



Messaging Tip Sheet: Message Focus

Before you develop messages for audience targets, you need to decide what the primary purpose of your message is:

- Share knowledge,
- Build will, or
- Reinforce action.

It's likely that you will need to create slightly different messages in each of the different phases. To determine which phase you are in, study your audience. Decide where they are in terms of their readiness to act.

➤ **Share Knowledge**

Often, before you can change behavior or policy, you need to introduce knowledge that makes the case for why the change is needed. Sometimes just sharing the knowledge alone will make people ready to hear a building will or action message. In this stage, the task is to share information on the issue without overwhelming the audience. You want to help the audience develop a personal connection to the issue so they care – make the issue relevant by appealing to their values and lifestyle, or by connecting the issue to their family, friends or community. With your information, you also want to share empowering solutions, so people feel they can help make a difference.

Example:

Many parents were unaware of the negative impacts of second-hand smoke on their children's health. They knew they didn't want their kids to smoke, but they had no idea that second-hand smoke was also a health risk for their kids. Once they received messages about the effects of second-hand smoke on children, many parents stopped smoking all together, and others no longer smoked around their children.

Knowledge sharing is an important step in any social change effort. Be careful not to overwhelm with too much information, focus instead on the key fact you want your audience to know. And remember: It's a mistake to always assume that just sharing the knowledge will be persuasive to audience targets. Often, audience targets know the information, but they don't care.

Example:

For years, anti-smoking organizations urged teens not to smoke with messages about the ill-effects of smoking on their health. These messages failed because teens didn't care. They were smoking to be cool and doing something bad for their health fit that bill nicely. Then The Truth campaign developed new messages that told teens they were being manipulated by the big tobacco companies. This was new information that connected with many young people and suddenly they cared. Now the messaging could move on to getting them to do something about it.

Sometimes audience targets know the information but don't believe it. Repeating it isn't necessarily going to change this – especially if the source has no credibility with the audience.

Example:

Campaign for Tobacco Free Kids (CTFK) disseminated messages that cigarette advertisers were targeting kids. This is not a surprising message to come from CTFK and it fell largely on deaf ears. Then CTFK got Madison Avenue ad firms to say they would no longer make cigarette commercials that targeted young people. Because these firms work with tobacco companies, they were much more credible on this issue than a nonprofit group that knows a lot about kids and smoking, but little about advertising strategy.

If your messaging needs to focus on knowledge sharing, determine how you can package the information in a way will help the audience not just know it, but also believe in it and care about it, too. It helps if you can make a personal connection to the issue.

➤ **Build the Will to Act**

Once your audience knows what it needs to know, it is time to build will. When you want to build will, you are basically explaining *what's in it for them*. Building the will to act means overcoming the barriers your audience may have. In this stage, you are no longer sharing information. Instead, the task is to ease the audience's perceived risk. You can overcome the barriers by respecting the audience's comfort zone and asking them to take a manageable action that fits their lifestyle. You can also show them a leader taking action first, or position the action as the social norm. You must offer hope for positive change, and show that the benefits of taking action outweigh the risks. Position your audience as the hero – not the villain – who can take action to make a difference.

Offer a doable action within the audience's comfort zone. Your audience is far more likely to take action if the action is reasonable and easy to do. Keep it simple and make one single ask. And remember that people's willingness to act is tied to their comfort zone. Offer an action that fits within that comfort zone, and will be much easier to motivate your audience to act.

Example:

When news of global warming first began to sink into the American consciousness, it seemed that the sky was almost literally falling and there was very little average people could do to stop it. But over the years, environmental and consumer groups have grown increasingly savvy about offering simple solutions to prevent global warming, such as changing the light bulbs in home to energy-saving versions. You can even buy "Eco Starter Kits" with everything you need to green your home, including energy efficient light bulbs, non-chemical cleaning products and other environmentally friendly household items.

Make the reward greater than the risk. If the action you want your audience to take is outside their comfort zone, then you must find away to make the reward for taking action greater than the perceived risk. In our research for the Activation Point, we heard that perceived risk of taking action ranges from worrying that someone will key your car if you put a pro-life bumper sticker on it, to discomfort about having "the talk" with your kids. Whatever the ask, you must understand the audience's perceived risk associated with taking it, and communicate a reward or benefit that trumps that risk.

