



# Finding the Right Message Framing To Create Demand

A Guide for Rapid Message Framing Testing

# Introduction

How do you craft believable messages in a communication environment dominated by myths and misinformation?

This was the challenge we faced in 2021 when launching a demand creation program for COVID-19 vaccines in Abidjan. Our formative research suggested many people believed vaccines caused illness, and even more questioned their long-term safety.

To break through these myths and misconceptions, our messaging had to be framed just right to leverage the mental shortcuts people use to subconsciously decide which messages they accept and which they reject. But how do you determine which “message framing” will work best? We did not think traditional pre-testing would help since it happens too late in the process and focuses mostly on comprehension.

A colleague suggested “message framing testing,” an approach used extensively by anti-tobacco researchers to determine how a message can be “framed” so it is accepted by your audience. We could not find evidence that message framing testing was common in international public health programs, and we soon learned why – the gold standard requires running a mini-campaign reaching thousands of people and comparing results to a control group. We had neither the time, nor the budget, to run mini-campaigns and while social media could have been an option, we decided it was not appropriate since a key target audience of our campaign, women of reproductive age, were less active on social media.

What we developed was a light(er) version of the testing approach proposed by Kim and Cappella (2019). We describe here our adapted approach, along with the steps and tools involved.

“...our messaging had to be framed just right to leverage the mental shortcuts people use to subconsciously decide which messages they accept and which they reject.”

# Who is this guide for?

This guide is intended for experienced designers and implementers of demand creation campaigns working with limited time and budget. While originally developed as part of a campaign to promote COVID-19 vaccination, the approach can be used to determine the best message framing for any campaign that needs to cut through the noise.

This guide does not get into the specifics of message framing, data collection approaches, surveying techniques, or how to create audience-facing message content since it is assumed you have that knowledge or know where to access it.



Photo credit: Village Reach



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This guide also includes several “Highlight” slides with examples from our campaign in Abidjan.



Photo credit: FHI 360

# The Basics

Message framing and message framing testing

# What is “message framing”?

Message framing is grounded in the fact that “how something is presented to an audience (called ‘the frame’) influences the choices people make about how to process that information” (Davie, 2014). In other words, how we word or present a message will determine whether an audience accepts or rejects it. There are many ways to frame a message, but the classic and well researched example is positive versus negative framing of consequences. An example of this message framing is presented in Figure 1.

This example demonstrates well the concept of message framing – the key message is the same (“nutritious foods can help you stay thin”) but how that information is presented (or “framed”) differs. By testing each message framing with our audience, we can determine which one is accepted as more convincing.

**Figure 1.** Example of negative (left) versus positive (right) framing of a nutrition key message.



Illustrations credit: Cornell Food and Brand Lab

# How is message framing testing different from concept testing and pre-testing?

Message framing testing happens much earlier in the design process than pre-testing. Pre-testing generates feedback on many aspects of a communication product, including message content, but the focus is more on determining comprehension, attractiveness, and other attributes of the communication product. Message framing testing is more like concept testing. But whereas concept testing generates audience feedback on an overall creative concept idea, message framing testing focuses specifically on message content. The table at right compares message framing testing to concept testing and pre-testing to highlight how it is different.

	Message Framing Testing	Concept Testing	Pre-testing
Purpose	Determine which message framing is most likely to be effective.	Generate audience feedback on an overall creative concept or idea.	Assess the comprehension, attractiveness, acceptability, and other aspects of a communication product.
Timing	After campaign objectives have been defined but before communication products are developed.	Before communication products are developed.	After communication products (e.g., pamphlets, posters, radio spots) have been developed.
How results are used	Select the message framing that is most persuasive for the audience.	Select the best overall creative concept or idea and improve it.	Finalize the content, format, and other elements of the communication product.
Learn more	Click <a href="#">here</a> to read more about the approach we adapted.	Click <a href="#">here</a> to learn more about concept testing.	Click <a href="#">here</a> to learn more about pre-testing.

