

Build an emotions-first narrative in six steps

People remember, believe, decide, and act with the emotional brain first. Work the steps in order; each one feeds the next.

CAMPAIGN / ISSUE

AUDIENCE

DATE

01 Understand your audience: start with emotion

Emotion precedes reasoning. Map the emotional landscape before you lift the pen. Plan research that surfaces feelings as well as beliefs, through focus groups, open-ended surveys, and social listening.



GOALS / DESIRED OUTCOMES · what outcome do you want your campaign to achieve?

Research plan for the emotional landscape

ASK DIRECTLY · when people can name it
“How do you feel about [issue]?”
“What do you think is causing [problem]?”
“Why do you think that is?”

ASK INDIRECTLY · when they can't or won't
“Tell me about the last time [issue] came up in your life.”
“What would most people around you say about this?”
“Look at this photo. What's the first word that comes to mind?”

Beliefs often surface indirectly: in the stories people tell, what they say others think, and how they react to an image. Listen for the explanation behind the answer, then turn what you hear into your own questions below.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS TO UNCOVER CURRENT FEELINGS

RESEARCH QUESTIONS TO UNCOVER CURRENT BELIEFS

01 Understand your audience (continued)

Record what your research found, then name the needs and emotions to work with.

↓ RESULTS FROM YOUR RESEARCH

1 · HOW DO THEY FEEL ABOUT IT NOW?

↓ RESULTS FROM YOUR RESEARCH

2 · HOW DO THEY EXPLAIN HOLDING THAT VIEW?

3 · WHAT CORE EMOTIONAL NEEDS ARE UNMET?

- ☐ Safety
- ☐ Attention
- ☐ Meaning & Purpose
- ☐ Community
- ☐ Intimacy
- ☐ Achievement
- ☐ Security
- ☐ Control
- ☐ Privacy
- ☐ Belonging
- ☐ Status
- ☐ other: _____

What does that look like for this audience?

4 · WHAT ACTIVATING EMOTIONS CAN HELP MEET THOSE NEEDS?

- ☐ hope
- ☐ excitement
- ☐ fear (with a way out)
- ☐ joy
- ☐ healthy anger
- ☐ other: _____

Avoid agitating emotions (anxiety, panic, resentment) and inhibiting ones (shame, guilt, helplessness). Hope needs success to feel attainable but not certain; fear needs a credible way to resolve the threat.

Test for feelings, not just agreement. Ask what people felt, remembered, and would share. Emotions may tell you more than agreement.

02 Set narrative objectives, lower the psychological cost



Evoke the emotions from Step 1 to create the desired beliefs. Don't fight the shield of motivated reasoning; make changing the belief cost less. Build them a golden bridge.

DESIRED FEELINGS · what will your target audience feel if your narrative is successful?

DESIRED BELIEFS · what should the audience believe once they feel that?

DESIRED ACTIONS · what do you want them to do?

EFFICACY · the clear goal, and the believable path to it

OUR DEFAULT FRAME (OUR VALUES ONLY)

THE REFRAME, IN VALUES WE SHARE WITH THE AUDIENCE

Speak in shared values. Framed on moral ground the audience already holds, the message lands as something they already believe, not someone else's argument.

03 Tell a story your audience can see themselves in



Facts arrive as arguments to judge. Stories arrive as experiences to live, and the immersed brain stops counterarguing. Build the full arc.

CORE CHALLENGE · concrete and self-relevant

VILLAIN · with named motive and intent

HEROES · the audience, facing a high-stakes choice

SHARED VALUES FRAMING · “people like us believe...”

→ **CLOSE THE DISTANCE** · make the story near, concrete, and personal

Time

someday → this year, this rent check

Space

somewhere → on your block, at your school

Social

a statistic → a neighbor, a name, a face

Probability

could hypothetically → is happening, to you too

SOLUTION AND POSITIVE VISION OF THE FUTURE · a credible, attainable pathway that turns emotion into action

REAL PEOPLE BEAT STATISTICS · whose lived experiences carry this story? Name them.

Let people and pictures carry it. Stories of real people out-raise and out-persuade the numbers; adding statistics back can smother the story. A statistic tells; images make you feel. Images are remembered better than text and can change behavior where emotional words do not.

04 Don't just tell; show

Demonstration beats declaration in every channel. Be mindful of every signal you send, not just the words. For each channel, note what you will show.



VISUALS

What visuals will you use?

a statistic tells, images make you feel; footage over figures

SOUND

What sounds help create the feeling you desire?

real voices and music; score the feeling, not the script

WORDS

What concrete words make this feel personal?

concrete nouns, lived experiences, first and second person

BEHAVIOR OF OTHERS

What examples do you have of people already taking action?

show people already taking action

NEWS STORIES

What types of news stories help drive your narrative?

earned media that shows the story in the world

✓ SOCIAL PROOF CHECK

- ☐ We show only the norm we want repeated. We never lament how common the bad behavior is.
- ☐ The crowd we show is local to the audience: petition counts, packed rooms, neighbors' yard signs.
- ☐ We point to the crowd's growth, not just its size.

