EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION:
CREATING MESSAGES THAT SELL
IDEAS, SERVICES, AND PRODUCTS

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A Trusted Source of Environmental Information

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Introduction

For many organizations, communication with the intent of convincing people to engage in some desired behavior is a key function. Whether seeking to convince someone to buy a product or service, support a position on a political issue, or change personal behavior (e.g., smoking) - communication requires framing messages such that recipients can understand them and are motivated to respond accordingly. While the most critical component of what many organizations do, all too often very little thoughtful planning is put into the messaging process.

To a certain extent *individuals* have done a better job of identifying and developing "messaging" skills than have organizations. Dale Carnegie's book "How to Win Friends and Influence People" and Dr. Chester Karrass' Effective Negotiating® seminars have garnered international recognition and helped thousands of individuals develop the discipline and interpersonal skills to successfully develop and deliver messages that aid their individual success. Many organizations would benefit from undergoing a similar process.

In this report we provide some of the basic concepts behind a good messaging program, and the steps an organization can take to ensure that they have the highest likelihood of success. Today, with a mountain of information competing for an individual's attention it is not enough to simply have the correct data or the right idea – the information needs the right path to get to the right people at the right time in the right manner for something good to come of it. In this report we try to give you some of the basic tools to make that happen.

Messaging

The goal of a messaging process is to inspire the greatest possible number of people to adopt your product, service or idea. It is the role of the "marketing message" to lead targeted individuals through the sequential "product" adoption process – where in this case the word "message" refers to an actual product, any service, or an idea. From now on in this report we will refer to this as the message adoption process. In addition, we will use "audience" and "target market" interchangeably to denote the applicability of this process in both selling something and influencing opinions.

> The 5-Step Message
> Adoption Process
>
> 1. Awareness
> 2. Interest
> 3. Evaluation
> 4. Trial
> 5. Adoption

The *message adoption process* has five sequential stages: *Awareness, Interest, Evaluation, Trial, and Adoption*. It is critical to recognize the importance of this sequence, and the underlined variability in the components of the message required at each stage.

1. Awareness Stage

Getting people aware of your message is more complex than having them simply recognize the name of your product, the brand, or the logo – although all those things may help with the awareness building campaign. The *Awareness* stage is successful when the target audience is able to envision your message as a <u>realistic possibility</u> for themselves. This is often the hardest stage to get past, and can be the most difficult to interpret based only on the initial response of the target market. Those comprising the target market or audience may ask general questions during the awareness stage to get a basic understanding of what the message is, implying but not confirming interest. Sometimes the ONLY way to know if an audience views a message as applicable to them is by asking them directly (e.g., would you vote for so and so?). Target market sampling can be used with groups to estimate the effectiveness of the message in getting past this stage (e.g., asking a random sample of individuals from the group).

As mentioned above, in many ways the Awareness stage can be the *most difficult stage to get through.* This results from the fact that consumers (i.e., you, me and the rest of the human population!) have a toolset of behaviors that protect them from unwanted inputs. It is fairly well accepted that these defensive behaviors are learned, and although they may vary greatly from culture to culture there are some commonalities.

Pavlov[1] described the behavioral sequence such as that needed to get past these defensive filters as the "stimulus response" method, by which there is a) a *cue* or weak stimulus that directs the attention (e.g., smell), b) a *drive* or motivation that reflects the need (e.g., hunger), c) a *response* to eliminate that need (e.g., buy some cookies), and d) *reinforcement* of the action, either positive or negative (e.g., positive, the cookies taste good – or negative, your mom yells at you for eating cookies before dinner).

To apply this theory to the messaging process, marketers have adopted what is commonly referred to as the "Black Box[2]" Model of human behavior (where the Black Box is the mind). So, in order to create true product Awareness the message must generate a <u>cue</u> that carries the information past a series of filters in the target audience's mind including selective:
- Exposure (precursor to cue – e.g., what radio or TV stations we choose)
- Attention (does the cue attract the senses? – sight, smell, taste, etc.)
- Comprehension (how we interpret the cue/message)
- Retention (do we remember it and how important it is? – high emotion leads to high retention!)

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[1] Ivan Pavlov, 1927 Classical Conditioning or Stimulus-Response Theory of Behavior.
[2] Sir Isaac Newton formulated the Black Box Theory of Science suggesting that natural phenomena follow a sequence of "input to black box to output" to explain how things happen, but not why things happen in science.