# Phase 1

Developing and validating message framing prototypes to test



# Step 1: Confirm campaign objectives and key messages

Refer to your campaign strategy to confirm which objectives will be addressed through communication activities. If you have not already, define key messages\* for each communication objective. These are the key messages that will guide development of the messaging content your audience reads or hears.

\*Remember, a key message is the main idea you want your audience to remember after hearing, seeing, or interacting with your communication activity. A key message is not usually the messaging you will place in front of your audience, that comes in the next step.



Photo credit: Village Reach

## Step 2: Develop message framing prototypes

For each key message, develop several message framing prototypes using different message frames. We found it is better to first identify potential message frames (see list at right) and then brainstorm how you might formulate your message framing prototypes to align with each frame. See **Highlight 1** and **2** for examples from our campaign.

Results of any formative research or audience insights can help you to identify the message frames that might work for them. You should end up with several message framing prototypes (aligning with different message frames) for each of your key messages by the end of this step.

At this stage you also might engage a graphic designer to put your prototypes into layout since visuals can also communicate your message framing. Just be sure these prototypes are treated as drafts, meaning not much time should be spent on “getting them perfect” or sourcing original images or illustrations.

Below is a list of some of the more common message frames:

- 1. Positive vs. Negative** – Presenting information in terms of potential gains/losses, benefits/risks, or positive/negative outcomes. For example, “Vaccines reduce your risk of dying from COVID-19.”
- 2. Gain vs. Loss** – Emphasizing what can be gained/lost by adopting the recommended action. For example, “Don’t risk missing work by going unvaccinated.”
- 3. Statistical** – Using statistical data and facts to promote your recommended action. This approach can also lend credibility and make your messaging more persuasive. For example, “Vaccination reduces your risk of infection by over 90%.”
- 4. Emotional** – Evoking emotions, from empathy and compassion to excitement and fear, to create a connection with the audience. For example, “By getting vaccinated, you protect the keepers of your family’s history – your elders.”
- 5. Cultural or Social Norms** – Aligning the messaging with prevalent cultural values or societal norms to influence behavior. For example, “Getting vaccinated shows the world you are a mother who cares about her family.”
- 6. Social Proof** – Using testimonials, reviews, or endorsements from others to convey that the recommended action is accepted. For example, “Your neighbors want you to know that they have already been vaccinated.”

# Highlight 1: Sample message framing prototypes

## Key message:

- COVID-19 vaccines are safe.

### Messaging frame: Authority

LES VACCINS COVID-19 DISPONIBLES EN CÔTE D'IVOIRE SONT **CERTIFIÉS** PAR **L'INSTITUT PASTEUR**. ILS SONT SÛRS ET DISPONIBLES.

FAITES-VOUS VACCINER AUJOURD'HUI.

**MISS MYRIAME**  
Chercheur Institut Pasteur

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The COVID-19 vaccines available in Côte d'Ivoire are certified by the Pasteur Institute. They are safe and available. Get vaccinated today.

*Ms. Myriame, Pasteur Institute Researcher*

JE SUIS UN CROYANT ET UN SCIENTIFIQUE. MAIS JE SAIS QUE LE VACCIN **COVID-19** EST SÛR. REJOIGNEZ MA FAMILLE ET MOI ET FAITES-VOUS VACCINER AUJOURD'HUI.

**MR KONAN**  
Scientifique

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I am a person of faith and a scientist. I know the COVID-19 vaccine is safe. Join me and my family. Get vaccinated today.

*Mr. Konan, scientist*

### Messaging frame: Social proof

NOUS AVONS ÉTÉ **VACCINÉS** DEPUIS, ET NOUS SOMMES TOUJOURS EN **BONNE SANTÉ**.

LES VACCINS SONT SÛRS.

FAITES-VOUS **VACCINER** AUJOURD'HUI.

**GERRARD ET ELODIE**  
Résident de Yopougon

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We've already gotten our vaccines, and we're still in good health. The vaccines are safe. Get vaccinated today.

