Entrepreneurs who build meaning: How framing fuels social change

Success in social entrepreneurship means mastering symbolic and emotional language to turn good ideas into ecosystem mobilization.

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In the world of innovation and entrepreneurship, disruptive products and clever scaling

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strategies often get the headlines and the funding. Yet beneath every successful scale-up lies something more fundamental than market share: a struggle over meaning.

In social entrepreneurship, which focuses on improving society alongside financial viability, the struggle for meaning is central to scaling social impact.

IESE's Yuliya Snihur has previously studied framing a threat as an opportunity in an innovation context. In new research with Clarence Blunt and Nancy Bocken, she returns to framing, examining why entrepreneurs — particularly social entrepreneurs — must master the art. It involves shaping meaning, provoking emotional responses and mobilizing stakeholders, including communities and the media, and it can be the ingredient that determines whether a venture scales or not.

Milk as a moral choice

In 2016 France, amid a severe dairy farming crisis, a startup selling fairly priced milk entered the market. At first glance, it appeared to be just another consumer brand, but it challenged deeply held norms about food pricing, supply chains and the relationship between consumers and producers.

The founder of C'est Qui Le Patron?!, Nicolas Chabanne, did more than market a carton of milk. He reframed a food staple into a symbol of farmers struggling under crushing debt and collapsing margins. Through a Facebook vote, he challenged consumers to determine a fair milk price. By appealing to the wisdom of the crowd, a consensus was found: a few cents extra per liter would help farmers regain stability and dignity.

The protagonists of this story were ordinary citizens acting together. They posted photos of receipts, reported empty supermarket shelves when milk sold out and persuaded friends to switch brands. Expressions of gratitude and pride circulated online.

Media coverage amplified C'est Qui Le Patron?! as a grassroots revolution, turning hardship into hope and extending its reach beyond its marketing budget. Retailers and competitors adopted the narrative while copycat products signaled a new market category. Politicians followed, invoking the brand in parliamentary debates and transparency laws to help shape national policy.

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Why it worked

Chabanne's message suggested that consumers were more than just passive buyers. They were a community that could enact solidarity.

His framing strategy unfolded along three dimensions.

1. Chabanne told stories of overworked farmers unable to make ends meet and the despair that had driven some to suicide. A human drama that consumers could visualize was more powerful than abstract economic distress.
2. Chabanne did not present himself as a lone visionary. He tapped the wisdom of the crowd to determine a fair price.
3. Chabanne avoided assigning blame. Rather than vilifying retailers or policymakers, the movement emphasized solidarity. Farmers would be smiling again, sleeping again and finding hope again.

Together, these elements created what the authors describe as "energized solidarity framing": moral urgency combined with simple action and shared excitement.

The emotional and symbolic tool kit

Social entrepreneurs often assume that rational appeals will suffice. They point to impact metrics, environmental benefits or fair wages. Such arguments matter, yet logic alone rarely mobilizes collective action. This research underscores a broader insight. Social ventures build more than products and services. They construct interpretive frameworks that shape how issues are understood.

Framing isn't a peripheral communication tactic. It is, or should be, a form of infrastructure. It organizes attention, channels emotion and aligns behavior across stakeholders. In an era defined by social and environmental crises, the ability to reshape meaning may be as valuable as any technological breakthrough.

A playbook for energized solidarity framing

Through language, symbols and storytelling, entrepreneurs can mobilize supporters, reduce resistance and reshape the logic of entire fields, markets and consumption practices.

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1. Start with culture

Use symbols and values that people already understand, such as fairness, community and empowerment. In the case of C’est Qui Le Patron?!, the message aligned with French cultural values that emphasize solidarity and citizen empowerment.

2. Balance the new with the familiar

Show how the solution is new but built on values that society already treasures. C’est Qui Le Patron?! was distinctive but also familiar. It presented itself as a consumer movement rooted in fairness rather than as a corporate player seeking profit, fitting well with its cultural context.

3. Use emotion deliberately

Regulate between urgency and hope. People need both to act. By guiding audiences through waves of concern and optimism, entrepreneurs maintain energy and commitment.

4. Treat framing as continuous work

Legitimacy is not won once; it must be maintained. C’est Qui Le Patron?! sustained momentum by repeatedly sharing farmers’ payment data and stories of impact, refreshing the moral appeal as the movement grew.

5. Engage in framing contests constructively

Framing rarely proceeds uncontested. But successful social entrepreneurs do not polarize; they reframe. Instead of attacking incumbents directly, C’est Qui Le Patron?! focused on solidarity, allowing retailers and policymakers to join without losing face.

6. Maintain coherence across audiences

Adapt emphasis, not identity. The framing remained coherent across audiences. Farmers, journalists, policymakers and consumers heard the same core storyline.

7. Let the community co-create how you frame

Meaning is most powerful when shared and enacted together. What makes the C’est Qui Le

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Patron?! story extraordinary is not just how the venture framed the issue, but how other community members, the media, retailers, competitors and policymakers amplified, energized and enacted it.

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