What Stands Between Your Message and Your Audience's Awareness[3]
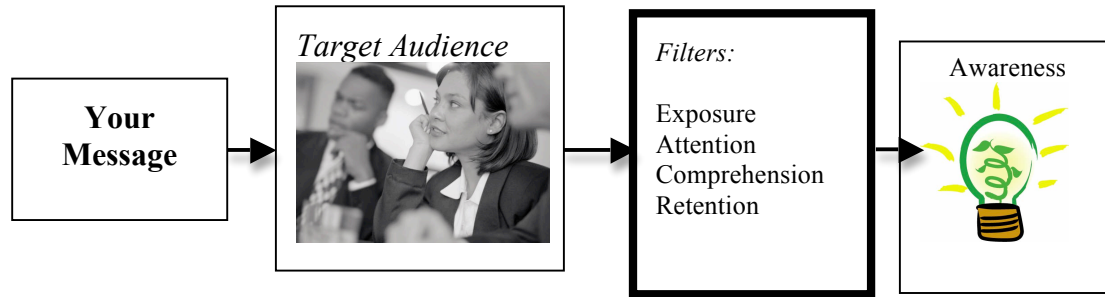
These filters serve to protect against information overload. In addition, every individual brings a different experience, a different set of evaluation criteria, and different attitudes to the problem recognition (or drive) process. Thus individual personalities greatly affect responses to different messages.

Filters Related to Environmental Messages

Successful environmental messaging can be particularly challenging on two counts. First, similar to religion and politics there is frequently significant emotion attached to environmental issues, as well as deeply embedded opinions attached to those issues.[4] Thus, the level of filtration of an environmental message is likely to be very high. Achieving a desired Awareness may be very difficult due, in part, to existing, potentially even incorrect, perceptions.

Second, a marketing message is unlikely to forge a way through emotionally charged filters by use of data. Data is primarily applicable in the *Evaluation* stage and may in fact be highly negative for many individuals during the Awareness stage of the message adoption process. Since communication stages are sequential, a message shouldn't try to convince an audience of a product's statistical benefits until the process has progressed through individual filters and triggered Interest. This is a critically important point. When customers are not making "rational decisions" based on convincing data it may be because an organization hasn't done a good job of (or has completely skipped) leading individuals through the first two stages of the message adoption process.

> Data is primarily applicable in the *Evaluation* stage and may in fact be highly negative for many individuals at the *Awareness* stage of the message adoption process.

The use of appropriate messages targeted at triggering the interests, or drives, of specific market segments is often the only way to get to the point where an audience can be induced to evaluate details that may lead to the desired response, or to a trial. Positive reinforcement follows. Underlying this approach is an assumption that the different wants and needs of the target market have been researched and fully understood.

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[3] Image source: Google Images
[4] A case could be argued that for all intents and purposes, environmental issues have become intertwined with religion and politics, adding to the level of emotion and strong opinion and further complicating the messaging awareness step.

Crafting Messages To Get Past Filters

In previous marketing reports we have discussed defining a target audience by segmenting the overall market into target groups based on common demographic, geographic, psychographic and/or behavioral characteristics.[5] For messaging purposes we tend to focus more on the psychographic (activities, interests, and opinions) and behavioral (perceived benefit) characteristics to define a target audience.

The first step in crafting messages is to develop an intimate understanding of the target market's wants and needs – basically creating the knowledge of what <u>drives</u> those in the target group so appropriate <u>cues</u> can be developed to trigger the desired <u>response</u> and create behaviors that can then be <u>reinforced</u>.

The next step is to craft a *unique message campaign for each unique target market* (audience segment). The first objective is to identify the best path to get past filters; one approach is to begin by addressing the following:

- Selective *exposure* – Basically answering the question of "how to get in front of the target market?" It is important to understand characteristics such as which TV stations/shows those comprising the target market watch (beer drinkers watch football), which radio stations they listen to (organic foods customers tend to listen to NPR), or which magazines they read (maybe trade magazines?) in order to select the right venue or channel for a messaging campaign.

Girl Scout's go door to door

- Selective *attention* - It is essential to understand the right cues (beer drinking men might pay attention to girls in bikinis; environmentalists might react to images of environmental devastation). There are three basic ways to get peoples' attention – aural (hear it – e.g. radio), visual (see it – e.g. TV) and physical (do it – e.g. test drive[6]) and all three are valid methodologies and can complement one another. Today, through a vehicle such as YouTube, organizations have the ability for the first time in history to provide "hear and see" information simultaneously to a potentially vast audience at low cost. This can be a great way also to address the physical, as activities can be demonstrated in detail to simulate experience.

- Selective *comprehension* – Here the challenge is to ensure that the message is in a form that people can readily understand …not too complicated, not too simple. However, better too simple than too complicated. Simple language accompanied by straightforward images is generally best. Remember the old saying, "a picture is worth a thousand words?" Good advice, but the picture selected is extremely important. In seeking to achieve comprehension it is

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[5] For previous Dovetail Reports addressing Marketing and Business Leadership, see: http://dovetailinc.org/reports
[6] A test drive is a physical attention getting stimulus rather than the "trial" step in the adoption process. The trial stage would be when a car is purchased for the first time.

particularly important to remember the importance of addressing behavioral characteristics; in other words, it is here where it is important to portray benefits. In this regard, an emphasis on outcomes is vastly better than focusing on the details of achieving them. Thus hospitals don't show images of bloody open-heart surgery to promote their services, but rather happy retired couples playing with their grandchildren. Wood products companies don't show pictures of people cutting down trees, but rather beautiful furniture or cozy homes. The goal here is for the target audience to begin to perceive the benefits of whatever product or message is being promoted: health, a sustainable environment, product quality, or world peace.