*Gerrard and Elodie, residents of Yopougon*

JE FAIS PARTI DES +5 Millions D'IVOIRIENS DÉJÀ **VACCINÉS** CONTRE LE **COVID**. LES VACCINS SONT SÛRS, NE RESTEZ PAS EN MARGE.

FAITES-VOUS VACCINER AUJOURD'HUI.

**MR DIGBEU et SA FEMME**  
Couple

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I am part of the more than five million Ivorians already vaccinated against COVID-19. The vaccines are safe; don't stay on the sidelines. Get vaccinated today.

*Mr. Digbeu and his wife*

# Highlight 2: Sample message framing prototypes

## Key message:

- It is important to get vaccinated against COVID-19.

### Messaging frame: Fear

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KOFFI ÉTAIT LE SEUL SOUTIEN DE SA FAMILLE, ET EST MORT À CAUSE DU COVID-19. LE VACCIN EST LE MEILLEUR MOYEN DE SE PROTÉGER CONTRE UNE MALADIE GRAVE ET DE LA MORT.

FAITES-VOUS VACCINER AUJOURD'HUI.

ROLAND KOFFI  
Petit frère de Koffi

Kofi was the only breadwinner in his family, and he is dead because of COVID-19. The vaccine is the best way to protect yourself against serious illness and death. Get vaccinated today.

*Roland Koffi, younger brother of Koffi*

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MON AMI DE CLASSE, A ÉTÉ INFECTÉ ET MORT DE COVID-19. JE ME FAIS VACCINER POUR NE PAS FINIR COMME LUI.

FAITES-VOUS VACCINER AUJOURD'HUI.

YVES AYMARD  
Voisin de Classe

My friend from school was infected with COVID-19 and died. I'm getting vaccinated so I don't end up like him. Get vaccinated today.

*Yves Aymard, classmate*

### Messaging frame: Altruism

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UNE PERSONNE QUI S'OCCUPE DE SA FAMILLE, FAIT TOUT CE QU'ELLE PEUT POUR LA PROTÉGER DU COVID-19.

FAITES-VOUS VACCINER AUJOURD'HUI.

FAMILLE QUATARRA  
Pere-Mere-Enfant

A person who cares about their family does everything they can to protect themselves from COVID-19. Get vaccinated today.

*Quatarra family, mother, father, and son*

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LES PERSONNES AGÉES SONT LES GARANTS DE NOS TRADITIONS ET DE NOTRE CULTURE.

GARANTISSONS LEUR SANTÉ EN NOUS VACCINANT CONTRE LE COVID-19.

Elderly people are the guardians of our traditions and our culture. We protect their health when we get vaccinated against COVID-19.



## Step 3: Review message framing prototypes with experts

Expert review of message framing prototypes involves seeking feedback from individuals who possess specialized knowledge, skills, and experience in the health topic your campaign is addressing.

First, identify individuals who are well-versed in the topic area of your campaign. These experts could be professionals from within your organization, a relevant government office, or other practitioners in the topic area. Next, establish clear evaluation criteria that the experts will use to assess your message framing prototypes. These criteria might include factors like clarity, accuracy, and alignment with national guidelines or policies. These experts should **not** focus on the appropriateness of the message framing, your audience will help you determine that aspect. We found it is best to have only a few criterion since your experts will be reviewing several message framing prototypes. See **Highlight 3** for an example from our campaign.

Your experts will individually review your message framing prototypes based on your established criteria and provide detailed feedback, suggestions for improvements, and recommendations based on their assessment. Feedback could be in the form of written comments or verbal discussions.

Finally, you collate this feedback and look for common themes, insights, and areas where improvements are suggested. Use the feedback to make necessary revisions to your message framing prototypes while ensuring that they still align with your key messages and message frames.



## Highlight 3: Sample evaluation criteria for expert review

Here is the evaluation criteria we provided to our experts when they reviewed the message framing prototypes for our campaign in Abidjan.