Example

The AIDS Ride uses the reward of public recognition to get people to raise funds and undertake a grueling physical journey to help find a cure for AIDS. As riders complete

the final mile of their race, they are on a parade route where hundreds of people are cheering them on for their efforts. Many riders' families and friends come to greet them along the parade route to laud them for their hard work.

Consider the audience's lifestyle. You can make it easier for your audiences to take action by offering an action that fits with their lifestyle. Sometimes people don't take action because "that just isn't me." By considering the audience's lifestyle, you can overcome that barrier.

Example

The Susan G. Komen Foundation's annual Race for the Cure asks people to raise money, then run a race to benefit breast cancer research. But many busy people weren't willing to give up a Saturday morning to run the race, and other nonathletic people just couldn't see themselves running a race at all. Rather than fighting these barriers the group offered an alternative: Sleep in for the Cure. Now people can participate by paying a registration fee, which benefits the organization, but instead of running a race, they get to sleep in for the cause.

Offer hope. Hope is a powerful incentive to bring a person to take action for change. The stronger the hope, the more likely the action, because a sense of possibility enhances one's desire to help. Hope emerges when one feels in control, helping a person to feel they can make a difference and that their actions contribute to the possibility of a positive outcome.

Example

Living wage efforts tap into the sense of hope. In Florida in 2003, a broad coalition of labor unions, community organizations, churches, senior citizen groups and others set out to offer a living-wage referendum to voters to raise the state's minimum wage to \$6.15 an hour. They made it clear that raising the minimum wage would help everyone, and called the campaign "Floridians for All." The campaign tapped hope for economic improvement for low-income families, and hope for success at the ballot box to move a coordinated and multilayered effort forward. The minimum wage measures won in every county in Florida.

Make them the hero, not the villain. We have seen social campaigns focused on pointing out things that are bad—overeating, smoking and drunk driving are all bad things, therefore the people who do them are "bad people." However, if you are trying to motivate these "bad people" to change, this may not be the best approach. No one wants to be seen as the bad guy. People want respect for their expertise and the efforts they are already making (even if imperfect). Advocates must assume an audience target has some level of expertise in their issue area—and that they are trying to be good parents, conscientious consumers, concerned homeowners, and so forth. Messaging that starts from the point of view that the audience is off to a good start is more likely to get through.

Example

Anti-smoking groups learned this lesson and switched from vilifying individual smokers to going after the true villains: tobacco companies that lied and concealed how addictive cigarettes are. Other groups that once vilified all gun owners have learned to split responsible hunters from irresponsible gun owners. When they talk about responsible gun ownership, they can call attention to those who believe the public should be allowed to own Uzis and keep responsible hunters on their side.

Show a leader doing it first. Most people look for leadership. The constituency perceived as taking action on something first will help define the issue and thus really impact who else gets involved. Leadership does not have to come from celebrities, but rather can be most powerful in a target audience's immediate community or social circle. The leader that gets highlighted must also have credibility with the audience target.

Example

This was the case with family-friendly workplaces. At first, very few companies offered day care or other child-friendly work options. Then a few big ones like IBM and Johnson & Johnson started offering on-site child care and flex schedules. This was followed by reports that family-friendly policies increase productivity and decrease absenteeism. Then a second, broader tier of adopters put these policies in place—these companies waited until they were tried and validated by a leadership group.

Become the perceived social norm. People are often interested in what their peers—people they perceive to be like them—think about an issue. Social proof gives people a sense that their thoughts and behaviors are acceptable because the rest of their social group is thinking and behaving the same way. People look to this group and tend to mimic what it does. Whether it is called a convergence factor, a bandwagon effect or social pressure, this phenomenon is important for planning successful persuasion.

Example

In 2006, immigration-reform demonstrations became an excellent example of the bandwagon effect serving as an activation point. The massive numbers who turned out in cities across the country heard the voices of “people like them” telling them it was time to get involved. Marchers came with friends and family, neighbors, co-workers and church congregations. They observed the behavior of others, accepted that behavior as correct and adopted it themselves.

There are other possible scenarios. The point is to understand what will work with your audience. You need to determine what will give your audience the backbone, chutzpah and wherewithal to take action.

