

Seven Tips for Framing Effective Messages

1

Effective messages are clear, consistent, and free of jargon.

2

Effective messages include stories about people and issues. Spokespeople are good storytellers who bring in the policy implications and community context in every personal story.

3

Effective messages are realistic and truthful. Spokespeople don't promise more than they can deliver, and they are prepared to talk about what doesn't work as well as what does—and the lessons learned from both.

4

In preparing effective messages, communicators identify target audiences and survey them early on to get their understanding of the issues. Listening is as important a skill as lecturing.

5

Effective messages are specific and local. Different messages will be needed for different audiences.

6

Effective messages are spread through materials that are varied and visually interesting. Core messages are repeated over and over again.

7

Effective messages include logos, Web addresses, and phone numbers on every product, even things like refrigerator magnets.

Audiences for an After-School Program

The leaders of the After-School Program initiative are meeting in May to plan a communication strategy to announce the launch of the pilot program in September. The following list describes examples of individuals who would be interested in learning about the program. For each person on the list, discuss the following:

1 What aspect of the issue of after-school care for children affects this person? Why should he or she be interested in a program to provide children with fun and educational after-school activities?

2 What do you want this person to do when he or she hears your message (volunteer, enroll children in the program, raise money for the program, etc.)?

3 Write two or three sentences to tell this person and the audience he or she represents about your group's actions to create an after-school program in an interesting way.

Janice

Janice has recently retired from her job as an office manager at a local real estate company. She has a lot of free time and is interested in volunteer opportunities.

Phil

Phil has two children who attend one of the middle schools where the pilot program is being launched. He works the 3 p.m. to 11 p.m. shift at the hospital as a patient care assistant and his wife works downtown from 8:00 a.m. until 5:00 p.m. He is concerned that his children are alone at the house for several hours in the afternoon until his wife returns home from work.

Tom

Tom is a seventh grader at the school where the pilot program is being launched. Both of his parents work during the day.

Harold

Harold is a local business leader who serves on the boards of the United Way and the Inter-faith Ministries Council. He is active in a number of community fund-raisers.

Maria

Maria has a daughter at one of the schools where the pilot program is being launched. She immigrated from El Salvador a few years ago and works as a housekeeper at a downtown hotel.

Catch-All Communication List

- “branding”
- local newspapers
- tote bags
- CD-ROM
- yard signs
- potluck dinners
- Web sites
- listservs
- newsletters
- storytelling
- town forums
- videos
- conferences
- flyers
- posters
- op-ed essays
- talking
- conferences
- press briefings
- training
- television news
- street rallies
- kiosks
- T-shirts
- materials in different languages
- speakers’ bureaus
- talk shows on radio and television
- press kits
- local television
- walk-a-thons
- walking tours of the neighborhoods
- arts festivals
- public access cable shows
- audiocassettes
- bumper stickers
- testimony at public hearings
- press releases
- photo exhibits
- letters to the editor
- logos
- paid advertising
- book clubs
- door-to-door surveys
- oral histories
- refrigerator magnets
- sermons
- block parties
- poetry readings
- brochures
- focus groups
- magazine articles
- bulletin boards
- letters to clergy
- outreach to reporters
- editorial board meetings
- award ceremonies
- billboard ads
- slide presentations
- news annual reports
- neighborhood newspapers

One Size Doesn't Fit All

Different people listen to different radio stations, watch different television programs, see different billboards, and read different magazines and newspapers. In short, they get their information from very different sources. In this activity you can brainstorm about possible ways to reach the different people who need to know about your group's after-school program .

For each of the following individuals, discuss:

- What is the best way to reach this person with information about the program?
- What does this person see/read? (Newspapers, billboards, bus advertisements, newsletters, posters, fliers, Web sites)
- What does this person listen to? (Radio stations, TV programs, sermons, workshops, etc.)
- With whom does this person regularly communicate? (Coworkers, supervisors, clergy, neighbors, social workers, physicians, teachers, friends, family)

Have someone record main ideas on a flip chart to share with the larger group.

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ATTRACTING MEDIA ATTENTION: A GUIDE

Reasons to Communicate

- To get attention
- To create a buzz
- To inform
- To inspire
- To build trust
- To organize
- To connect
- To change public perception
- To build a movement
- To counter apathy or opposition
- To change policy
- To disseminate information
- To build bridges
- To sustain reform
- To uncover neighborhood/community strengths
- To increase visibility of community leaders

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Tips for Gaining Media Attention

- Create a media plan and message.
- Prepare a media list and keep it current.
- Become a master interviewee.
- Stage an event.
- Submit a letter to the editor.
- Arrange an editorial board meeting.
- Write a guest opinion (op-ed).
- Put out a news release and follow up.
- Respond to stories in the news.
- Contact journalists in advance.
- Use community calendars and public service announcements
- Use radio call-in shows.
- Hold a news conference when you have specific news to announce.

ATTRACTING MEDIA ATTENTION: A GUIDE

Major Media Outlets

PRINT MEDIA

(Your contacts: reporters and editors)

Most cities have only one, or at most two, local daily newspapers. Most urban areas also have a wealth of specialty papers, daily, weekly, or monthly. You can pitch a story, write letters to the editor or op-ed essays, or become a resource for reporters.

TELEVISION MEDIA

(Your contacts: assignment editors and reporters)

Most cities have at least three or four local stations that cover the news. Cable television adds even more choices.

RADIO

(Your contacts: news directors and reporters)

Radio is booming. Most commercial radio stations specialize in one narrow type of programming, though a few broadcast a lot of local news. Talk radio offers opportunities to raise issues, both as a caller or as a guest; but it can sometimes be contentious. Public and community radio are generally noncommercial outlets and have a range of public affairs programming.