05 Listen for what resonates organically

Join the conversation already happening. Engagement is a proxy read of emotional resonance: find the simmering stories that fit your narrative and pour fuel on them.



STORY ALREADY CATCHING	EMOTION IT EVOKES	WHERE IT'S SPREADING	HOW WE BOOST IT

WHAT TO LOOK FOR

High-arousal emotion (awe, amusement, excitement, anger) and surprise. Low-arousal content, however agreeable, dies.

WHY IT WORKS

Emotion leads to action, action leads to sharing, sharing leads to spread. Algorithms reward the same things the brain does.

06 Repeat, repeat, repeat

Familiar feels true. One core narrative, many messengers and formats, sustained over time. Budget for the tenth telling, not just the launch.



OUR CORE NARRATIVE IN ONE FLUENT LINE

What is the one line every messenger will repeat?

simple, chantable, no jargon

TRUSTED MESSENGERS

Who do people already trust on this issue?

familiarity is trust already banked

FORMATS & FRESH SURFACES

How will you bring the narrative to life both online and in real life?

same spine, new content

CADENCE OVER TIME

What does your timeline look like?

spaced beats a burst

Repeat the truth, never the lie. Repeated claims feel true even when people know better, so do not repeat the opposition's claim to debunk it. Flood the zone with your frame instead.

✓ BEFORE LAUNCH

Pre-flight check

- | | |
|---|--|
| ☐ We test for emotion, memory, and share intent, not just agreement. | ☐ It makes them feel something activating, and gives that feeling somewhere to go. |
| ☐ It is framed in values we share, not only our own. | ☐ It is now, here, people like you, and certain — not someday, somewhere, someone, maybe. |
| ☐ The audience is the hero, and real people, not statistics, carry the story. | ☐ We never repeat the lie, even to debunk it, and never amplify the opposition's frame. |
| ☐ We're riding the wave and inserting our narrative into the ongoing conversation. | ☐ We're deploying our narrative at scale through trusted channels with high reach. |

WORKED EXAMPLE · ILLUSTRATIVE

Filling in the blanks



A condensed pass through all six steps for a local affordability campaign, modeled on the toolkit's hope-based Mamdani 2025 case study.

01 Start with emotion	GOAL Pass a citywide rent freeze by next fall.			
	FEELINGS QUESTIONS "What emotion do you feel when you sit down to pay your rent every month?" "How do you feel about your landlord?"		BELIEFS QUESTIONS "Why do you think the rent is so high?" "Who is to blame?" "Who can change it?"	
	HOW THEY FEEL NOW Anxious, resentful, powerless. "Nothing I do will change anything."		HOW THEY EXPLAIN IT "Rents just go up. That's how this city works."	
	UNMET NEEDS Security, Control, Community		ACTIVATING EMOTIONS Hope, healthy anger	
02 Set objectives	DESIRED FEELING Hopeful, and angry enough to act. "We can win this."		DESIRED BELIEF Rent is a choice the landlords make, and people like me can change it if we take action.	
	DESIRED ACTION Knock doors in your own building.	EFFICACY Three council votes stand between us and a freeze.	REFRAME "Housing justice" → "If you work here, you should be able to afford to live here."	
03 Tell the story	CORE CHALLENGE The rent is too damn high.	VILLAIN Landlord lobby spending to block the freeze, to protect profits.	HEROES Tenants in our building.	CLOSE THE DISTANCE This year, this block, our neighbors.
	SHARED VALUES FRAMING In our city, we believe that no one should have to choose between paying the rent and putting food on the table.		SOLUTION & POSITIVE VISION A citywide rent freeze, so families can plan a future here.	
	REAL PEOPLE Tenants from three buildings tell their own stories.			
04 Show	VISUALS Stories of people talking about how their rent is making it harder to get by.	SOUND Tenants' own voices, unscripted.	OTHERS ACTING Packed lobby meetings.	NEWS Local tenants winning repairs by organizing.
05 Listen	STORY CATCHING A tenant's video about a 20% increase is spreading in neighborhood groups.		EMOTION Healthy anger	HOW WE BOOST IT Share clips of her story; ask a local creator with large reach to interview her.
06 Repeat	CORE LINE "Freeze the rent."	MESSENGERS Tenants.	FORMATS Tenant interview videos, creator content, and an IRL stunt: an art installation outside the city landlords' association.	CADENCE Daily, for 12 weeks.