Cognitive Battlefield
Part II: A Framework for packaging information

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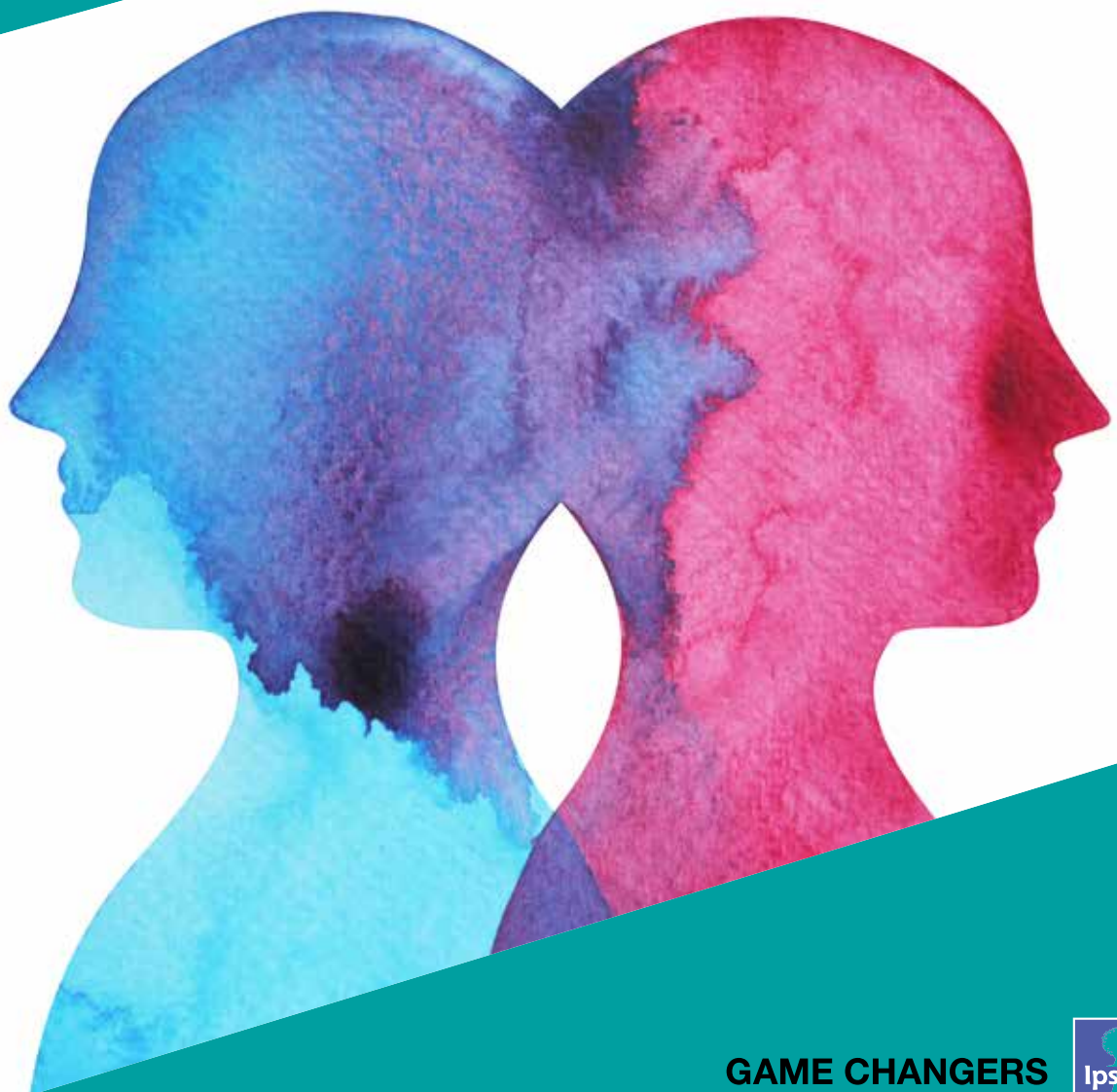
Introduction

In Part I of the Cognitive Battlefield Series, we presented the multi-attribute model as a way to identify important themes and priorities. We use the model to rank-order people's priorities and then use those priorities to evaluate the favorability of an actor (e.g., a political candidate) or an object (e.g., Coca-Cola). The results are invaluable for determining optimal communication strategies, whether actors are behaving in optimal ways (or not), and how possible scenarios may unfold.