➤ **Reinforce Action**

Once people have taken action – even a small one – on behalf of your issue, reward them for doing the right thing. Remind them that they've done a good thing, and they'll be much more likely to act on your behalf again next time you ask. In this stage, the task is to celebrate your victories with the people who helped make them happen.

Give immediate reinforcement. This can not only make people feel good but also ensure that they will take action this time and in the future. This reinforcement needs to be positive—aggressively positive. It needs to show the difference people have made. Reinforcement reminds people that there is something they care about deeply and that they can do something about it. It makes them more likely to take more ambitious steps in the future because now the link is clear and they have experienced an ability to make a difference.

Example

In hotel rooms across the country, there are signs claiming that by hanging up used towels rather than sending them to the laundry after each use, guests can help conserve water, prevent detergent from polluting nearby water sources and save energy—all that

before they even get their morning coffee. The signs offer immediate reinforcement by letting hotel guests know exactly how their actions can help. It is something the hotel guest can feel really good about.

Celebrate victories. A strong way to reinforce action is to make the target audience part of a winning effort. It's no big surprise that people like winners. Yet advocates frequently talk about themselves as losing or on the verge of losing, rather than as winners. It is the difference between choice groups regularly reminding us that Roe v. Wade is about to be overturned, and President Bush declaring "mission accomplished." Regularly we hear from progressives that the right wing has beaten them in the war of ideas, citing the success of the Heritage Foundation, American Enterprise Institute and the Cato Institute. They use this as a rallying cry, but it is more defeatist than motivational. There is a big difference between being the underdog and being a loser. Americans love underdogs that have a chance at triumphing, but they really do not like losers. Often when groups win, they don't spend significant time reminding people of their success. Instead, they talk about the pieces that fell short or the next hurdle.

Example

Since its inception, the Endangered Species Act has been 99 percent effective. Only seven out of 1,800 species listed have been lost. Yet for years, environmental groups have largely ignored the act's success. Instead, they dwell on its shortcomings— it doesn't do enough to protect habitats, it isn't funded right, and so forth. Former Congressman Richard Pombo (R-Calif.) was able to step into this negative frame and start defining the act as a 99 percent failure because not one animal that has been listed has fully recovered. Although this was never the intent of the act, his positive posturing left the act very vulnerable. During recent focus groups to test new messaging around the act, Defenders of Wildlife told people the act was 99 percent effective at stopping extinction. One participant summed up the problem with his reply: "That's not true. If it were true, environmental groups would be talking about it." To protect the act, advocacy groups need to spend more time touting its successes.

➤ Conclusion

Once you know where your message needs to focus – based on where your audience target is on the spectrum of action – you can create compelling messages and persuade them to do what you want them to do.



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.

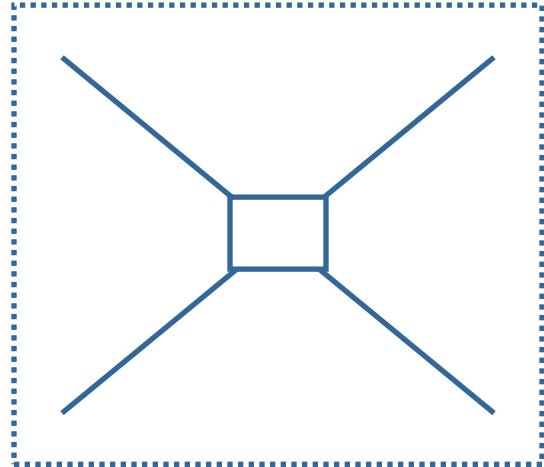
The important thing to keep in mind here is that you want to be sure that your message taps into one existing value that your audience has – not the value that you want them to have.

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

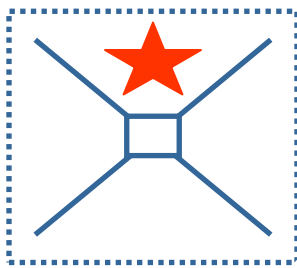
Once you know who you want to reach and have determined what they care about, you can create message points that will resonate with this audience. Good messaging has no more than four main points. These points need to be both concise and compelling. It is that easy, and that hard.

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.



