

Smart Messages

by Dave Stauffer

“Smart growth” can be a tough sell for planning commissioners. When you’re out in the community – addressing a civic group meeting, perhaps – you may be frustrated when your attempts to explain the benefits of smart growth seem to fall on deaf ears. I believe that one of the key reasons for this outcome lies in our failure to understand the dynamics of persuasion.

What follows are some techniques we can use to more effectively communicate our message to others. While my focus is on smart growth, the techniques I’ll be discussing – as you’ll see – can also be applied to other issues.

1. Re-frame the hot-button issues.

A communications “frame” demarcates how people view and discuss an issue. It is defined by the language we use to refer to an issue or concept. That language – including the mere use of a term that names the issue or concept – can have a powerful influence on whether people are more disposed to agree or disagree with us.

In his recent book, *Don’t Think of an Elephant*, linguist George Lakoff observes that it’s hard for anyone to speak up on behalf of a “death tax,” regardless of what merits the estate tax may have. But, he notes, even worse than accepting a frame (such as “death tax”), is mentioning it over and over in explaining why you reject it.

Lakoff illustrates the impact of framing by telling his audience “don’t think of an elephant.” “Forget about big, floppy ears,” Lakoff commands. “Put that long trunk right out of your mind.” And when his audience has presumably obeyed, Lakoff innocently says, “Sam loves peanuts.” Not surprisingly, no one can help but immediately think of that darned elephant. The plea to not think of an elephant is guaranteed to evoke thoughts of an elephant.

“DON’T THINK OF AN
ELEPHANT ... FORGET
ABOUT BIG, FLOPPY EARS ...
PUT THAT LONG TRUNK
RIGHT OUT OF YOUR MIND.”

Applying Lakoff’s principles to the smart growth movement, we can see that those who oppose new urban, traditional, and sustainable development have often controlled the frames used in discussions and debates. I have a collection of articles from newspapers around the country in which planning commissioners, planners, and developers continually repeat and reinforce the framing used by those seeking to scuttle beneficial projects. Advocates of progressive development say, for example, “No, downtown condo projects do not create gridlock.” “No, dense development does not create slums.” “I don’t agree that such projects are a get-rich-quick scheme.”

These statements make presentation coach Arch Lustberg cringe. He observes that investigative TV correspondents love to ask corporate CEOs questions such as, “Why are you ripping off consumers?” because nine times in ten the CEO will obligingly reply, “We’re not ripping off consumers. Why would we rip

off consumers? Ripping off consumers is not part of our mission.” Viewers will remember one thing about the CEO’s company: they rip off consumers.

Similarly, what listeners will take from the statements above by progressive development advocates are expressions such as “gridlock,” “slums,” and “get-rich-quick scheme.”

A better approach is to re-frame using positive terms: “Traffic flows will be improved because these projects put residents within walking distance of shops.” “Compact development has a history of attracting buyers whose incomes are diverse, compared with the narrower income range of those who buy in conventional suburbia.” “Development costs for new urban projects are usually greater than for conventional projects.”

What if you can’t think of such positive responses on the spot? At a minimum, don’t repeat the negative characterization. Simply say, “I don’t accept that view. My view is that this project will serve all of our citizens because it ...”

2. Get emotional.

This may seem counterintuitive; the best thing should be to let the facts of smart growth speak for themselves. The problem is, logic and facts alone convince very few people.

Consumer psychology expert Pam Danziger told me that people “often don’t realize that most buying is based on emotion.” And in the realm of emotion, she adds, “people are illogical and self-contradictory.” Consider the feeling of wearing a new brand-name suit to the office, she suggests. The price, features, and benefits may be “justifiers” – the factors you use to give yourself permission to buy. But the real reason you buy it might be because it makes you feel good!

Now consider why smart growth opponents get mileage out of false statements, such as the charge that increasing