While Part I covered how to identify people's priorities, it did not address how to package those priorities into optimal communication messages. In Part II of this series,

we demonstrate how to package the priorities identified in Part I in a way that grabs attention and makes the message "sticky" (e.g., they remember it). Making sure people remember a message requires us to understand how people process information. For this we turn to our bucket of cognitive psychology theories and choose a framework for understanding information processing. The Elaboration Likelihood Model[1] is one of the most widely used and comprehensive information processing models, especially when it comes to creating "sticky" messages. Therefore, we will use the Elaboration Likelihood Model as our framework for how to package our theme.[2]

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[1] Petty, R.E., & Cacioppo, J.T. (1986). The Elaboration Likelihood Model of persuasion. In L. Berkowitz (Ed.), *Advances in experimental social psychology* (Vol. 19, pp. 123-205). New York: Academic Press.

[2] We recognize that people often think about System 1 and System 2 with information process models. The Elaboration Likelihood Model, also called the Tally Model, cuts across System 1 and System 2 since people filter and evaluate information regardless of whether it occurs consciously or unconsciously.

Elaboration Likelihood Model

In the Elaboration Likelihood Model, there are three general stages of information processing. We use different packaging techniques at Stage 1 (Attention) and Stage 2 (Stickiness) to influence the evaluation of that information at Stage 3 (Elaboration).

		Cognitive Process	Communication Strategy	Research Metric
Stage 1	Attention	Triggering the working memory to assess new, contradictory, or threatening information.	Distraction-free. Repetition. Personal relevance. Personal responsibility. Rhetorical questions. Novelty. Confirmation.	Recall. Familiarity/awareness. Response time. Eye-tracking. MRI/Brain Scan. Feelings towards the ad (makes sad, worried, happy, etc.).
Stage 2	Stickiness	More fully considering new information. Mapping new information onto exiting memory clusters.	Hot cognition. Source credibility. Source attractiveness/ likeability. Number of arguments. Priming.	Credibility of messengers, information,objects. Identification of key words and objects.
Stage 3	Evaluation	Ascribing a positive or negative value to an object.	Emphasizing those object attributes that are deemed most important.	Favorability towards the object(s). Importance of key attributes. Rating of key attributes.

1) Attention

We process messages even when they don't grab our full attention. However, the more messages do grab our attention, the more deeply we process them, and the more lasting the impact on us. One of the best strategies for grabbing attention is to align the message with beliefs that people already have (i.e., **belief confirmation**).

This is because people have a tendency to ignore or discount messages that challenge their beliefs. Therefore, the more people think that the message confirms what they already think, the more likely they are to pay attention to it. Other strategies for grabbing attention are listed below.

Strategies to Grab Attention

Distraction-free: When possible, present the message in a context that is free from distraction. This allows the recipient to focus on the argument without disruption.

Repetition: Repeating the message gives the recipient greater opportunity to consider the content. However, this only works up to a point and then repetition results in a negative reaction of boredom and annoyance.

Personal relevance: Increase the personal relevance of the message by describing how the information will affect the individual personally, using second person pronouns (e.g., "you"), and framing the message to align with their values (e.g., generosity, beauty, wealth).

Personal responsibility: Increase the sense of personal responsibility about evaluating an issue by emphasizing the impact that the recipient's decision will have on the outcome.

Rhetorical questions: Use rhetorical questions ("Wouldn't you want to vote for this candidate?") rather than assertions in your argument. This encourages people to think about how they would respond, even when the question is rhetorical.

Novelty: When possible, present information that is unexpected (e.g., a surprising headline).

Belief confirmation: Align the message with the beliefs and attitudes that people already hold. New information that confirms currently held beliefs is easily assimilated and accepted, whereas information that challenges currently held beliefs is discounted, ignored, or countered.

2) Elaboration/Stickiness

If we've managed to grab people's attention, then the next step is to make the message "sticky" by causing them to elaborate, or think more deeply, about the information. We can make the message "sticky" through certain strategies.