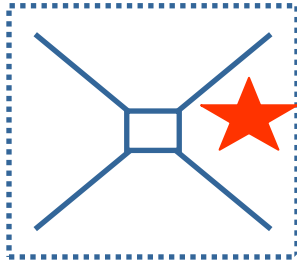
The Value Message – Top (North) Section

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 Message – Right (East) Section

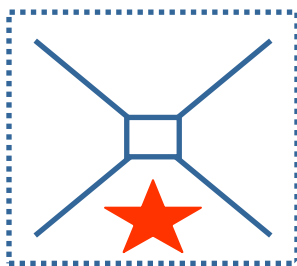
With so many different opinions out there, the chance for misconception is high. People may not realize the extent of a problem – or they may not realize they are basing all their decisions on an incorrect fact.

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.

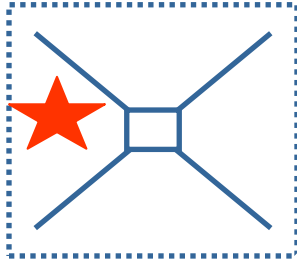


The Ask – Bottom (South) Section

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 Message – 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

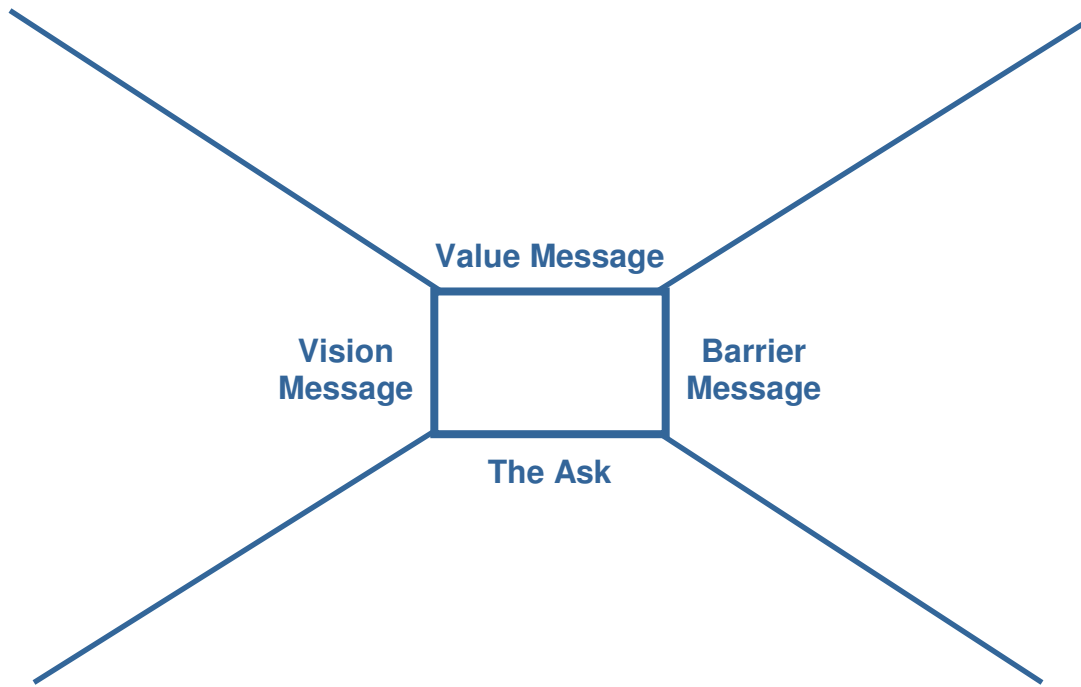
Once you have finished your message box, pat yourself on the back. Then find a way to test your messages among some audience targets. This could be as simple as asking three or four members of your audience what they think, or it may mean fielding a national poll. Either way, try it out on someone who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

Creating Compelling Messages Worksheet

Who are you trying to reach with this message? *(Remember to keep your audience as narrow as possible. And only select one audience at a time – different audiences need different message boxes.)*

Brainstorm a list of values that your audience has. Circle the one that is most important that you will tap into with your message.

Now fill in the four sections of your message box.



1 MESSAGE BOX

Audience 1:

Value:

Barrier:

Tap Value

Echo Vision

Overcome the Barrier

Ask