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# Reframing oral health

Communications recommendations for advancing a new oral  
health narrative

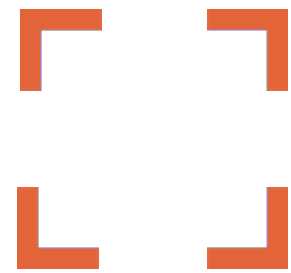
Shaping the Future of Oral Health - Oral Health Florida  
Orlando, FL

*July 24, 2018*

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# FrameWorks is on a mission...

to advance the nonprofit sector's capacity  
to frame the public discourse on social problems.

# Today's agenda

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- A brief introduction to framing
- Public thinking about oral health and the communications challenges it presents
- *Prevention and Justice*: two values for engaging new audiences
- *Keys to Oral Health*: a strategy for presenting new policy
- Wrap Up + Q&A

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# **Introducing framing**

# Three things to know about framing

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- 1 Frames are choices that communicators make about how information is presented.
- 2 People have multiple ways of reasoning about any social issue, and some are more helpful than others.
- 3 Which frames work to build public understanding of and support for an issue is an empirical question.

# What is a **Frame**?

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Frames are sets of choices about how information is presented:

What to emphasize, how to explain it, and what to leave unsaid.

# Framing choices shape understanding

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**CONTEXT**

**NUMBERS (DATA)**

**EXPLANATORY CHAINS**

**ORDER**

**EXPLANATORY EXAMPLES**

**SOLUTIONS**

**EXPLANATORY METAPHORS**

**STONE**

**MESSENGERS**

**VALUES**

**NARRATIVE**

**VISUALS**

## Health

- *Health Individualism*
- Health hierarchy (vital organs vs. other stuff)
- *Consumerism*

## Oral Health

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- Good oral health=no cavities
- Pretty smile and fresh breath
- Self-esteem and social status
- Mouth=gateway to the body

## Causes of Problems

- Poor personal hygiene
- Bad parents
- Too much sugar and smoking
- Choosing to delay or avoid care
- “Cultures” of poor self-care

*What's in the Swamp public thinking about ...*

# Oral Health

## Solutions

- Three simple things (brush, floss, go to the dentist)
- Better information for better decisions
- Low priority
- There's nothing society can do

## Oral Health System

- Dentist offices are the system
- Team=dentists, hygienists, receptionists
- Dental insurance coverage is supplemental
- Prevention=better, earlier self-care



# A frame that “works” shifts thinking in multiple ways

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knowledge



attitudes



policy support

# When a frame “works,” it moves thinking in multiple ways

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knowledge

If people have oral health issues, this can create severe health problems in other parts of the body.



attitudes

If people in this country have poor oral health, our country has failed in its responsibilities.