For each message framing prototype, please evaluate it according to the following criteria. Any criterion for which you determine “No,” please provide feedback to address your concerns.

Criterion	Yes	No	Feedback
<b>Accuracy:</b> The information presented in the message is scientifically accurate and based on the latest research and COVID-19 vaccination guidelines.			
<b>Alignment:</b> The message does not conflict with the Ministry of Health’s policies or recommendations for COVID-19 vaccination.			
<b>Clarity:</b> The message is clear, concise, and easily understood. No jargon or complex medical terminology is used.			
<b>Cultural Sensitivity:</b> The message does not conflict with the cultural backgrounds, beliefs, and values of the audience and does not inadvertently offend or alienate anyone.			

# Phase 2

Planning and conducting message framing testing

# Step 4: Prepare survey tool

Our survey tool draws on two indexes proposed by Baig et al. (2021) – effects perceptions and message perceptions.

- **Effects perceptions** assesses the potential of the message framing to change either the behavior of interest (like getting vaccinated) or factors influencing the behavior of interest (such as attitudes, misconceptions, social norms, etc.).
- **Message perceptions** assesses persuasiveness of the message framing to change behavior.

Each index includes multiple measures that are scored by the evaluator (i.e., your audience member) on a five-point Likert scale. At right you will find these measures. You should adapt the effects perception measures to align with your behavior of interest.

See **Highlight 4** for an example from our campaign.

## Measure

### Effects Perceptions

- This message makes me want to [promoted behavior].
- This message makes [promoted behavior] seem like a good idea.
- This message makes me concerned about the consequences of not [promoted behavior].

### Message Perceptions

- This message is worth remembering.
- This message grabbed my attention.
- This message is powerful.
- This message is informative.
- This message is meaningful.
- This message is convincing.



## Highlight 4: Sample survey tool

Here is the survey tool we used in our message framing testing in Abidjan (translated from the original French). The emoji scale was a suggestion from respondents during the survey tool pre-test.

Choose the emoji to say what you think.



1 – Strongly  
Disagree



2 – Disagree



3 – Neutral



4 – Agree



5 – Strongly  
Agree

E-1	This message makes me want me to get vaccinated against COVID-19.
E-2	This message makes vaccination against COVID-19 seem like a good idea.
E-3	This message makes me concerned about the consequences of not getting vaccinated against COVID-19.
P-4	This message is worth remembering.
P-5	This message grabbed my attention.
P-6	This message is powerful.
P-7	This message is informative.
P-8	This message is meaningful.
P-9	This message is convincing.

## Step 5: Calculate sample size

To calculate the sample size for your message framing testing you need to decide two things: **1)** the number of audience members that will evaluate each message framing prototype you draft and **2)** the number of these prototypes each audience member will evaluate.

On point 1, Kim and Cappella (2019) found that previous research suggested anywhere from 18 to 120 evaluators per message. In our campaign, we decided 22 evaluators per prototype would suffice, mostly because we had so many prototypes to test. The more prototypes you test, the more time and resources you will need so consider your budget and timeline when determining how many audience members will evaluate each prototype.

On point 2, the nature of your prototype will largely determine how many you can realistically expect one audience member to evaluate. A format that requires more time and attention, such as a 30-second radio spot, will obviously require more effort than a poster with two sentences. In our campaign, we settled on three prototypes per audience member since we planned to recruit them at busy thoroughfares, where people tend to be more pressed for time.

Here is a simple formula to determine the sample size for your message framing testing:

$$\frac{\text{(number of prototypes to test X number of evaluators per prototype)}}{\text{number of prototypes per evaluator}} = \text{sample size for message framing testing}$$

## Step 6: Conduct data collection

Now that you have your survey tool and sample size decided, you are almost ready to get out there and collect data. But first, you will need to decide if (and how) you will randomize selection of your evaluators (i.e., audience members) and how you will randomize the prototypes each evaluator will evaluate. While doing both will improve the quality of your results, it is understandable if, due to budget and time constraints, you use a convenience sample for evaluator selection. However, randomizing which prototypes each evaluator evaluates is an absolute necessity.

