

The 4 Cornerstones of Your Message Platform

You have to connect with your target audiences to move them to act...to give, to sign, to participate, to volunteer and more. Your organization's messages are your greetings—the first step in building these vital relationships and a must-do for keeping them vibrant over time.

But without relevant messages, it's impossible to connect.

Crafting compelling messages that are easy to remember and repeat is one of the most overlooked—and under appreciated—methods of ensuring you reach your nonprofit marketing goals.

In fact, 76% of nonprofit communicators like you say their messages are irrelevant to the people they want to give, volunteer or take another needed action.*

Their target audiences (like yours?) remain unmoved and their goals unmet.

That's a huge loss, as effective messages have a significant ROI (return on investment). When your messages don't connect, you generate just a huge who cares. And who-cares messages alienate current supporters, as well

as prospects on all fronts. Who wants to dig into something that doesn't seem to have anything to do with them?

There's No Choice—Learn How to Get to Relevant Messages

Creating engaging messages requires a minor (if any) financial investment and a moderate investment of time, and offers tremendous returns. I hear from so many of you who believe in the power of messages, but just don't know where to start.

In response to your requests, here's an updated guide to crafting the four cornerstones of your organization's messages—your message platform.

4 Must-Dos *Before* You Shape Your Message Platform

Take these four steps to ensure relevancy, the essence of messages that connect.

1. **Build your message team** of colleagues, leadership, volunteers and supporters. You'll want their insights to shape your messages, their relationships to test them and access to their networks by training them as fantastic messengers down the line.
2. **Clarify your top one to three marketing goals**—how will you use marketing to reach your organizational goals, and the actions you want folks to take to get you there.
3. **Identify who is most likely to act and/or has the greatest influence** (your target audiences; no more than three groups).
4. **Get to know what's important to your audiences** (wants, values and preferences) so you can articulate what's in it for them

and ensure no barriers stand in your way to engaging them, and learn how best to reach them.

The 4 Cornerstones of a Relevant Nonprofit Message Platform

Now you're ready to draft, or refine, your organization's messages. These four components are the cornerstones of your organization's message platform.

Be aware that although these elements are presented in a linear manner here, the message development process is cyclical. For example, what you learn in building out your key messages and related support points may highlight an element that needs to be incorporated into your positioning statement. Design your timeline, and roles and responsibilities, for this process with that in mind.

1. Tagline

Value

Extends your organization's name to convey its unique impact or value with personality, passion and commitment, while delivering a memorable and *repeatable* message to your network.

Definition

Running no more than eight words, the tagline is your organization's single most used message.

An effective tagline provides enough insight to generate interest and motivate your reader/listener to ask a question, without providing too much information so that she thinks she knows everything she needs to and doesn't want to read more or continue the conversation.

How to Use

Exactly as written in print, online and verbal communications, including business cards and email signatures.

Examples

- *Organization:* Community Food & Justice Coalition
- *Tagline:* Food for People, Not for Profit
- *Organization:* Maryland SPCA
- *Tagline:* Feel the Warmth of a Cold Nose

2. Positioning Statement

Value

Connects your organization with those you want to engage by 1) linking it with what's important to them; and 2) differentiating it from others competing for their attention, time and dollars.

Definition

A one to three sentence statement that positions your organization most effectively in the environment in which you work. It conveys the intersection of what your organization does well, what it does better and differently than any other organization (uniqueness), and what your network cares about.

Key components of your positioning statement are:

- What you do.
- For whom (whom do you serve).
- What's different about the way you do your work.
- Impact you make (something tangible, like a stat, is compelling here, see example below).
- Unique benefit derived from your programs, services and/or products.

Most, importantly, *this is not your mission statement.*

Your mission statement is internally oriented and serves as your organizational road map. Your positioning statement connects your mission with what's vital to your network, so must be externally oriented.

How to Use

Exactly as written in all print and online communications (with the exception of the occasional narrowly-focused flyer or mini-site).

Examples

- The Environmental Health Coalition (EHC) builds grassroots campaigns to combat the unjust consequences of toxic pollution, discriminatory land use, and unsustainable energy policies. Through leader development, organizing and advocacy, EHC improves the health of children, families, neighborhoods and the natural environment in the San Diego/Tijuana region.
- The Rural Women's Health Project (RWHP) designs and delivers health education training and materials to help rural women and their families strengthen their understanding of critical health and family issues. By blending innovative techniques with a collaborative approach, RWHP has built a record of success in improving the health and well-being of the communities they serve.