For instance, people tend to be more influenced by messages that they perceive as coming from an **attractive, likeable, and credible source.** Whether a source is seen as having these qualities depends on people's affiliations and beliefs. However, beware of using a celebrity that has the potential for a fall from grace. In addition, **hot cognition** has a powerful effect on how people evaluate messages. **Hot cognition** is when cues in the packaging of the message elicit certain emotions. People have automatic emotional reactions to certain things. For example, if you ask someone what comes to mind when they think of a cockroach, most people will automatically have a negative reaction.3 If we want people to have a positive association with our message, then generally, we want to include images or cues that automatically elicit positive emotions. See the box below for additional strategies.

Strategies to Increase Stickiness

Hot Cognition: Pair the message a cue that automatically elicits positive emotions (i.e., a beautiful landscape, soothing music). In general, positive feelings lead to more positive evaluations.

Source Credibility: Make the source of the information appear as credible as possible. People are more influenced by messages that they perceive as coming from a credible source (e.g., an expert, a prestigious university).

Source Attractiveness and Likeability: Have the message come from someone that people find attractive and/or likeable (e.g., a well-liked celebrity or sports star). People are more likely to agree with messages by attractive or likeable sources.

Number of Arguments: Increase the number of arguments in the message. A greater number of arguments gives the impression that a message has more merit.

Priming: Create a favorable first impression by presenting positive information first. Information presented earlier in the process biases how the subsequent information is processed.[1]

3) Evaluation

The last stage of the Elaboration Likelihood Model is evaluation, where people either retain their original attitude, or change their attitude based on the message. If the message is sufficiently persuasive, then people's attitudes will shift. With stickier messages, attitude change is longer-lasting and more likely to also change behavior.

This is powerful, especially since messages can either unify or divide groups as we will demonstrate in our case example.

Case Study

Let's say that we wanted to craft a persuasive message about the best way to strengthen the US economy. We will show how to accomplish this by appealing to both Republicans and Democrats (unifying messages) or by targeting one party (divisive messages).

We use data from an Ipsos poll that surveyed 1,004 U.S. adults in April 2018 on the favorability of different values and identities. Favorability was compared between Republicans and Democrats, providing a cognitive roadmap for each group.

The values and identities that are favored by both Republicans and Democrats are those in the upper right quadrant and include things like responsibility, being intelligent, being self-reliant, and school teachers. Alternatively, the values/identities that divide Republicans (red) and Democrats (blue) are those in the left quadrants. Republicans favor Ronald Regan, the 2nd amendment and the Tea Party, whereas Democrats favor Black Lives Matter, feminists, activists, and the #NeverAgain movement.

Understanding which values and identities appeal to each group help us craft persuasive messages that can target each group separately (divisive) or target both groups combined (unifying). We use some of the techniques from the Elaboration Likelihood Model described previously.