- Selective *retention* – The goal at this stage is that messages make an impact on the target's memory systems. Emotions are especially important in causing people to remember things. Humor is commonly used as it engages positive emotions that are fairly straightforward to create. Fear is another easily created emotion, but not one we will advocate the use of herein, although it is among the most common used in some venues (e.g., politics). Other positive emotions come from creating situations where the targets can either see themselves or other people (and particularly influential people) enjoying the benefits of adopting whatever is being promoted. This latter characteristic is a very important one as it denotes the importance of *reference groups* to influencing people's decisions.

The Role of Reference Groups

Reference groups (other people) can be an important part of the messaging process, as they are the single largest influence on an individual's attitudes, opinions, values, and behavior.[7] Reference groups affect the way you remember information - that is what emotional reaction you associate with that memory. Types of reference groups include: Associative (people who others view positively), Disassociative (people who others view negatively), and Aspirational (people who many people would like to emulate).

Creating an associative memory can be accomplished by showing the target audience people they perceive as similar to themselves enjoying the benefits of the product adoption or behavior you want to encourage (perhaps racing through the winding hills in their new sports car). An example of a message intended to create a disassociative memory would be showing your competitor's car on those same roads…. crashing. Organizations use movie stars to create aspirational association with their products (e.g., for some people, if Jennifer Lopez uses it… it must be good).

jenniferlopez.com

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[7] Jacob Naor, PhD. 1992. Marketing Strategies presentation, University of Maine.

Importance of The Messenger

Based on people's reaction to the last example (Jennifer Lopez) it is possible to understand the importance of attuning the messenger to the needs of the target audience. For some people Jennifer will be a trusted and admired source of behavior stimulus (perhaps an aspirational reference), while for others she may be quite the opposite. It is important that the messenger match the audience, the more complex and/or emotional the topic, the more important the messenger.

> *The more complex the message and/or emotional behavior you are trying to influence, the more important the messenger!*

The use of testimonials is one way to supplement the message and balance any potential negative impacts of a specific messenger. Short testimonials from a variety of individuals (with different marketing profiles) can be used to aid getting through the target's filters and help the individual identify with the desired behaviors. Example testimonials could include:

- "With EggyWeggs my kids now get a nutritional breakfast they enjoy – Joan, mother of 4 in Houston"
- "HummZeee vehicle provides the power I need in any weather and great dependability – Joe, professional truck driver."
- "I've used this drug for years and it's never let me down – Dr. Arnold Bitterman, cardiac surgeon."

Testimonials can be highly effective and are fairly easily implemented. In some situations these are referred to as second party certification. There are also third party certifications (e.g., forest certification) that can aid in the sale of some products to some target markets.

Finally, for certain kinds of behaviors, where significant distrust or emotional links exist the messenger may become more critical than the message. For complex messages such as environmental ones the credentials of the messenger and the venue through which a person receives the message are critical. For example, a poster in a video game store with a testimonial by Carrot Top[8] may not be the best place to get the general public to believe in climate change – whereas a documentary hosted by Tom Brokaw on PBS might have a significant impact on those same people.

Although this can vary somewhat from period to period, people generally trust the opinions of (in approximately the following order):

1. Family & Friends
2. University and Medical experts (e.g., PhDs and MDs)
3. Other experts specific to issue (e.g., electricians on electrical issues)
4. Government
5. Industry and Nonprofit Groups (highly dependent on the target audience and the topic)

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[8] Scott "Carrot Top" Thompson is a nationally renowned red headed comedian.

2. Interest Stage

Once you have successfully passed through someone's filters and gotten their attention enough to consider your information, the next step is to clarify attributes and benefits for that audience. This is likely to require a different message than is used to achieve someone's awareness. Depending on the nature of the attributes you are trying to explain, a different messenger may even be valuable! Here the primary goal of the process is to clarify the nature of the attributes and benefits that will appeal to your target audience. As above, selecting the right information to provide that is likely to attract their interest is critical to moving them through the adoption process.

