

# Feeding America SNAP Messaging Project

## Messaging Framework

A successful message is a good story and like a good story, a successful message must have a beginning, middle and end. Non-profits are generally very good at telling the beginning and middle of stories. In terms of structure, the beginning and the middle are the set-up and the complication. These are the parts of the story that inspire the most sympathy and immediate action.

However, for a deeply entrenched problem like hunger where there may not be a clear, foreseeable ending, this presents a challenge because simply ending our stories and messages in the middle (“we provide food to struggling families”), may inadvertently groove a narrative of dependency.

While ending hunger in each of our messages is too bold of a goal, we can and must present endings in a way that suggests hope. For example, providing food and access to benefits to people must enable them toward small, achievable, realistic victories. This is the “end” that many organizations are missing in their messaging.

For example, in the example messages highlighted above, they end with a hopeful path forward, rather than a continual state of being. It’s the difference between ending a message like this:

Feeding America helps to provide families the nutrition they need so that no child and no family goes to bed severely hungry day after day, week after week.

And like this:

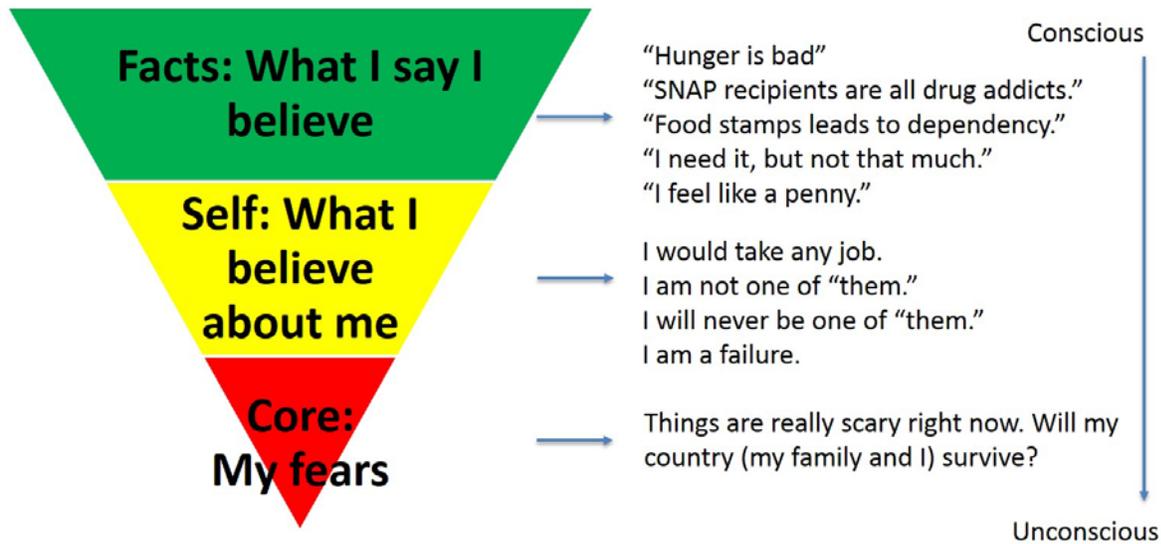
Feeding America helps to provide families the nutrition they need so that no child and no family goes to bed severely hungry day after day, week after week. Together with church groups and federal nutrition programs, we strengthen communities by ensuring that people have to fuel to not just to carry on, but begin the work toward turning their lives around.

Furthermore, in order to be successful, messages must operate on three levels of communication, addressing people at the fact level, the self-level and core fears level.

What we say we believe is at the fact level. At this level, we are processing at a fully conscious, superficial level.

The next level down, is the self-level. This is where the things we say and what we agree or disagree with reflect who we are, who we want to be and our values. At this level, the processing is semi-conscious.

Finally, at the next level down is the core-fear level. At this level, we are processing unconsciously, based on templates and master cultural narratives informed by our values, hopes and fears that we have developed over a lifetime.



These levels of psychological processing explain how we have so many negative myths, stereotypes, and images of people who are poor. People are afraid to be hungry or be seen as a failure and they create internal narratives to validate that it could never happen to them and that the people who are hungry are so because they are lazy, have poor judgment, are drug addicts, etc.

Even people who are enrolled in SNAP, or who may be food insecure, hold these negative stereotypes and images about other SNAP recipients or food bank clients because it is an effective coping strategy; if someone else is a failure, then you must not be one.

From a messaging standpoint, these three levels of communication also offer insight into how we might structure our messages for the most impact. To the extent possible, we should be selling progress in the fight against hunger, not hunger itself. By selling progress, we are offering a way out of a problem that a majority of Americans see as a serious problem without getting mired in the negativity and perceived intractability of the problem itself.

We should resist the urge to paint a picture of extreme need. Words like "struggling," "hungry," "low-income," and "vulnerable" serve to create distance between people who are food-insecure and those who aren't. Rather, it is important to paint a picture that people who are food-insecure or who are on SNAP as people who are "just like me" and that through collective action, we are coming together to strengthen communities, an idea that a large majority of Americans agree with.

Finally, large numbers and statistics must be deployed strategically. By themselves, to an average audience members, dramatic numbers don't mean anything and to skeptics, they are open to debate and examination.

Rather than using large numbers and statistics to establish the scale of the problem of hunger, they should be used to define and frame the human or social cost of ignoring the problem. Furthermore, by themselves large numbers and statistics have the tendency of making the problem seem too big and too intractable, thus creating counterforce and distance from the problem. So, instead of just saying how

many people in local communities are food insecure, connect those statistics to how people can get involved to help.

Consider this message about SNAP and food bank demand:

There are 47 million struggling, low-income Americans on SNAP, and over half of the beneficiaries are vulnerable, low-income children and seniors. In our local community, that's nearly 400,000 people, including about 200,000 children. If their average \$133 monthly SNAP is cut by \$20 a month, these vulnerable families would have to resort to coming to our food bank, which has been serving a steadily increasing number of families, up 30% from 2008.

Compare it to this:

People are at their best when they are able to have enough to eat to tackle the day. SNAP helps 47 million Americans be their best at work and their children to learn and excel in school. In our community, the food bank has seen demand grow due to the effects of the Great Recession and we are addressing that increased demand by helping connect our eligible friends and neighbors to SNAP to ensure that they have access to the food they need to be their best.

Please use this message framework in developing your own food bank or SNAP messaging. Some keys to remember:

- Position an inclusive frame at the beginning of a message
- Pivot to how an intervention – SNAP, food banks, food pantries, other programs – helps people who are hungry
- End with how this intervention will impact the people's lives and the community

