Framing

A technique that influences decision making and judgment by manipulating the way information is presented.

Framing is the use of images, words, and context to manipulate how people think about something. Information can be presented in such a way as to emphasize the positive (e.g., *glass is half-full*) or the negative (e.g., *glass is half-empty*). The type of frame used to present information dramatically affects how people make decisions and judgments, and is consequently a powerful influencer of behavior. News media, politicians, propagandists, and advertisers all commonly use framing (knowingly or unknowingly) with great effect.[1]

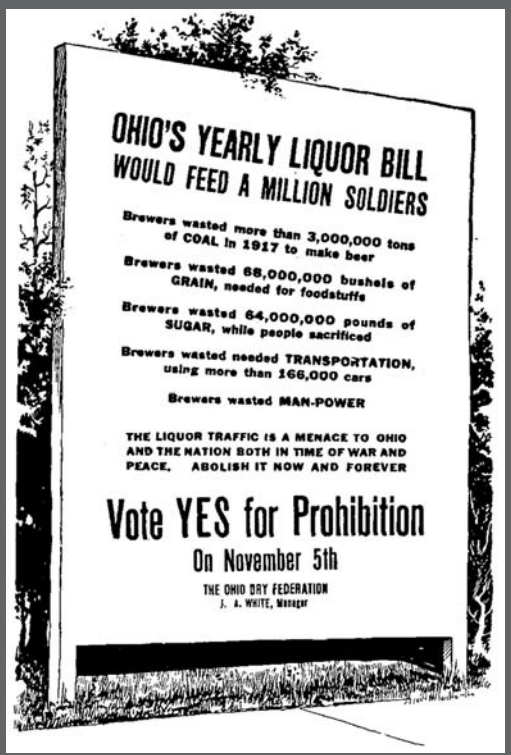
In October 2002, Russian Special Forces used a sedating gas to knock out Chechen rebels who were holding over 750 hostages captive in the Moscow Theater. The gas prevented the rebels from setting off explosives and killing all of the hostages, but the gas itself caused the death of well over 100 hostages. Newspapers throughout the world reported the incident in basically one of two ways: *Gas Kills Over 100 Hostages*, or *Gas Saves Over 500 Hostages*. This event is tragic no matter how it is presented, but judgment of the Russian efforts to free the hostages is greatly influenced by the frame of its presentation. The *negative frame* emphasizes the lives lost, and presents the information in a way that suggests the Russians bungled the affair. The *positive frame* emphasizes the lives saved, and presents the information in a way that suggests the Russians cleverly salvaged a seemingly intractable situation. Similar positive and negative frames are typically used in advertising. For example, it is common to see yogurt advertised as 95 *percent fat free*, rather than *5 percent fat rich*; and tobacco legislation has been defeated more than once by framing the legislation as a matter of taxation, instead of a matter of public health.

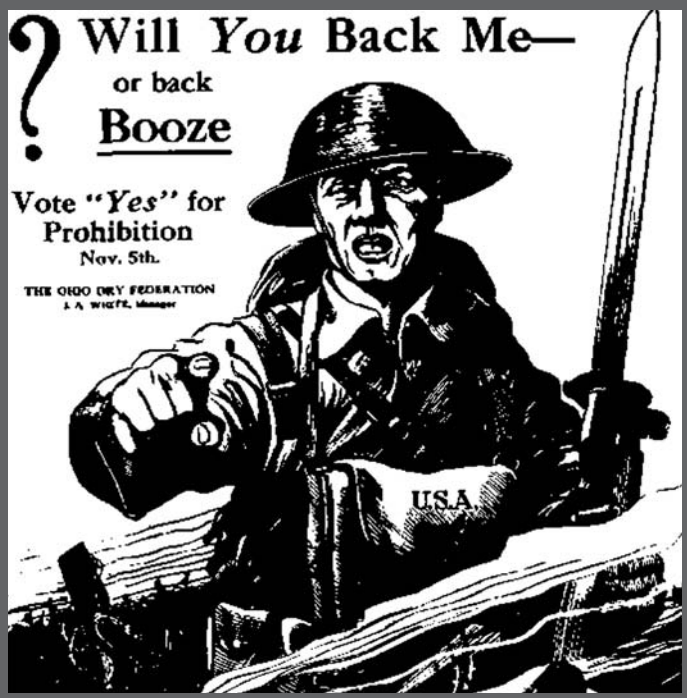
Positive frames tend to elicit positive feelings, and result in proactive and risk-seeking behaviors. Negative frames tend to elicit negative feelings, resulting in reactive and risk-avoiding behaviors. Stress and time pressures amplify these behaviors, a phenomenon frequently exploited in high pressure sales: present a product in a positive frame, present competitors in a negative frame, and time-bound the decision to pressure the buy. However, when people are exposed to multiple conflicting frames, the framing effect is neutralized, and people think and act consistently with their own beliefs.

Use framing to elicit positive or negative feelings about a design, and to influence behaviors and decision-making. Use positive frames to move people to action (e.g., make a purchase) and negative frames to move people to inaction (e.g., prevent use of illegal drugs). To maintain a strong framing effect, make sure that frames are not conflicting. Conversely, neutralize framing effects by presenting multiple conflicting frames.

See also Expectation Effect, Exposure Effect, and Scarcity.

[1] The seminal work on framing is "The Framing of Decisions and the Psychology of Choice" by Amos Tversky and Daniel Kahneman, *Science*, 1981, vol. 211, p. 453–458. A nice treatment of the subject is *The Psychology of Judgment and Decision Making* by Scott Plous, McGraw-Hill, 1993.





The Ohio Dry Campaign of 1918 is a case study in framing. Prohibition advocates framed the issue as either supporting prohibition of alcohol or supporting waste, poverty, crime, treason, and so on. The campaign was successful in turning public opinion, and resulted in passage of prohibition legislation in 1918. Similar framing tactics are common today. For example, abortion-rights advocates frame their position as *prochoice* and their opponents' as *antichoice*; abortion-rights critics frame their position as *prolife* and their opponents' as *anti-life* or *proabortion*.