NEWS SERVICES

(Your contacts: "daybook" editors and reporters)

All media outlets subscribe to news services to get a steady supply of news. The Associated Press is the largest news service in the country and is divided into city bureaus. If AP covers your story, it may be picked up in multiple outlets. Smaller news services include Reuters, United Press International, Gannett, Bloomberg, and Pacific News Service.

Major Media Outlets (continued)

ALTERNATIVE MEDIA

(Your contacts: community-access television)

Accessing alternative media can provide sites with opportunities such as place-based video projects and diaries, and community-access television stations where residents can discuss local issues. Video documentaries and diaries are typically neighborhood based. Public and cable community-access television often designate public space for local input.

ELECTRONIC MEDIA

(Your contacts: you and a Web designer)

Online networks are increasingly used to communicate information in an interactive format. Chat rooms, community Web sites, online parent support groups, electronic neighborhood forums, e-mail, and listservs (electronic bulletin board) are examples of electronic media that can be used to convey important messages.

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How to Put Out a News Release

A news release is the vehicle for alerting multiple media outlets to an event, agenda, campaign, etc. It's a brief written explanation of your plans. You can mail, fax, or e-mail it to reporters. (If you are suggesting a story idea to one specific reporter, you need not write a news release. But you should have basic written information available.) "I might have 30 seconds to spend on a news release," says Paul Day, a reporter for KCNC-TV in Denver, adding that the important information should "leap off the page."

Standard format for a news release

1. In the top left corner, type "For Immediate Release."
2. In the top right corner, type the date.
3. Below "For Immediate Release," type the names and phone numbers of two contacts.
4. Make sure these contacts can be easily reached by phone.
5. Type a headline on the release. This can be up to four lines, if necessary. Include as much essential information as possible.
6. Emphasize what's unique: the first, the biggest, etc. Be creative.
7. Write short paragraphs of one to three sentences each.
8. Write the release like a news story, with the information in descending order of importance. One page maximum.
 - Spend 75 percent of your time writing the headline and first paragraph.
 - The release should answer Who, What, Where, When, Why, and How. You can write these words on the left side of the page and answer them on the right.
 - Type "—30—" or "###" to indicate the end of your release.
 - Type the release on the letterhead of the organization.
 - Briefly describe the organization in the last paragraph of the release.

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How to Use Community Calendars and Public Service Announcements

If you have an event you'd like included in the community calendars of newspapers or other media, use the style of a news release to distribute the information. Tell them who, what, when, where, and why in a clear and concise way. Label the release, "Calendar Item" and make sure you send it to the appropriate people at news outlets. Find out which news organizations—print and broadcast—in your community have calendars listing community events, and become familiar with them. Calendar editors want to hear from you. Getting your information is their job.

- Send in most calendar items at least two weeks in advance.
- Double-check your dates, times, locations, etc.
- Don't forget your local cable access station and commercial TV stations.
- Ask if color photos are accepted.

Many broadcast outlets will air information about nonprofit causes (health tips, safety information) and events (rallies, lectures). Even commercial television stations run video public service announcements—albeit seldom in prime time. For TV stations, contact the public affairs director. At radio stations, call the DJs directly and ask them to read your information on the air, even if they don't normally read news.

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How to Hold a News Conference

When many citizens think of “publicity,” what pops into their minds is “news conference.” In reality, a news conference is usually the wrong way to attract the media. It’s a much better idea to call reporters individually and fax them information. But news conferences may be the right approach if you expect significant coverage. Whenever possible, hold press conferences outside, with backup arrangements for bad weather. That way, you don’t have to worry about providing electricity for lights and cameras.

- Assign someone to greet reporters; write their names on a sign-in sheet.
- Keep it to four speakers, maximum. Limit speeches to five minutes. Put your most important speakers first. Cut off speakers who run on too long.
- Speakers should dress in business clothes, unless they are in costumes.
- Allow ten minutes for questions. The whole thing is over in thirty minutes.
- Make sure your amplification system is adequate.
- Photographers frequently arrive early to try to catch a candid photo.
- If only a few reporters arrive on time, delay five minutes, then begin.
- Practice the news conference in advance, including questions.

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How to Stage An Event

Media events can be used to call attention to any issue. If you provide interesting visuals and a strong message, the media will come. Television news, in particular, will seldom cover a story without a strong visual element. "The most imaginative and theatrical people are going to win," says Colin Covert, a feature reporter at the *Star Tribune* in Minneapolis. "Don't expect good intentions to get you space. The fact that you're trying to fight cancer is great, but it's not news. If you do something interesting, we'll write about it."

PETITIONS

Signed petitions should be delivered in a way that create an image and drama for the news media. Consider putting petitions inside something (e.g., a coffin, trashcan, or symbol of your issue).

REPORTS AND RESEARCH

Reporters are interested in fresh statistics and new information. Link reports about your issue with visual images for the widest coverage. Hold a news conference to display your visual image and your report.

BANNERS

Signs and banners make news. Activists have climbed existing billboards and covered them with their own banners; dropped banners from construction sites; put letters on people's shirts (one letter per shirt) and made a human banner; and placed photos of women who have had breast cancer on a banner. A simple sign, offered at the right time, can be extremely effective.

CELEBRITIES

Take advantage of our society's obsession with sports and Hollywood. Finding a celebrity or notable person to endorse your cause or speak at your event can be difficult, but it's worth the effort. Sometimes when a celebrity takes up a cause, everything suddenly changes. Support comes out of nowhere. Your position becomes credible.

NOTHING SPECIAL

Often, you don't need to create a special event for journalists. Simply let them know when your organization is doing something interesting, particularly if it has visual appeal. Every day, nonprofit groups are doing interesting things, but too frequently staff and volunteers forget about letting the news media know. Almost any community activity—even a meeting—can make news.