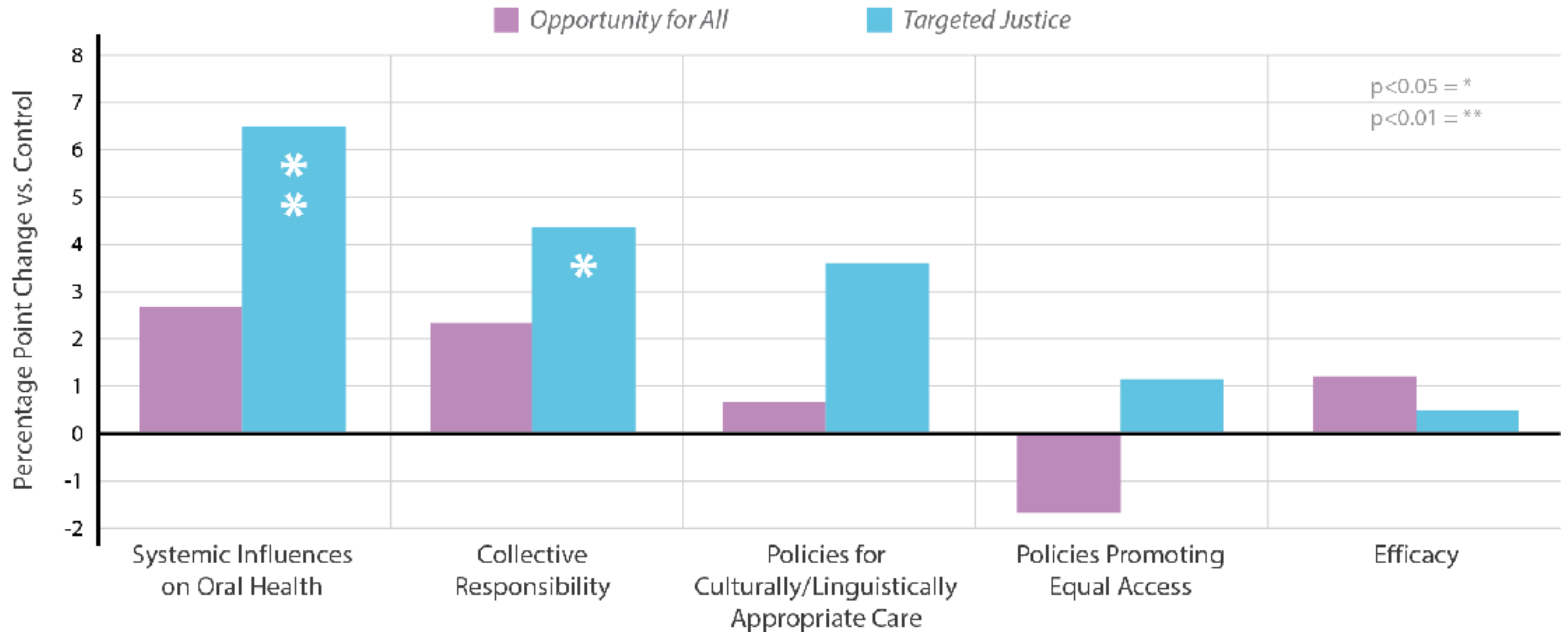


policy support

Health clinics should produce materials in multiple languages to inform people about oral health, no matter what language they speak.

# Understanding is frame dependent: an oral health example

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# How do we reframe an issue?

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Map the terrain



Design and test frames



Engage the field

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**Know what you are up  
against**



# You Say ... They Think

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## Patterns in public thinking block issue engagement

Oral health problems could be completely eradicated through widespread prevention

They would just brush, floss, and use a toothpaste. If a dentist didn't exist, they wouldn't have



**The Field**



**The Public**

## Health

- *Health Individualism*
- Health hierarchy (vital organs vs. other stuff)
- *Consumerism*

## Oral Health

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# Oral Health

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# What assumptions are being activated?

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*In some cultures or communities, there's a sense that "dental problems are inevitable," so "there's no point in trying to prevent them," [Russell] says. And because a child's oral health is closely related to that of their parents, the issue becomes cyclical."*



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# **Themes to avoid, strategies to advance**



# Getting started reframing oral health

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**AVOID** presenting oral health as “only about teeth”.

**AVOID** leaving solutions unspecified, or up to an audience’s imagination.

**ADVANCE** images, examples and explanations that present the connection between oral health and overall health.

**ADVANCE** solutions, especially those highlight the team of professionals in a community who touch oral health.

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## ***Responsible Management***

**AVOID** citing the importance of prevention, without giving examples of what prevention is.

**ADVANCE** a conversation about avoidable costs. The *Responsible Management* value explains that using resources wisely (e.g. to provide dental sealants, insurance coverage for all), prevents problems later and avoids additional costs.

# *Responsible Management*

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Your issue matters because:  
Using resources wisely means making smart decisions now to avoid problems later. When all communities have strong prevention efforts in place and access to oral health care, we can reduce costs by stopping problems before they start.

## **Redirect public perceptions away from:**

- *Individualism*
- *Us vs. Them*
- *Three simple things*

## **Move public thinking towards:**

- Systemic influences on oral health
- Collective responsibility

# Before

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Good oral health enhances our ability to speak, smile, eat, and show our emotions through facial expressions. And preventive oral health habits—such as regular dental care and good oral hygiene— can lead to better overall health throughout a person’s life. While oral health in America has improved overall over the past few decades, oral diseases, from tooth decay to gum disease and oral cancer, still cause significant pain and hardship for many adults and children in the US, particularly those lacking access to care and preventive services.

# After

Good oral health is crucial for good overall health. But while oral health in America has improved over the past few decades, oral diseases, from tooth decay to gum disease and oral cancer, still cause significant pain and hardship for many adults and children in the US. These diseases are serious and expensive to treat, but we have an opportunity to stop them before they start by investing in preventive oral health programs. By making sure all adults and children in the US have access to care and preventive services, we can prevent costly diseases before they develop.

# Framing testimony with the *Responsible Management* value

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*I join you today as a representative of the [organization name], an organization that focuses on improving the oral health of all people in [state]. **We recognize that as our elected representatives, you reflect the desires of our citizens to use our nation's resources efficiently and effectively. ...***

*When it comes to oral health, we can stop problems with the mouth, teeth, gums, and tongue—and in fact, the whole body—before they start by increasing access to oral health insurance coverage. We can prevent oral conditions that can be serious and expensive to treat—and that can undermine overall health. **If we invest in oral health prevention and treatment now, we will avoid costly problems later. Providing all adult recipients of Medicaid with dental coverage is a good use of our resources. It will allow us to make good on our commitment to provide health coverage to all.***

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## ***Targeted Justice***

**AVOID** letting data about disparities and uneven outcomes “speak for itself”. These data can be interpreted as evidence of poor individual choices.

**ADVANCE** a conversation about oral health issues as justice issues. Use the *Justice* value to define a just system as one that recognizes and accommodates specific needs.

