

THE NEW TOURISM LEXICON: REWRITING OUR INDUSTRY'S NARRATIVE

Last year, Destinations International released a policy brief entitled, "Advocacy in the Face of Ideology," which made the case that relying on ROI numbers to defend the value and relevancy of a destination organization was no longer a viable advocacy strategy. Instead, we argued, destination organizations need to support the message of ROI in terms of dollars and cents with an ideological and value-based appeal to convince political leaders that without a destination organization, these returns will inevitably vanish.

Our industry has unfortunately fallen for what George Lakoff, a professor of Cognitive Science and Linguistics at the University of California at Berkeley, dubs the "Enlightenment Fallacy." According to this viewpoint, you simply need to tell people the facts in clear language and they'll reason to the right, true conclusions. The problem, as Lakoff puts it is, "The cognitive and brain sciences have shown this is false... it's false in every single detail."

The reality is that people tend to frame political arguments, and the facts behind them, in terms of their own values. What this means, essentially, is that words matter in politics, and those words need to be chosen carefully.

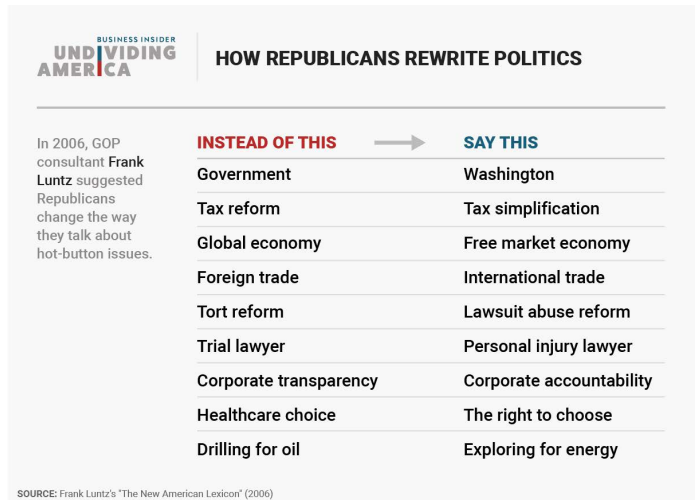
Political Framing

Using language to frame a political conversation is nothing new. Frank Luntz is a pollster who has been at the forefront of Republican political messaging for 30 years. One of his greatest contributions to Republican messaging can be found in "The New American Lexicon," a playbook published annually by Luntz since the early 1990s. In a section titled "14 Words Never to Use," Luntz instructs to never say "government" when one could say "Washington" instead.

"Most Americans appreciate their local government that picks up their trash, cleans their streets, and provides police and transportation services," Luntz said.

"Washington is the problem. Remind voters again and again about Washington spending, Washington waste, Washington taxation, Washington bureaucracy, Washington rules and Washington regulations."

Luntz also suggested replacing "drilling for oil" with "exploring for energy," "undocumented workers" with "illegal aliens," and "estate tax" with "death tax." The substitutions often work — an Ipsos/NPR poll found that support for abolishing the estate tax jumps to 76% from 65% when you call it the death tax.



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In 2006, GOP consultant Frank Luntz suggested Republicans change the way they talk about hot-button issues.

INSTEAD OF THIS	→	SAY THIS
Government		Washington
Tax reform		Tax simplification
Global economy		Free market economy
Foreign trade		International trade
Tort reform		Lawsuit abuse reform
Trial lawyer		Personal injury lawyer
Corporate transparency		Corporate accountability
Healthcare choice		The right to choose
Drilling for oil		Exploring for energy

SOURCE: Frank Luntz's "The New American Lexicon" (2006)

"It was completely revolutionary," according to Republican consultant Jim Dornan. "He detected phrases and single words that could change how people thought about the issues."

From "Gambling" to "Gaming"

One of the best examples of the impact language can have on perception comes from the gaming industry. When Frank Fahrenkopf joined the American Gaming Association in the late 90s, he spearheaded a seemingly simplistic, yet revolutionary, re-branding strategy for the entire industry, to redefine "gambling" as "gaming." With one single, powerful word, a new context was set for all

communicating our messages effectively.

1. Keep It Simple

“A leaders’ job isn’t to educate the public — it’s to inspire and persuade them,” Jon Favreau, President Obama’s former speechwriter. “That requires meeting people where they are and speaking in words that are easily accessible to the broadest possible audience. Perhaps the most powerful, inspirational political phrase of the last decade or so involved three of the simplest words in the English language: yes we can.”

When our industry talks about incremental visitation or induced economic impact, we’re not doing ourselves any favors. A good example of an industry mission statement that demonstrates this point is Tourism Australia’s:

“Tourism Australia’s mission is to make Australia the most desirable destination on earth.”