The audience demonstrates their *Interest* by asking questions of clarification and detail about specific attributes of the message. For example they might ask, "Do you mean they actually replant trees? Or can this really translate fifty languages fluently?" Generally at the Interest stage the questions are much more specific and there are more of them than at the awareness stage. The key here is that the information at the interest stage must go into a higher level of detail, and this is only possible either through direct customer feedback (e.g., questions) or by extensive research into the wants and needs of the customer. You can tell if you have successfully gotten someone's interest if they start making comparisons! This leads you to…

3. Evaluation Stage

In the *Evaluation* stage the audience or target market is ready to make direct comparisons to alternatives. These comparisons may be obvious; such as they say: "I can buy it at Wal-Mart cheaper", or more indirect such as "you're too high." As all good sales people recognize, the exact language of the customer is critical and marketers are often the greatest sticklers for semantics around. For example, the phrase "you're too expensive" is likely to mean the comparison is to their available funds while the term "you're too high" implies your price is compared to a competitor's product of perceived equal value. Neither of these interpretations is 100% true all of the time, but is indicative of the kinds of interpretation necessary at the evaluation stage.

Every good sales person also knows that once you have a target making comparisons you are well down the path toward a legitimate adoption of your product or idea, assuming you have selected the right target in the first place. We are not suggesting that you can convert Satan, merely that if you select the right audience with the right message delivered in the right manner, you have a legitimate probability of getting them to adopt your message. The goal of the Evaluation stage messaging process is to demonstrate the superiority of your product or idea. Again, videos, test-drives, all of those things that get people's attention can often be a component of the evaluation process, but subtle differences exist. Clarifying the benefits is critical at this stage whereas exploration of attributes can be successful at the earlier stages.

4. Trial Stage

The *Trial* stage is the easiest to identify as individuals actually undertake to implement the behavior that you are trying to encourage for the first time, e.g., they vote the way you want or begin to buy what you are selling. With ideas it is a bit more complicated. Generally, the trial phase with an idea means they begin exploring it with others, testing how the arguments hold up when they try to utilize them. Success of course brings further ingraining of the idea into someone's belief system.

A key to the trial phase is in the opportunity to ask the individual for the order, or in the case of the idea, "what do you think?" This supports the ability for the individual to voice remaining concerns, unexplored needs for comparison, or areas of information that are lacking. In the sales world this is all part of what is often referred to as the "trial close", but is equally valuable in exploring ideas with each other.

In any case, *getting people to act differently than they have can be extremely difficult*, as changing people's existing behaviors is generally much more difficult than creating new ones. For example, if someone has already fully and happily adopted a competing product there is a lot of work involved in starting back at the beginning with a new one!   As a result, the number of filters a person puts up to prohibit unwanted information is very high in these situations. Thus the level of trust required to get past these filters, get people's attention, and get them to act differently is very high. Recognizing this and putting the appropriate effort and planning into the whole messaging process is critical to having any influence in changing the way people believe or act.

5. Adoption Phase

The *Adoption* stage is simply a measure of repeatability. Have they adopted your message consistently – meaning are they regularly buying something (e.g., loyal customers) or voting consistently, or acting regularly in the manner you hoped? Getting the target through this stage requires post trial stage follow through, message reinforcement, and benefit clarification.

> *Behaviors become habits when positively reinforced*

One of the critical and often neglected aspects of the adoption phase is the "post purchase" reinforcement process. It is critical to recognize, acknowledge, and reward individuals for positive behaviors. This acknowledgement process over an extended period of time builds up the kinds of filters for your competition that you want and need.

A note about Personal Selling:

Personal selling is the marketing approach whereby the target audience is dominantly led through the message adoption process through direct personal interaction with an individual. This is the dominant approach of politics and least used by beer and soft drinks. Generally, it is the most expensive option on a cost per person basis, but it critically essential for complex issues and complex products. Most people buy a house via the personal selling option and most medical and or pharmacology products are sold via the personal selling method. From the above messaging description process it can be seen why the direct personal interaction, with its ability to provide immediate feedback and adjust the message, would be so critical for very important and complex messages, and why environmental messages are so difficult to communicate.

Summary

The basic steps in a successful messaging process or campaign are as follows:

- Divide customers or audience into targeted groups
- Analyze the wants and needs (or drives) of each target separately and in detail
- Develop a different (or modified) messaging campaign for each individual (or specific) target
- Identify the right channel or venue to get the message to the target audience
- Identify the appropriate cues for the target audience
- Create messages the audience can relate to and comprehend
- Select messengers consistent with the gravity and/or emotional intensity of the issue,
- Create associations through the people and/or activities you use that the target audience can relate to,
- and most importantly,
- Recognize that moving people through the Awareness, Interest, and Evaluation Stages may require three separate messaging campaigns!

Above all, it is vital to recognize that communication is all about people. The more that is known about the target audience and the more effort put into understanding them, the greater the likelihood of success. Finally, follow up and reinforcement are important. Behaviors become habits when positively reinforced.

Delivering a message to the right people, in the right way, at the right time, and through the right venue maximizes the chances of success.