# Targeted Justice

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## The story you're telling:

Different situations call for different responses and groups have different needs. By making sure that our health system allows people to get the kind of support they need to maintain good oral health, we can create a more just and fair society.

## Redirect public perceptions away from:

- *Poor Outcomes = Poor Choices*
- *Individualism*
- *Focus on Problem*

## Move public thinking towards:

- **Collective Responsibility**
- **Systemic Perspective**
- **Solutions**



# Framing in an elevator speech with the *Justice* value

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*My work is about **helping all people have good oral health**. So, when it comes to oral health care, **different people have different needs**. Some people need public transportation to get to dental offices. Some people can only see dentists on nights and weekends. And some people need to see providers who speak **their language**. At [name of organization], we advocate for policies that provide the supports people need for good oral health. When people have healthy mouths, they're also more likely to have healthy bodies and minds. And when we have healthier people, we have a healthier society.*

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## Framing practice for this afternoon

*Creative brainstorm:* In small groups, generate a list of ideas, words, and visuals for bringing *Targeted Justice* to life in your communications.





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# Framing Practice

## Introduce Yourself with a Value

Answering the question “what do you do?” is an opportunity to prime people to think differently about oral health.

Instead of describing your job, what would it sound like to use the *Targeted Justice* or *Responsible Management* values to explain why it matters?

Turn to your neighbor and give it a try! Use your green *Targeted Justice* and *Responsible Management* reframe cards for inspiration.

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## ***Keys to Oral Health***

**AVOID** using individual cases alone as a way to point to the need for collective action.

**ADVANCE** the explanation of systemic barriers to health as “locked doors”. Solutions that open up access to care and health are keys to a locked door.

# The Explanatory Metaphor

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## A Translation Device

### *Brain Architecture*



Brain Development



Building/Architecture

# Keys to Oral Health

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The story you are telling:

To get to good oral health, everyone goes through a series of doors - but for some people, they are locked. Without the keys, people cannot access oral health.

## Redirect public perceptions away from:

- *Three Simple Things*
- *Health Individualism*
- *Dentists' Offices are the System*
- *Stigmatization of oral health problems*

## Move public thinking towards:

- Collective responsibility
- Systems thinking
- Collective efficacy (we can do something)



# Framing Practice

## Brainstorming Keys and Locks

Use the *Keys to Oral Health* concept to talk about the work that your organization does.

- What are the locked doors, or problems, that need to be addressed?
- What are keys, or solutions, that would get through that door?
- What is an example of how your organization is working to unlock that door?

Now that you have a sense of how this concept describes your work, where can you apply this messaging strategy?

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# Putting it all together



# Putting it all together

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[Insert key message here]

What is standing in the way of  
good oral health?

What can we do  
about it?

Why does this  
matter?



# Putting it all together

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## An adult dental Medicaid benefit prevents dental disease

What is standing in the way of good oral health?

Why does this matter?

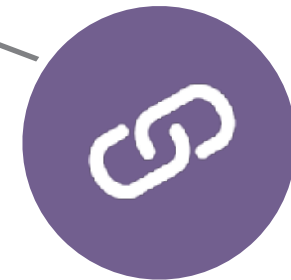


*Catching health problems before they start is a smart strategy. Revising coverage for adult dental benefits makes it possible to start early and save later.*



*Coverage limits block adults from using insurance coverage to access dental care, and close the door on health. Medicaid dental coverage that is widely accepted would open a door to screenings and other steps that catch health problems early on. The early stages of dental infection and disease are easier to treat.*

What can we do about it?



*An “emergency only” benefit is not enough to prevent disease. We need to engage primary care providers in calling for coverage for preventative and restorative services.*

# Framing key messages

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## Licensing dental therapists improves health outcomes

What is standing in the way of good oral health?



Why does this matter?



*Communities face different challenges when comes to promoting oral health. A fair system would find ways to address those needs.*

*Dental care is in short supply in many areas, preventing people from getting the care they need. Licensing more dental care practitioners can unlock a door to care and health that was once closed.*

What can we do about it?



*Encourage state representatives to take up a bill that allows licensing dental therapists and builds our state healthcare workforce.*

# Five things you can do to frame differently

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1. **Review your existing communications** (website, literature) for unproductive language cues and remove them. (Step 2: Replace them with well-framed ones!)
2. **Choose one talking point** you use regularly in your work: reframe it using the *Responsible Management* or *Justice* values, practice it out loud until you're comfortable with it, and then use it -- often!
3. **Share the keys to oral health concept** with your colleagues and encourage them to try out a tested explanation for community development.
4. **Post a list of framing-friendly language cues** (words and phrases that "get at" the reframed story you want to tell) on hand and reference it whenever you are writing about community development.
5. **Learn more about incorporating framing into communications.** Visit the Reframing Oral Health Communicators Toolkit, sponsored by the DentaQuest Foundation at [www.frameworksinstitute.org/toolkits/dentaquest](http://www.frameworksinstitute.org/toolkits/dentaquest).

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# Thank You!



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