



Expanding Opportunity, Building the Common Good Promoting Equal Opportunity Policies

This memo offers communications advice for educating audiences about the importance of equal opportunity policies. It integrates recent opinion research, media trends, social science literature, and experience from the field to offer promising themes and messages. Additional tools and materials, as well as the opportunity to offer feedback, are available at www.OpportunityAgenda.org.

Major Communications Themes

Leading with Values. Beginning communications with *shared values* instead of dry facts, controversial accusations, or even terminology that is less tainted by negative perceptions helps to connect with new audiences. The values at stake when it comes to equal opportunity programs such as affirmative action include: (1) *Expanding Opportunity*—the idea that everyone should have a fair chance to achieve their full potential, and that that fair chance must be extended to more and more Americans; and (2) *Community*—the notion that we’re stronger as a society when no one is left behind, and that we have a shared responsibility to advance the common good. Together, these values support the argument that equal opportunity is good for our country and everyone in it. It is not a matter of “minority rights” or “special interests,” but the just and smart thing to do for all Americans.

Framing Thematically. Many Americans’ first reaction to social problems (especially regarding race) is to invoke a “self-made person” frame in which individual hard work and “merit” are the sole reasons for people’s success or setbacks. That frame obscures systemic problems and invites audiences to blame people who are denied the opportunity to be successful. That limiting frame must be balanced by a focus on *systemic* barriers and solutions, which most audiences also understand.

Over-Documenting Bias and Inequality. Most U.S. audiences are both uninformed and skeptical about the continuing existence of racial bias and even racial inequality. This is especially common among white audiences, but is true of many people of color as well. Overcoming this skepticism requires, among other things, providing what may seem like excessive evidence of racial disparities and, especially, discrimination. That means, for example, demonstrating how people of color are more likely to be subjected to sub-prime loans, poor quality schools, and lesser job opportunities, *even when their qualifications are the same as whites’*. Stories and numbers that show systemic inequality of opportunity are more effective than stories of individual bigotry or racism, which many audiences dismiss as exceptions to the rule.

Shared Solutions. Many Americans want to open opportunities for others, but are also worried about their own limited opportunity. Promoting equal opportunity policies alongside popular policies that expand or offer equal opportunity for everyone—such as increased student aid and business training programs—can help to reinforce shared interests.

www.opportunityagenda.org

*Building the National Will
to Expand Opportunity in America.*

THE OPPORTUNITY AGENDA IS A PROJECT OF THE TIDES CENTER. All content Copyright 2005 The Opportunity Agenda.

New York
568 Broadway
Suite 302
New York, NY 10012
Tel: 212.334.4202
Fax: 212.334.2656

Washington, DC
2000 Florida Avenue NW
Suite 210
Washington, DC 20009
Tel: 202.387.2829 ext. 101
Fax: 301.576.5780



Sample Opening Messages:

In order to deliver a consistent, well-framed message in a variety of settings, we recommend structuring opening messages in terms of **Value, Problem, Solution, Action**. Leading with this structure can make it easier to transition into more complex or difficult messages.

Value: Everyone should have the opportunity to succeed in life, regardless of their race or gender.

Problem: But research and experience show that's not happening today in our state; Women are earning just 77¢ for every dollar that men earn, and women of color earn only 66¢ per dollar.

Solution: Programs that promote equal opportunity are good for our state because they give everyone who's qualified a chance to prove that they can excel.

Action: Ask your elected officials to support policies that promote equal opportunity, and that expand opportunity in education, employment, and the business world.



Value: Keeping the ladder of opportunity sturdy for everyone in our country is crucial to America's future.

Problem: But despite the progress we've made as a nation, far too many communities are unplugged from decent jobs, the chance to attend college, or a shot at running a business.

Solution: Modest programs that promote equal opportunity are one important tool for ensuring that all communities have a chance to achieve economic security and contribute to our state's economy. We must preserve these policies while at the same time pursuing others that advance our shared prosperity, like small business counseling, student aid, and worker training.

Action: Host a community meeting or write a letter to the editor supporting policies that promote equal opportunity.

www.opportunityagenda.org

*Building the National Will
to Expand Opportunity in America.*

New York
568 Broadway
Suite 302
New York, NY 10012
Tel: 212.334.4202
Fax: 212.334.2656

Washington, DC
2000 Florida Avenue NW
Suite 210
Washington, DC 20009
Tel: 202.387.2829 ext. 101
Fax: 301.576.5780

Additional Talking Points and Considerations:

Business Enterprise:

- Starting and running a business has been a gateway to opportunity for generations of Americans. But there is an *opportunity gap* when it comes to business ownership in our country. Minority business owners face unequal barriers to success, including less access to loans, business advice and financial networks. For these and other reasons, business equity held by people of color is only about half that held by whites.
- Addressing the opportunity gap in business is crucial to strengthening the economic health of both minority communities and our larger economy. Minority business owners can be a greater source of jobs, economic development, and leadership for our state, creating new pathways to shared prosperity. They strengthen the economy as a whole, through increased employment, tax revenues, and services. By investing in a fair chance for minority entrepreneurs, we are investing in the prosperity of our state.

