

The Message Matters

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Leadership

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What is your message? Do you even know?

This is a question I pose to new clients early on in our relationship, and more often than not, I find that they don't have a clear answer. For years, even before we created a service offering that we call Foundational Narrative Creation, we helped clients backtrack to articulate their unique message, clarify their brand story and focus their communications around values and purpose.

After so many clients required this type of guidance, we wove it into our offerings and often encourage a client to begin working with us at the Foundational Narrative stage — even if they are well along as a company. It is never too late to articulate and clarify your story.

Great marketing depends on clear and consistent messaging, and compelling messaging comes from a combination of personal inspiration, company origins and the purpose behind the brand.

There are so many messages around us that we must be crystal-clear about what, exactly, the marketing messages are and whether they resonate with the brand.

As a journalist before I became an entrepreneur, I look at marketing through a storytelling lens. We are living in a connection era, and we must be strategic about the messages we transmit.

A great message is relevant to its audience. A 2018 survey found that 60% of millennials make purchases that they believe express their personalities. A number of brands do this well.

Outdoor retailer Patagonia has a history of aligning its brand with values. Founded by Yvon Chouinard, a mountain climber passionate about the environment, Patagonia's platform focuses on protecting the environment and wildlife. It gives grants, and a portion of sales supports environmental activism. The company even launched a viral campaign titled "The President Stole Your Land." Then it endorsed two political candidates for the first time. Speaking out, the company stepped into an advocacy role to educate voters, believing its customer-base aligned with its philosophy. It used its platform to affect change.

Nike is another example of clear, inspiring messaging. The "Just Do It" messaging has evolved over time, and now Nike is known for supporting beliefs rather than just selling athletic apparel. After Colin Kaepernick took a knee, Nike applauded his protest in its 30th-anniversary campaign. Sales skyrocketed. The company shared beliefs publicly and being true to its message paid off.

This is mission-driven messaging. It's daring, to be sure, but by standing for something, a company differentiates itself.

The best marketing messaging derives from mission. We must know the *why* before the *what*.

Without a why — a purpose — we cannot be clear on why we wake up every day and try to move the needle. Desiring to make a difference more than to make a dollar often leads to a more robust bottom line.

Another company known for consistent, meaning-rich messaging is Ben & Jerry's. Ice cream is a commodity. Walk the freezer aisle of any grocery store and you'll see plenty of options — most for a lower price than Ben & Jerry's. So why does this company continue to prosper? In part for its creativity. In part for its messaging.

In 2019, Ben & Jerry's biggest focus was racial justice. The company sent a message about what matters to its leaders, which influenced business decisions. Ben Cohen, the Ben in Ben & Jerry's, told the New York Times his company and a few others "were pioneers in creating a model of business that saw making profits to be coequal with its purpose of improving society beyond just providing jobs."

Clear. Articulate. Not afraid to stand for something.

So how can you create corporate messaging that transmits meaning?

A good message must be specific, each word chosen with purpose and thought. The more specific a message, the more universally relatable it will be. Avoid speaking in generalities and broad sweeps.

A well-crafted message must be shared consistently through all communications channels.

To begin crafting your messaging, begin by answering these questions:

- What does your company stand for?
- What do you want to be known for?
- What are the words that help you achieve this?

We use the Five Cs of Successful Messaging to guide our messaging development work with clients:

- 1. Be Clear.** Easy to understand and memorable, no matter who hears your message.
- 2. Be Concise.** Direct, to the point. No extraneous words. Every word matters if you want your message to be powerful. Edit judiciously. As an avowed word nerd, I love this part. What words convey impact, and what words can you eliminate?
- 3. Be Credible.** Your message must be believable. Nothing lofty or out of reach. Down to earth. Relatable. Prove that you mean what you say so it's easy for your audience to believe your message.
- 4. Be Compelling.** Catch attention and inspire your audience to take action.
- 5. Be Consistent.** A message must be repeated often through a variety of channels to make a lasting impact.

The best attributes of a compelling brand message are true in personal messaging, too.

Be authentic.

Mean what you say.

Make people think.

Make them laugh.

Make them cry.

A brand message is any expression that communicates your brand's promise to your audience. It's the first step toward building a relationship, and business depends on relationships.

Consider the FedEx slogan: "We Live to Deliver." Simple, focused and direct. The brand is all about delivering a package into waiting hands.

The all-boys Haverford School in Pennsylvania offers a simple message on its donation page to explain why it seeks contributions: "It's all about the boys." Simple. To the point. You know where your gift goes.

Consumers desire clear messages. They have so many stories coming at them, and more options than they honestly want. Give a reason to choose your brand over another. Mission, belief, passion, truly unique value.

Creating a clear, consistent, accessible message builds trust in your brand, which leads to loyalty, repeat business and growth.

The message matters. Craft it, and they will come.

Forbes Agency Council is an invitation-only community for executives in successful public relations, media strategy, creative and advertising agencies. *Do I qualify?*



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