [Cisco's efforts to keep Chinese rivals Huawei and ZTE out](#) of the lucrative U.S. network equipment market. In each of these cases, and many others we studied, effective framing transformed the social and political environment in which an issue played out, thereby giving the framer a key strategic advantage. Frames promoted by the key players were far from neutral; rather, they were the result of careful strategic assessment and deliberate effort, and generally conditioned the outcome by tilting the competitive playing field in favor of the framer. And as in the dispute between Apple and the FBI, framing itself was usually a competition, with different players seeking to promote their own conceptual frames.

As the social and political issues confronting firms increase in number and complexity, managers are well-advised to hone their framing skills. In a world of 24-hour news media and pervasive communications, if you don't frame, you risk getting framed.

[1] “FBI Director Comments on San Bernardino Matter,” Federal Bureau of Investigation, Washington, D.C., February 21, 2016. [Back]

[2] Enjoli Francis, “Exclusive: Apple CEO Tim Cook Says iPhone-Cracking Software ‘Equivalent of Cancer,’” ABC News, February 24, 2016. [Back]

[3] Nick Chater, “The Search for Simplicity: A Fundamental Cognitive Principle?,” *The Quarterly Journal of Psychology*, Section A 52.2 (1999), pp. 273-302. [Back]

[4] See Robert M. Entman, “Framing: Toward Clarification of a Fractured Paradigm,” *Journal of Communication*, 43/4 (1993), p. 52. [Back]



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