

## Messaging Tip Sheet: Create Compelling Messages

Effective messaging is about narrowing your focus to make a few strong points that people will remember – rather than throwing out a variety of points and letting the audience decide which ones to retain. To start, consider the following questions.

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

Narrow your target audience as much as possible. Your audience should never be the general public, which is simply too big and diverse to reach with a single message. Instead, select a very specific target audience that relates to your goal.

**Example:** An environmental organization wants to get a large tract of wilderness in Alaska permanently protected. It could target members of the U.S. Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources – or it could choose to target the President of the United States. The group could also choose to target constituencies who hold influence over either of these audience targets – such as hunters and fishermen (affectionately known as the hook and bullet crowd). Each of these potential audience targets will require different messaging.

### **Question Two: What does your audience care about?**

Effective messaging takes into account the values and core concerns of the target audience. 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 or they can be "smaller" core concerns, such as parents wanting to keep their families safe or a business owner wanting to make a profit.

Before you begin developing message points, consider what your audience cares about. Be honest with yourself – your audience's values may be different from your own. Brainstorm a list of audience values, then select the one that is likely most important to your audience. Review public opinion studies or talk to members of your target audience for insights.

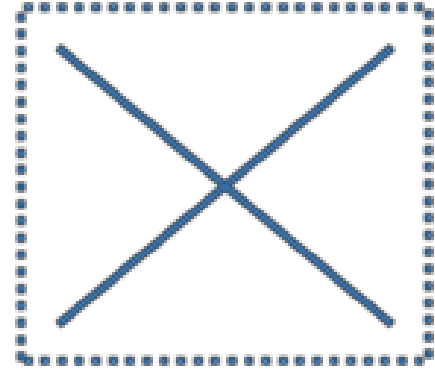
Remember: your message should tap into a value that your audience already has – not a value that you want the audience to have.

**Example:** The Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC) partnered with over 30 craft breweries to enforce the Clean Water Act and support EPA protections for American waters. Many brewery owners are small business entrepreneurs. Because they can't make beer without water, protecting water quality is critical to their business. By tapping this multi-billion-dollar industry as a partner, NRDC brought a business perspective to clean water issues. As local employers, these breweries also helped bring local policymaker attention to the issue.

### **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. 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. The circular nature of the message box lets you start at any message point and hop around in a speech, during an interview, in a press release – any time you are communicating about your issue. Just stay in the message box.



For each audience target you are trying to reach, you need a different message box. Every audience has different values and your messages will be most effective if you tailor them to each audience. Tailoring your messages doesn’t mean starting from scratch, but rather adjusting each of the points as needed for the new audience.

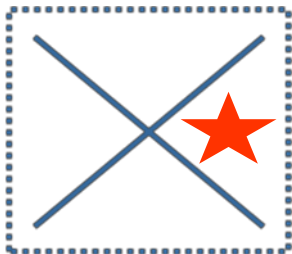
Once you have filled in the four core messages in your box (described below), you can develop supporting points for each message including compelling facts, stories and statistics.



**The Value Message – Top (North) Section**

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

**Example:** The debate around death penalty reform offers a good example of a policy-based value message. 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 sentiment, which tapped into the value of fairness. Advocates were able to establish common ground and build a case for reform.



**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 turned out to be 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 misconception about your issue. The key to a successful barrier message is not to repeat your audience’s misconception. Instead, provide new or unexpected information to

overcome the audience's barrier.

**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 156 people have been exonerated from death row since 1976.*



### The Ask – Bottom (South) Section

Focus at least one message point on getting the target audience to do something. What's the point in getting the audience's attention if you don't use it to reach your goal? 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. However, increasing a school budget to allow for more qualified teachers is something people can get behind.

**Example:** If the death penalty reformers had said “pass reform” and left it at that, they would have left it to policymakers to define what reform meant. This isn't ideal – different people are likely to have radically different ways of dealing with this issue. Instead, they asked legislators to *pass legislation to offer DNA testing to inmates convicted of a capital crime.* This was a specific request for legislators to address.



### 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:** Death penalty reform advocates rallied around the vision message: *Then we'll have a fair justice system.* This vision connects to the fairness value highlighted in the value message: *Innocent people should not be wrongfully convicted.*

### Testing Your Message Box

Once you have finished your message box, 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. It may mean sending some digital posts and monitoring the response. Or, you may need to conduct more extensive message testing such as gathering national polling data or conducting focus groups. One way or another, test your messages on an audience sample that can evaluate the messages from a neutral standpoint – this rules out you and anyone who helped you complete your message box.