

The Power of Story Framing

How to shift perspectives and unlock more giving



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You're Already Using Frames - Here's How to Make Them Work for You

Every time you tell a fundraising story, you're framing it in a certain way—whether you realize it or not. The words you choose, the emotions you evoke, and the donor's role in the story all create a frame that shapes how they perceive the problem and their ability to help solve it.

Most nonprofit professionals instinctively use framing, but refining and intentionally choosing the right frame can transform how donors engage with your message.

This guide will help you recognize and apply frames to make your fundraising stories more compelling and effective.

Why Framing Matters in Fundraising

Every story you tell in fundraising carries an underlying message - whether intentional or not.

The way you frame your message shapes how donors perceive the problem, the solution, and their role in making a difference. The right frame doesn't just inform; it moves people to act.

Imagine you're raising money for school supplies:

- **Frame 1: Urgency** – “Without these supplies, children will fall behind in school.”
- **Frame 2: Justice** – “No child should be at a disadvantage just because of where they were born.”
- **Frame 3: Belonging** – “Every child deserves a place where they belong, with the tools they need to succeed.”

Each frame tells the same story but influences donor perception differently. The key to effective fundraising storytelling is choosing the right frame for your audience.

What Is a Frame?

A frame is the lens through which donors understand your story.

It determines what they notice, how they feel, and whether they take action.

Example:

Are you asking donors to “**save a child’s future**” or to “**give every child a fair chance**”?

Both describe the same cause but tap into different donor values.

The Most Powerful Fundraising Frames

Moral Frame: Appeals to a donor’s sense of duty and right vs. wrong.

Example: “Every child deserves access to clean water—no exceptions.”

Urgency Frame: Highlights the immediate need for action.

Example: “This child has just 30 days to find a home.”

Impact Frame: Focuses on tangible results of giving.

Example: “Your \$50 provides a child with school supplies for a year.”

Belonging Frame: Emphasizes community and shared responsibility.

Example: “Join a movement that ensures no one goes hungry.”

Justice Frame: Frames the issue as a fundamental unfairness.

Example: “Women shouldn’t have to choose between safety and shelter.”

How to Frame Your Fundraising Story

1. Identify What Matters Most to Your Donors

What are your donors passionate about? Do they respond to fairness, urgency, community, or tangible impact? Use donor surveys, past giving behavior, and conversations to understand their values.

Example: If your donors value justice, frame your appeal as a fight against an unfair situation: “Every child should have the same chance to succeed—your gift helps level the playing field.”

2. Define the Problem Through the Right Frame

The same issue can be framed in different ways:

- **Generic Problem Statement:** “Many children lack access to education.”
- **Framed Problem Statements:**
 - **Justice Frame:** “Millions of children are left behind simply because of where they were born.”
 - **Impact Frame:** “Your gift ensures a child gets the education they deserve.”

3. Position the Donor as the Solution

Make it clear that the donor’s action is the turning point in the story.

Example: “Your support ensures that these children have access to the same opportunities as everyone else.”

4. Test and Adapt Your Frame

- **A/B Test Messages:** Try different frames in emails and social media campaigns.
- **Reframe If Needed:** If urgency doesn’t resonate, try an impact-driven or community-based frame.

Reframing in Action

Scenario	Urgency Frame	Belonging Frame	Justice Frame
Feeding the homeless	“Without your help, 50 people could go hungry this winter.”	“Join a community that ensures no one goes hungry.”	“No one should have to choose between food and warmth.”
Supporting education	“This school is at risk of closing unless we act now.”	“Together, we can keep this school open for future generations.”	“Every child deserves access to a quality education.”
Medical care for children	“This child needs surgery immediately—time is running out.”	“Be part of a movement ensuring every child gets the care they need.”	“No child should suffer because they can’t afford treatment.”

Fill-in-the-Blank Framing Formulas

To help you get started, use these simple formulas to frame your fundraising message. As you gain experience, you can adapt and refine them to fit your needs.

Moral Frame:

- "[Issue] is simply wrong. Every [group] deserves [solution]. Your gift ensures [impact]."
 - Example: "No child should go hungry. Every child deserves a warm meal. Your gift ensures they have food tonight."

Urgency Frame:

- "[Problem] must be solved now. Without your help, [consequence]. Your donation today can [solution]."
 - Example: "This child has just 30 days to find a home. Without shelter, she faces a dangerous winter. Your gift today provides a safe place to stay."

Impact Frame:

- "With your help, [specific change] happens. Just [\$X] can [result]."
 - Example: "With your help, a child will have the school supplies they need. Just \$50 provides a year's worth of materials."

Belonging Frame:

- "Join [community] in [action]. Together, we can [result]."
 - Example: "Join a movement ensuring no one in our city goes hungry. Together, we can make sure every family has a meal."

Justice Frame:

- "[Injustice] shouldn't happen. Your support helps [group] by [solution]."
 - Example: "No mother should have to choose between rent and feeding her children. Your support provides emergency groceries for struggling families."

Apply This Today

1. **Pick a current fundraising story or campaign.**
2. **Identify the core value you want to appeal to** (e.g., urgency, impact, justice, belonging).
3. **Reframe your message** using the examples above.
4. **Test different frames** in emails, social media, or direct mail to see what resonates most.

Final Thought

Framing isn't about changing the facts—it's about shaping perception in a way that resonates with donors. The right frame can turn passive readers into engaged donors.

For more practical storytelling insights and tools, join us at the [Nonprofit Storytelling Conference](#) and take your fundraising to the next level!

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If you found this guide helpful, please forward it to a friend who could benefit from learning how to frame their stories.

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