

Messaging Tip Sheet: Create Compelling Messages

Effective messaging is about narrowing the focus and making a few strong points that people will remember – rather than throwing out a variety of points and letting the audience decide which of these it wants to retain. Before you can decide what you want to say in these points, however, you need to answer a couple of questions.

Question One: Who are you trying to reach with your message?

The audience for your message should be as narrowly targeted as possible. Your audience should never be the general public – it is simply too big and diverse to reach everyone with a single message. Instead, you should select a very specific target that relates to your goal.

Example: A community health nonprofit is trying to reduce childhood obesity by increasing the number of children who walk to school in the community. Potential audiences for its messages could include moms, principals, or physical education teachers. The audiences could be narrowed even further by selecting moms of students at three elementary schools, for example. The more narrow you are with your audience choices, the more your message will resonate with those audiences.

Question Two: What does your audience care about?

Messages that take into account the values and core concerns of the target audience are most effective. By tapping into your audience's existing values, you can create common ground and more easily motivate them to act. These can be "big" values like fairness but they can also be "smaller" core concerns of a mother or father wanting to keep their family safe or a business owner wanting to make a profit.

Before you begin developing message points, take the time to think carefully about what your audience cares about. Be honest with yourself – the values of your audience may be different than your own values. Brainstorm a list of audience values, and then select the one that seems to be most important to your audience. You can review public opinion studies or even informally talk to members of your target audience for insights.

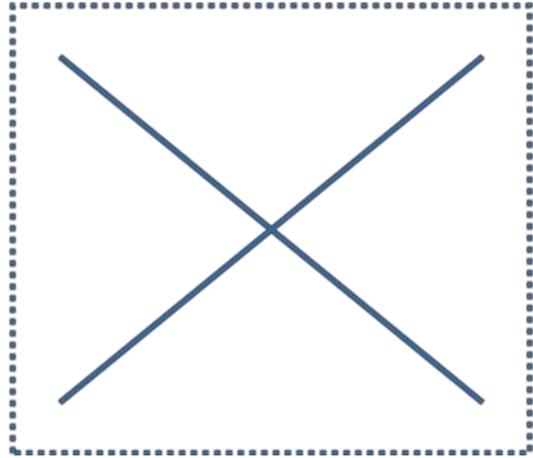
The important thing to keep in mind here is that you want to be sure that your message taps into one existing value that your audience has – not the value that you want them to have.

Example: An environmental group wanted to stop a proposed airport expansion because the construction of new runways would destroy the habitat of a certain species of frog. To do this, the group needed to activate members of the community to tell local government officials to stop the expansion. The group talked with members of the community about their concerns. They found out that community members were very worried about increased traffic, but far less concerned about environmental impact. The group decided to focus their messages on how the airport expansion would increase traffic (their audience's core concern), rather than its impact on biodiversity (the environmental group's core concern), so that they'd have the best chance of getting the audience to act to stop the expansion.

Developing Message Points

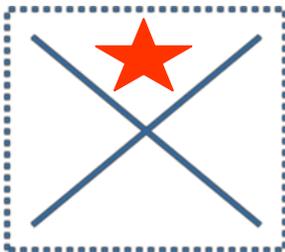
Once you know who you want to reach and have determined what they care about, you can create message points that will resonate with this audience. Good messaging has no more than four main points. These points need to be both concise and compelling. It is that easy, and that hard.

To help you think through your message points, try using a message box. The message box is in this shape for a reason. The circular nature of it reminds you that you can start at any message point and hop around to your heart's desire in a speech, during an interview, in a press release – any time you are communicating about your issue. Just stay in the message box. If the messages were presented in a linear fashion, the inclination would be to start at the top and work down. Instead, messages should remain flexible so you can deliver the ones that best fit an audience's knowledge and interest.



For each different target audience that you are trying to reach, you should have a different message box. This is because every audience has different values and your messages will be most effective if they are tailored to each of your target audiences. Tailoring your messages doesn't mean starting from scratch, but rather adjusting each of the points as needed for the new audience.

Once you have filled in the four core messages in your box (described below), you can develop supporting points for each message including compelling facts, stories and statistics.