How you randomize prototypes will be dependent on how your survey will be administered. If you will be using a computer-based data collection tool, it may include a randomizer that can be added to your survey flow. If you will be using trained data collectors to administer your survey in-person, you should develop a system to ensure the randomization of prototypes to evaluators.

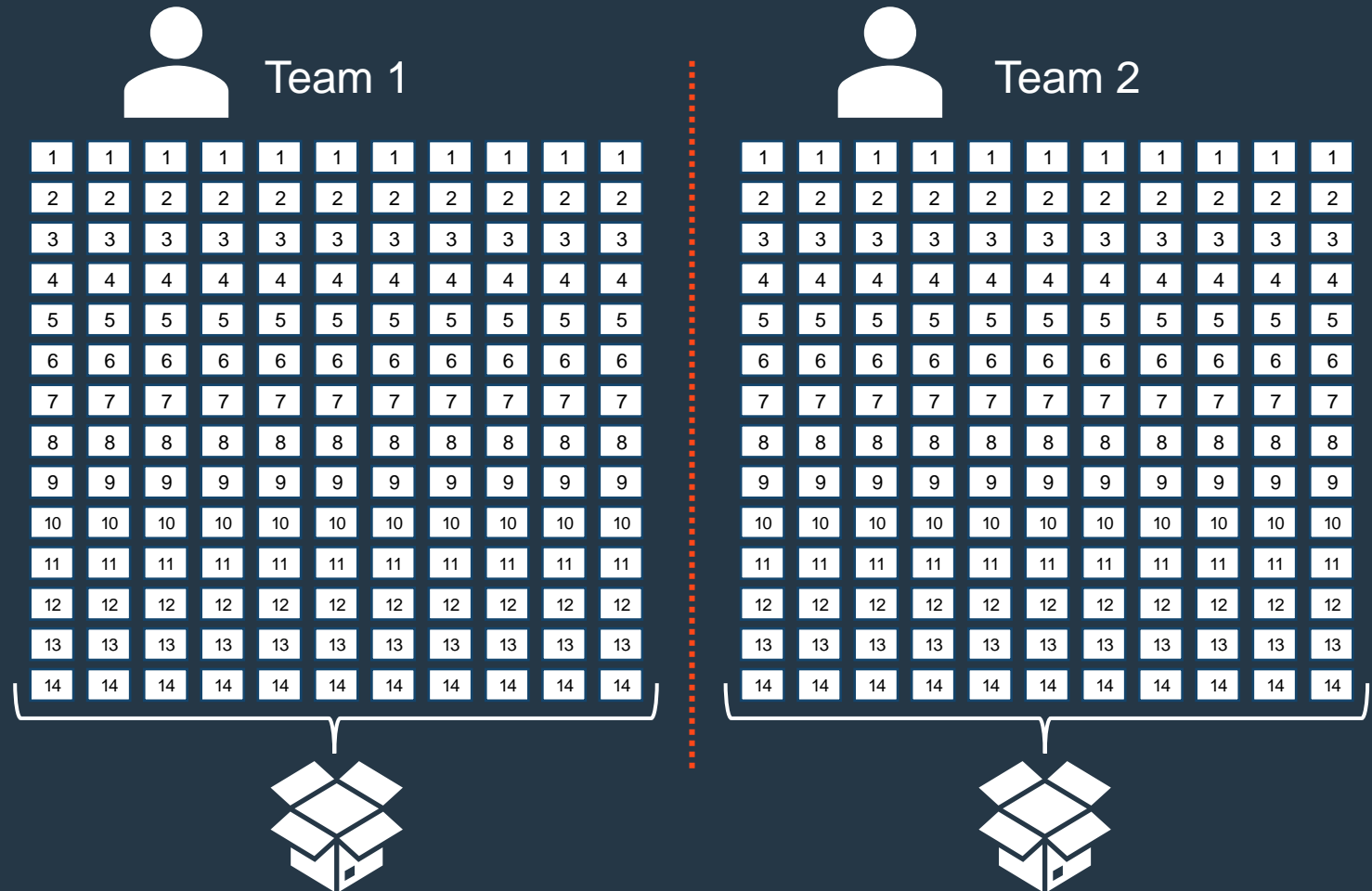
For our campaign, we used a “draw from a hat” method. First, we numbered all our prototypes from “1” to “14,” since we had 14 prototypes to test. We printed 22 small pieces of paper each numbered 1 to 14, since we wanted 22 evaluations per prototype. During data collection, we invited each evaluator to pull 3 pieces of paper from the “hat” (which was a box), since each evaluator reviewed only 3 prototypes. If they pulled the same number twice, which happened quite often, we just asked them to pull a replacement and returned the other one back to the box.

