

A STEP-BY-STEP GUIDE TO CREATING GREAT KEY MESSAGES

1. Why do I want key messages?

Messages are the words that help you deliver your narrative. Messages help you focus your communication which is critically important. In advertising it's called "effective frequency". The idea is that an ad has to be seen multiple times before a consumer will a) notice and b) respond favorably. It's the same with messaging — you're selling something — even if it's an idea or point of view. You have to stick with it.

2. The basics of persuasion

Frames, narrative, and persuasion are essential building blocks that you need to understand before you create messages. Before you develop your messages you should have a narrative in place — it guides your messaging. Know and use the three modes of persuasion:

- Character — is the person delivering the message someone the audience sees as trustworthy or an authority on the subject.
- Emotion — used by the speaker to appeal to the audience's emotions. The speaker builds a common bond through shared identity, and inspires action
- Logic / Reason — the speaker presents a logical argument backed by sound evidence. Care is taken not to confuse the audience. This is important when trying to persuade people who know a lot about the issue.

3. Creating your key messages

- Clear — Free of jargon, devoid of technical language, and relevant;
- Concise — Deliver key messages in 7-8 seconds. That might be all the airtime you get;
- Consistent — Messages must be repeated if they are to sink in.

Appeal to emotion - If you don't stir the emotions in your audience your messaging won't work. People will remember the way they felt long after they have forgotten the facts.

Be careful with numbers - If numbers will help you tell your story, use them. But know that your audience probably won't remember them if you're precise. Instead of saying between 18 and 48 percent, go with "about a third". It's easier to remember and easier to emphasize with emotion. Other examples are:

- More than 80% — not 82%
- Two-thirds — not 67%
- Almost one hundred years ago — not 95 years ago
- More than 6,000 people — not 6,300 people

Don't overload your audience with numbers. The fewer the better.

Adapt - As circumstances change you will need to update your messages. You will need different messages depending on whether you are talking publicly or to a room of experts in a private setting. Experts may expect more evidence and technical arguments. Give it to them. The public's expectations are different.

The rule of three - There's an idea in writing and speaking: things in threes are more aesthetically pleasing and easier to remember.

Test your message - Research becomes a critical part of developing communication. Call on your network of people. Test it with people that know a lot about the issue and people who don't. Your messages may evoke a frame that isn't helpful. You may find that the order in which you present your messages changes the way your audience reacts to them. Your language may be too aggressive or a bit ho-hum.

4. Practice

Know what works and practice. Don't wing it. It's easy to stumble, forget what you wanted to say, and default into technical language. Be prepared for the easy questions and know how to deal with the difficult ones. Practice working your key messages into them.

Excerpts adapted from Jeremy Porter
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