



Messaging 102: Standing up to the opposition

Most groups that stand for something eventually find there are groups on the other side of the fence. Some organizations and efforts face active opposition. For instance, advocates for death penalty reform are frequently at odds with those pushing for death penalty expansions. Anti-consumption groups regularly face-off against the efforts of corporate America to encourage consumers to buy more. For your messaging to work it must be able to hold its own when the opposition strikes.

To evaluate the strength of your messages, complete an opposition box.

Them on Them	Them on You
You on Them	You on You

This looks like a tennis court on purpose. The top two boxes are for the opposition – “them.” In the top left box, note how the opposition defines itself – what they are saying about the issue. In the top right box, note how the opposition defines you. ***If this is where the conversation or debate is happening, then you are not controlling the conversation and you are likely losing or getting little traction on your issue.***

The bottom left box is where you list all the things you say about the opposition. This is a box that you can use to pull the conversation over to your messages. Finally, the bottom right box is where you define you – your main, proactive message on the issue at hand. If you are conversing down here, preferably in the “You on You” quadrant, then you are controlling the conversation and likely winning or getting traction on your issues.

Example: The Gun Control Debate

Gun control advocates went head to head with gun rights groups (the opposition in this example) on two issues – the assault weapons ban and an effort to increase the number of gun laws on the books to protect children. The following are sample opposition boxes that demonstrate how the gun control advocates’ messages stacked up against the opposition.

The Assault Weapons Ban: A Winning Frame

Them on Them	Them on You
We are about preserving people's constitutional right to hunt and protect their families.	The Uzi issue is a slippery slope. They won't stop at Uzis.
You on Them	You on You
Let's stay focused on the main point.	Pass the assault weapons ban to keep our families safe.

Lesson Learned: By focusing on the weak point of the opposition's argument (the Uzi), gun control advocates were able to control the conversation and win passage of the weapons ban.

More Gun Laws: A Losing Frame

Them on Them	Them on You
There are more than enough laws on the books now controlling guns, but they are not enforced.	Kids are getting killed because existing laws are not enforced. Gun control advocates should focus their attention on that.
You on Them	You on You
Kids are still getting killed under current laws.	Pass more laws to protect our kids.

Lesson Learned: The opposition captured the frame by exploiting a weakness in the gun control advocates' argument (there are already laws on the books that, if enforced, could protect kids).

If you complete an opposition box and find that the opposition's arguments or language are stronger than your own, consider changing your messages or shifting the frame of the conversation. Also, using the opposition box can help you to anticipate attacks and inoculate your organization before the opposition strikes.



OPPOSITION MESSAGE BOX

The Opposition on the Opposition	The Opposition on You
You on the Opposition	You on You



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