See **Highlight 5** for an illustration of this method.



# Highlight 5: Sample prototype randomization approach

In our campaign we had 14 message framing prototypes to test.\* Because we wanted each to be evaluated by at least 22 evaluators, we ended up with 308 individually numbered pieces of paper. Because we had two data collection teams, we split this total between the two teams, so each team had a randomization box with 154 individually numbered pieces of paper.



\*A quick note to say that we found 14 prototypes was far too many. This and other lessons learned are discussed later in this guide.



# Phase 3

Analyzing and applying message framing testing results

## Step 7: Aggregate and analyze data

After you have completed your last survey, it is time to aggregate responses. At right you will find a link to a workbook for this purpose, just be sure to adapt it to your measures and sample size.

This workbook is also set-up to help with your analysis. Here again you have options: use the median or absolute score to determine which message framing performed best.

Just be sure the total number of evaluations is the same for each prototype if you are using the absolute scores, otherwise your scoring will be incorrect (i.e., those with more evaluations will have artificially higher scores).

Click on the icon to  
download the  
workbook



## Step 8: Apply results to select and refine final message framing

The results of your analysis will tell you which message framing is the most persuasive and (potentially) impactful. Now you just need to use it to guide the design of your campaign's communication products.

While the “winning” prototype can itself become a final communication product (after completing the creative design and pre-testing process, of course), we found it was also helpful to use the testing results to create short message framing summaries for each objective. These summaries were used as guideposts to inform the message content we designed for our radio spots, other print media, and community engagement approaches.

See **Highlight 6** for an example from our campaign.

## Highlight 6: Sample message framing summaries

We used results from our testing to formulate message framing summaries for the three campaign objectives we were addressing through communication activities.

**Objective 1:** Belief that COVID-19 vaccination is the norm

**Message framing:** Show that more and more Ivorians are getting vaccinated. Tap into "altruism" by reminding people that being part of a family and/or community means doing things to help others.

**Objective 2:** Belief that it is important to get vaccinated against COVID-19

**Message framing:** Emphasize "risk" of missing work due to COVID-19 illness, and not being able to support family and other loved ones.

**Objective 3:** Belief that COVID-19 vaccines are safe

**Message framing:** Feature testimonials from people who have been vaccinated and remain healthy.

# Highlight 7: Learn from our mistakes

A few lessons learned from our experience:

- Whittle down your message framing prototypes to a manageable few. We ended up with 14 prototypes, which we felt was too many. Not only did this add to the complexity of survey administration but also watered down our results. In hindsight, we should have merged similar prototypes so that the differences in message framing were more obvious to evaluators.
- Make sure your team understands the concept of message framing. Message framing was a new concept for our team, so we had to orient them on it a few times before we got it right with our prototypes.
- Relatedly, if you are engaging a graphic designer to present any prototypes visually, make sure they too understand the prototyping process. We lost lots of time during the prototype development process because our graphic designer was aiming for perfection. Prototyping is not the time to worry about getting everything perfect.



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If you have any feedback on this guide or have questions, please reach out at [sbc@fhi360.org](mailto:sbc@fhi360.org).



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# Thank You!

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