3. Key Messages or Talking Points

Value

Succinctly elaborate on your positioning statement and provide the necessary proof required for validation, while enabling you to tailor your messaging to specific groups within your network.

Definition

A set of four to six key messages that build on the information conveyed in your positioning statement and respond to most common questions asked by your current and prospective network.

Most talking points should run no more than two sentences. Develop a set at the organizational level first; and follow (if needed) with sets for specific target audiences, programs and/or campaigns.

Be prepared with supporting points (a.k.a. proof points) for each talking point.

How to Use

- Use in both written and verbal conversation.
- However, talking points *do not represent the exact words that must be used* (especially in conversation), but rather convey the essential ideas to be conveyed. They can be customized for greater impact—to the specific interchange, the interests of the person you're speaking with or emailing, and/or the topic of conversation.

Examples

Note proof points associated with the talking points in some of these examples.

- Advancing Equality (see pp. 13-16)
- Beverage Container Recycling
- [Walk to School](#)

4. Elevator Catch - *not Pitch*

From the moment the first elevator sped upwards in 1853, people have been polishing their elevator pitches. The idea was that if the big prospect ever strode into your elevator, you'd be able to dazzlingly explain your organization and your role there by the time you reached your floor.

But that traditional elevator pitch is dead! Here's why, and guidance on how to persuade people to give, volunteer and support your cause today:

1) Today, we work *constantly* to move people, not just the prospect and not just in the elevator.

We're working to persuade fans, colleagues, our children and friends—who are all overwhelmed by media and messages—all the time. It's a tough sell.

2) Your conversational partner—or child, program participant, colleague or board member—doesn't care what *you* want. She cares mainly about her own needs, wants, passions, habits and dreams, and those of her near and dear.

It's not selfish, it's human. We have to filter somehow.

If your pitch relates, great. If not, nada. And the only way to find that match—if there is one—is to a) get attention, b) learn about what's important to your partner.

Value

Enables you to listen and learn from any social contact (not just those that take place in an elevator). If there's interest in your issue and/or org, you can turn it into a "first step" conversion opportunity (asking for more information, scheduling a call, etc.) in 60 seconds or less.

Definition

A conversation customized to the interests of the person you're talking with, the context of your conversation and the first-step "ask" you'll be making and/or other factors. Takes no more than 60 seconds to deliver; 30 seconds is ideal.

These are the four steps to get there. Start with step one and end with step four, but the order of steps two and three can vary:

1. *The lead-in.* This is where you introduce yourself and your role in your organization to set up the conversation. It's intended to spark the interest of the person you're speaking with.
2. *The question.* This is the hook, an open-ended conversation that allows you to assess the interest level of your conversational partner. Remember to pause after you ask, to wait for an answer.
3. *The differentiator.* Proceed here *only* if you get interest in response to your question. Your differentiator identifies your organization as providing a unique resource valued by the person you're speaking with (build from what you've heard), one that deserves immediate attention.
4. *The first-step call to action.* This is the request to schedule a follow-up call to discuss the matter further, make an online contribution or participate in a meeting on the issue, thereby making the conversion. Make it specific, clear and doable (e.g. don't ask too much, especially in an initial conversation).

NOTE: It's vital that the "pitcher" is adept at following the lead of his conversational partner to make the most of the short period he has. Role playing is a proven way to build this skill.

Examples

Hi, I'm Mora Lopez. I'm a senior at Santa Fe High School and a volunteer with Open Door. We host workshops at our school so that adults can learn English. We're the only free adult ESL class in town.

Do you know that out of the 30 million adults who are below basic reading and writing levels, almost 40% are Hispanic?

PAUSE, continue only if there's clear interest.

Our participants report back that learning English has made a remarkable difference in their lives, both professionally and personally, and we want to grow the number of students we can handle.

Would you like to share your email address? That way we can keep you posted on the program as it continues to grow.

Now It's Your Turn—Next Steps

Your next step is to inventory your organization's current message platform against this checklist:

- What elements are in place as defined above (or near enough)?
- For those that are in place, were they created based on the four “must-dos” outlined at the beginning of this article?
 - If yes, you have some of the four cornerstones already in place.
 - If no, you’ll need to start at the very beginning, with your positioning statement.
- For those cornerstones you need to revise, or create for the first time:
 - Start with clarifying your communications goals.
 - Identify those you need to engage to meet those goal, and get to know them.
 - Start shaping your cornerstones based on this framework.

Focus in Chunks - Next 90 Days --

A simple tool to help focus? - Creative Brief - introduce - share copies

What’s holding you back from effective messages?