The Value Message – Top (North) Section

This is where you connect with your audience and tap into a specific value that your audience has. This message point reminds them of your common ground, or says something that will get them to agree or at least nod their heads. For newcomer audiences this is a point that you may spend a great deal of time on when making a speech or preparing materials. For the choir this is more of a touch and move on point. Remind them quickly and move to other points that are more pressing.

Example: A good example of a policy-based value message can be taken from the death penalty reform debate. Activists decided to quit talking about morality, which was not getting them where they wanted to go, and instead focus on innocence. Their value message: *Innocent people should not be wrongfully convicted and sentenced to die.* Most people agreed with this and it tapped into the value of fairness. The advocates were able to establish common ground and start building their case for reform.

Example: The Take It Outside effort provides a good example of a successful behavior change value message. This was a program that wanted parents to stop smoking around their kids. Rather than start with a vilifying message off the bat, e.g., your smoking is making your kids sick, they started with this commonality: *We all want what is best for our kids.*



The Barrier Breaker – Right (East) Section

With so many different opinions out there, the chance for misconception is high. People may not realize the extent of a problem – or they may not realize they are basing all their decisions on an incorrect fact.

Think about all the seemingly credible stories you have heard that have ended up being urban legends. It took a lot of people passing around false information before the story made its way to you and countless others. It doesn't take long to take an incorrect fact and circulate it as the truth. The barrier message point addresses this challenge by countering your audience's key misconception about your issue.

The key to a successful barrier message is that you do not repeat your audience's misconception. Rather, you provide new or unexpected information to overcome this barrier to your audience buying in to your message.

Example: For the death penalty reform folks, getting people to agree that innocent people should not be put to death was relatively easy. Then they had the challenge of clearing up the misconception that such a thing couldn't happen in the United States – when of course it does. Their barrier message focused on sharing this fact: *More than 100 people have been exonerated from death row since 1976.*

Example: For the Take It Outside campaign, organizers discovered many parents didn't realize that second-hand smoke was bad for their kids. There was a misconception that only the smoker's health was impacted by smoking. The barrier message relied on a child delivering a message directly to a parent: *Mom, your smoking makes me feel bad.* This message was supported by a fact: second-hand smoke is the cause of 150,000 to 300,000 bronchitis and pneumonia cases in infants and young children annually.

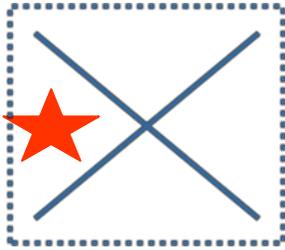


The Ask – Bottom (South) Section

At least one message point should be focused on getting the target audience to do something. What's the point in getting their attention if you don't use it to reach your goals? This is where the ask comes in – the more doable it is the better. Asking someone to save the children isn't helpful – it's overwhelming. People have no idea how to do this. Increasing a school budget to allow for more qualified teachers, however, is something people can get behind.

Example: If the death penalty reformers had said "pass reform" and left it at that, the policy makers they were addressing could have defined what reform meant. This isn't ideal – different people are likely to have radically different ways of dealing with this issue. *Pass legislation to offer DNA testing to inmates convicted of a capital crime,* however, is a specific request legislators can address.

Example: If the Take It Outside effort had said, *Quit smoking,* they would have run into all the excuses smokers usually give for not quitting. Instead, organizers gave smokers an easy alternative: *If you smoke, go outside.* Take your smoking outside for the sake of your children's health is a doable ask.



The Vision Statement – Left (West) Section

This message point echoes the value message point. It says to people: If you do what I ask you to do, then you get what you want.

Example: By rallying around the vision message, *Then we'll have a fair justice system*, death penalty reform advocates connected with the fairness value they originally touched in the value message: *Innocent people should not be wrongfully convicted*.

Example: Take It Outside delivered the vision message: *This simple act can protect your child's health*. The message echoed the value message and reminded parents that we all want healthy children, and certainly don't want to be the cause of illness.

Testing Your Message Box

Once you have finished your message box, pat yourself on the back. Then find a way to test your messages among some audience targets. This could be as simple as asking three or four members of your audience what they think, or it may mean fielding a national poll. Either way, try it out on someone who can evaluate the messages from a neutral standpoint – this rules out you and anyone who helped you complete your message box.