Higher Education:

- We all win when the opportunity for qualified students to attend college is expanded to more and more communities. The cure for cancer, new sources of energy, the next great invention depends on tapping the genius of *all* of our state's people and communities.
- Educational opportunity simply is not equal in our state. As we move to increase teacher training, preparation, and resources in all of our schools, equal opportunity initiatives are one important tool for keeping the doors of opportunity open.

Jobs and Discrimination:

- Research shows that, while our country has made significant progress, racial bias still presents a major barrier to African Americans and Latinos in our country. One recent study showed that job applicants with white-sounding names were 50 percent more likely to be called for interviews than those with black-sounding names.
- A different study that tested whether a criminal record would damage job chances found that white applicants who presented criminal records were more likely to receive callbacks than African Americans who did *not* present criminal records.
- In addition to intentional discrimination, people of color are often shut out of the good old boy networks and word-of-mouth information that opens access to jobs and business opportunities. These barriers build on each other, adding up to steep obstacles to opportunity that require our collective attention to overcome. But we have the knowledge and tools to address these problems together.

The Role of Government:

- Our country's greatest leaps forward have come when we've invested in public structures and systems that protect opportunity for all—think of child immunization programs that have wiped out devastating diseases in our country; our Social Security system that has enabled millions of senior citizens to move out of poverty; our civil rights laws; even our interstate highway system that connected us as a single, prosperous nation.

www.opportunityagenda.org

*Building the National Will
to Expand Opportunity in America.*

THE OPPORTUNITY AGENDA IS A PROJECT OF THE TIDES CENTER. All content Copyright 2005 The Opportunity Agenda.

New York
568 Broadway
Suite 302
New York, NY 10012
Tel: 212.334.4202
Fax: 212.334.2656

Washington, DC
2000 Florida Avenue NW
Suite 210
Washington, DC 20009
Tel: 202.387.2829 ext. 101
Fax: 301.576.5780

Countering Opponents' Messages:

Opponents of equal opportunity programs including affirmative action will describe them as using “racial preferences,” “quotas,” and unfair “discrimination” that violates “individual rights.” Reporters may echo that language in their questions and reporting. For our part, it is important to avoid reinforcing that narrative and to return to our core messages. For example:

Reporter: Why are you in favor of quotas and racial preferences?

Advocate: Quotas are illegal, and I'm against them. I am *for equal opportunity programs, because they* are about expanding opportunity for everyone in our state. It's necessary because, despite the progress we've made as a nation, people of color and women are still facing barriers to opportunity like job bias and exclusion from business relationships.

Reporter: Isn't affirmative action unfair to white men?

Advocate: It's in *everyone's* interest to expand opportunity to more and more people in our state. We need the contribution of women and minority business people, who continue to be shut out by a good old boy's network in many sectors and industries. We need the ideas and experiences of qualified students from different backgrounds and walks of life. Knocking down the barriers to full participation is good for everyone, whatever their race or gender.

References

- Franklin D. Gilliam, Jr., “The Architecture of a New Racial Discourse,” Frameworks Institute (2006), www.frameworksinstitute.org/clients/gilliam_memo1106.pdf;
- Philip Mazzocco, “The Dangers of *Not* Talking About Race,” Diversity Advancement Project (2007), <http://diversityadvancementproject.org/html/framing.html>;
- Makani Themba Nixon & Hunter Cutting, *Talking the Walk: A Communications Guide for Racial Justice*, AK Press (2006);
- Gallup Poll, June 8-25, 2006, <http://www.pollingreport.com/race.htm>.
- Pew Research Center Poll, Sept. 5-Oct. 6, 2007, <http://www.pollingreport.com/race.htm>.

The Opportunity Agenda is a communications, research, and advocacy organization dedicated to building the national will to expand opportunity in America. To learn more about The Opportunity Agenda, go to www.OpportunityAgenda.org. The Opportunity Agenda is a project of the Tides Center.

www.opportunityagenda.org

*Building the National Will
to Expand Opportunity in America.*

THE OPPORTUNITY AGENDA IS A PROJECT OF THE TIDES CENTER. All content Copyright 2005 The Opportunity Agenda.

New York
568 Broadway
Suite 302
New York, NY 10012
Tel: 212.334.4202
Fax: 212.334.2656

Washington, DC
2000 Florida Avenue NW
Suite 210
Washington, DC 20009
Tel: 202.387.2829 ext. 101
Fax: 301.576.5780