Unless you speak the language of your intended audience, you won’t be heard by the people you want to reach. When it comes to effective communication, small beats large, short beats long, and plain beats complex. And sometimes a good visual beats them all. Beautiful images of your destination may be great for external marketing purposes, but when preparing materials that will be viewed by your internal stakeholders, use images of the people in your community who are actually being positively impacted by tourism.



2. Say It. Repeat It. Say It Again.

Finding a good message and then sticking with it takes extraordinary discipline, but it pays. Remember, you may tire of saying the same exact same thing again and again, but many in your audience will be hearing it for the first time. The overwhelming majority of your stakeholders aren’t paying as much attention as you are. It’s important to have your key messages, stay on point, and repeat them over and over again. We’re great at repeating the numbers; now let’s start repeating the emotional message.

3. Provide Context

Without context, you cannot establish a message’s value, its impact, or most importantly, its relevance. Far too often, leaders in our industry tout the benefits of tourism and destination promotion without providing a broader context. We provide “solutions” without attaching them to an identifiable “problem,” and in such instances, those solutions come across as meaningless.

As an example of this, a headline often seen in our industry is, “Destination X sets record with Y number of visitors.” But what problem or need is this solving for the community? Do residents feel that they need more visitors? The likely answer is no, and there’s plenty of evidence out there to demonstrate this. Even if the reality is that your destination is not overcrowded with visitors, popular perception can overwhelm truth and accuracy.

Context starts with the value of listening, not speaking. When people feel they’re heard and understood, they’ll listen. It also means humanizing the issues they care about. This underscores the importance of connecting with your residents, and even doing research to understand resident sentiment towards the industry and community at large.

We need to start providing more context to the work that we do. We’ve taken the first step by connecting the benefits of tourism with broader socio-economic benefits to our communities. But if we really want our messaging to connect, we need to start talking about industry benefits in the context of local values.

As an example of this, a few years ago a headline in *Oregon Business Magazine* read, “Tourism Supports a More Sustainable Oregon.” Oregon is known for being a state that cares our nature and the environment, and in this instance, the destination organization was able to tie their work to that core value. They’ve effectively communicated the benefits of tourism in a context that is meaningful for stakeholders in their community.

4. Credibility Is As Important As Philosophy

The words you use become you, and you become the words you use. If your words lack sincerity, if they contradict accepted facts, circumstances, or perceptions, they will lack impact. In simple terms, you have to walk the walk. If you are going to position your destination organization as being essential to the quality of life in your community, then you need to demonstrate to your leaders, stakeholders and residents that you care deeply about their quality of life. Saying one thing and doing another will quickly be exposed in today’s world that demands transparency and accountability.

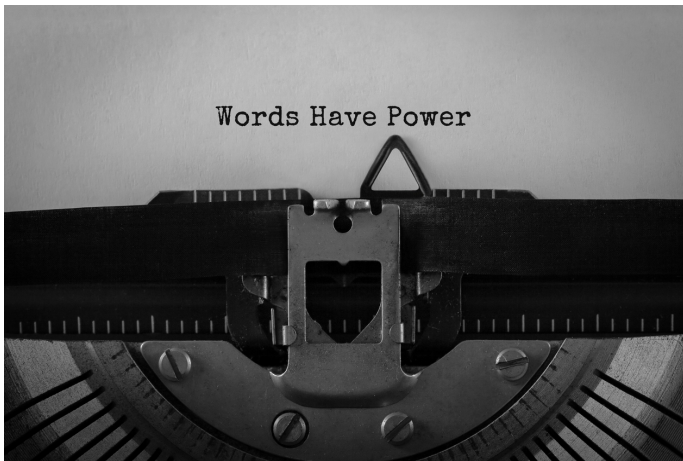
The above example in Oregon only works because tourism actually does support a more sustainable Oregon.

The Travel Oregon Forever Fund “provides residents and visitors to Oregon an opportunity to give back to projects that make Oregon a better place to live and travel.” Launched in 2012, the Forever Fund has raised more than \$175,000 in support of 28 Forever Fund Projects in Oregon.

It is not enough to blindly apply the rules of effective communication, nor is it enough to consider the audience’s context as well. You have to go further and *be* the message.

Conclusion

We all know the positive impacts our work has on the communities we represent, and our industry is filled with exceptional leaders whose ideas for the future can position their organizations as champions within their destinations. But what you say in defense of those ideas matters, and what people hear matters even more.



Our industry has changed drastically over the past decade, and it’s time now for the way we talk about our industry to change as well. Together, we can utilize a new tourism lexicon to connect with our stakeholders in a meaningful way and illustrate to them something we know to be true: that destination promotion is a public good for the benefit and well-being of all; an essential investment no community can afford to abate without causing detriment to the community’s future economic and social well-being.

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