Favorability Quadrant Analysis for Republicans and Democrats
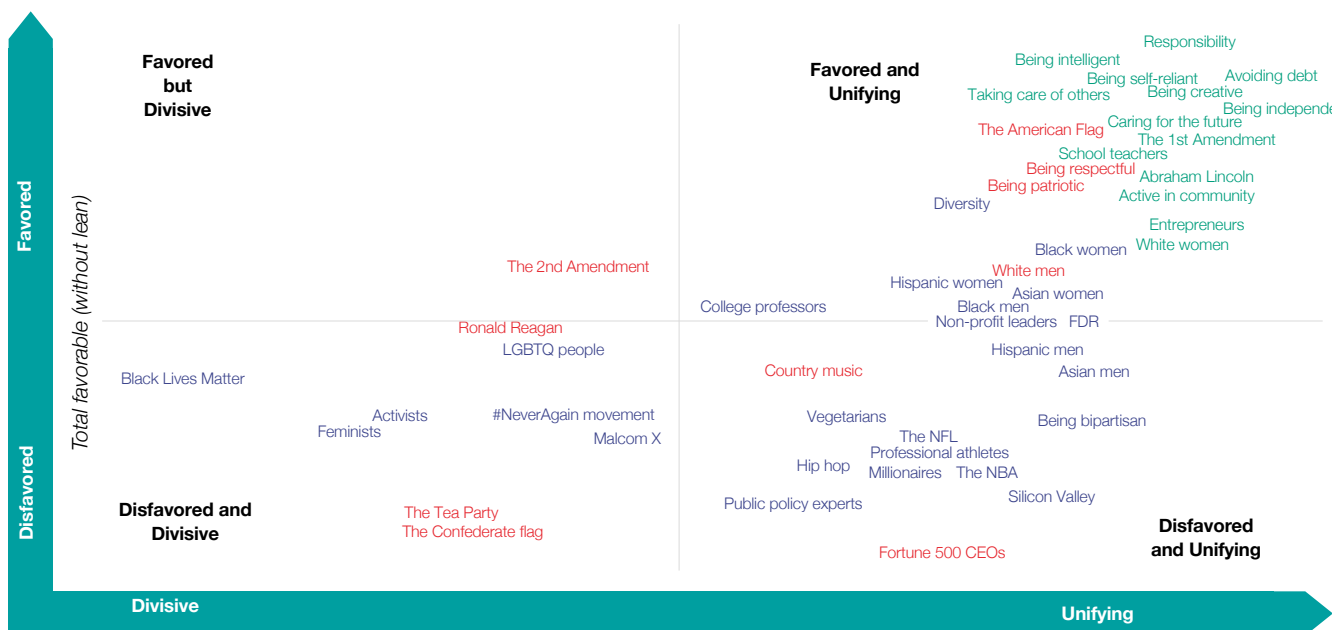
Absolute value of margin between Democrat's and Republican's favorability

Legend: Blue = Democrat; Red = Republican; Green = Neutral

> "Grabbing people's attention and creating "sticky" messages are the keys to influencing people's attitudes."

Unification

If we want to create a message about strengthening the US economy that appeals to both Republicans and Democrats, we would focus on those values and identities in the upper right quadrant. Using the confirmation technique, we would focus on beliefs held by both parties. Our data indicate that both groups believe in "caring for the future". Therefore, a unifying political message would be, "Strengthening the US economy helps us provide a better future for our children."

Based on source likeability, we would also want the message come from a source seen as favorable by both parties. According to the data in the upper right quadrant, both parties view school teachers and white women favorably. Therefore, we could have a picture of a white female school teacher making the case to create a stronger economy by providing better education for children.

Divisiveness

Alternatively, we can create divisive messages that are tailored specifically to Republicans or Democrats. Once again using the confirmation technique, a message for Republicans should align with beliefs traditionally held by

that party. According to our data, the Tea Party is viewed favorably by Republicans. The Tea Party believes that free markets are the best generator of jobs and economic growth. Therefore, our political message packaged for Republicans might be, "If we reduce government regulation, the free market will create jobs and strengthen the US economy." According to our data, Republicans favor Ronald Reagan. Therefore, based on source likeability, we should tie the message about strengthening the US economy to Reagan and Reaganomics if we want to appeal to Republicans.

If we want to focus on Democrats, we see from our data that the Black Lives Matter movement is viewed favorably by that party. The Black Lives Matter movement believes that the economy needs to be restructured to provide economic justice for all. Our political message packaged for Democrats might be, "Our economy is structured in a way that promotes inequality. Only by providing more support to those disadvantaged by the system can we create a strong economy." Democrats also favor feminists and activists. Therefore, the message could come from a well-known feminist, like Gloria Steinem, or a well-known activist, to appeal to Democrats.

Conclusion

The Elaboration Likelihood Model showcases how to create persuasive messages by capitalizing on the way people process information. Grabbing people's attention and creating "sticky" messages are the keys to influencing people's attitudes. Specific strategies, like confirmation of existing beliefs, source credibility, and hot cognition, can be used to make messages particularly compelling. Moreover, the packaging can serve to either unify people or divide them. With our US economy example, we showcase how to either unify the parties by focusing on shared values and identities, or divide the parties by capitalizing on existing cleavages between Republicans and Democrats.

Crafting persuasive messages around top priorities (Part I) provides a strong strategy for influencing people's attitudes. In Part III of this series, we will showcase the role that social media plays in the strategies presented in Part I and Part II.

Ipsos

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