The Power
of Pitch-Perfect
Messaging

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Nonprofits and associations have great stories to tell!

...that's what we constantly hear, right? And you're certainly out there trying to tell it. You're talking. Your colleagues are talking. Your boss talks. The new guy on the team is definitely out there talking.

It's happening face-to-face. Online. In your email newsletter. On your website. And maybe even on social media, if you're able to find time for that. When you're not talking in real-time, you're **automating the talking**.

Wouldn't it be nice if you had a guide for what to say? Or if you were confident everybody talking was saying the same thing — whether they were doing outreach for fundraising, engaging members, or simply telling that all-important story?

You can be. You just need a messaging framework to make it happen.

What is a Messaging Framework?

A messaging framework is a roadmap for your association or nonprofit's communications. It's a document that breaks out the organization's positioning, what it stands for, and how it should be communicated to your different audiences across channels. It can be of great assistance when speaking about the organization, making a story-based ask for donations, or finding the right tone for your social media update.

We've found that messaging is truly one of the hardest things for nonprofits or member-based organizations to nail down. And it's hard for many reasons.

- **It's hard because you think it's easy. You think everyone knows your mission, where you're going, and what you believes. It's easy to think that until someone writes/says/acts in a way that directly contradicts what you thought was a given.**

- **It's hard because messaging is the basis for everything else. With that comes pressure. And opinions. Often opinions that don't align and which a lot of people have a lot of feelings about.**

- **It's hard because putting on paper what you are also identifies what you are NOT and inspires all sorts of internal FOMO.**

But a clearly-articulated messaging framework is also your very best friend, helping you to sift out the crap and focus on what's real. Your messaging framework is what keeps you safe in an always-on, social media-fueled, omg-did-you-see-what-so-and-so-just-said world.

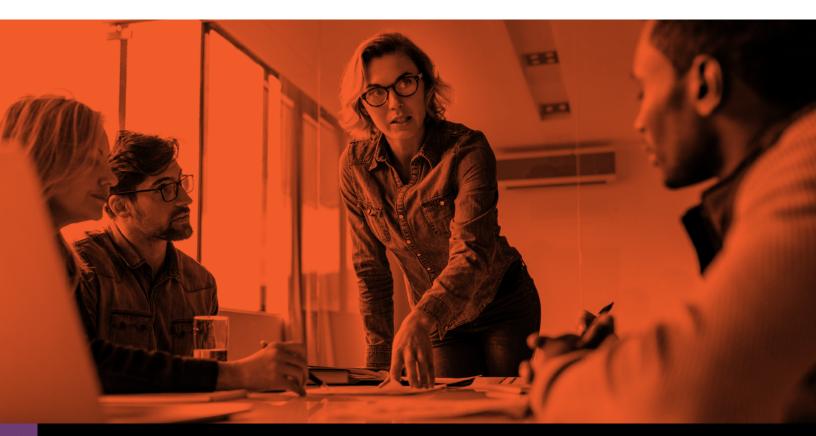**It turns a communications firehose into a coordinated sprinkler.**

Creating Your Messaging Framework

A lot goes into creating a messaging framework. One that is strict enough to keep everyone on message, but flexible enough that it's helpful in a variety of situations.

Good messaging is three things.

- **It is simple enough to be understood.**
- **It is unified in a single promise.**
- **It is scalable to allow the brand to grow.**

Where do we start?

Solidifying Top-Level Positioning

This is ground zero. Your top-level positioning is the warm, gooey center that exists between the thing you're uniquely good at and the need/problem your audience has. It takes into consideration things like:

- **Who you are**
- **Who you are not**
- **What you believe**
- **What you don't believe**
- **Who you work/advocate for**
- **What the greater value is of that work**

It looks neat and tidy in the list above, but getting there is not.

At Overit, we most often use a mix of surveys, questionnaires, and focus groups to establish it, taking a top to bottom look at a brand that involves hashing things out with the executive team, the marketing team, ground-level employees, and members to understand the intent of the organization. This helps square away discrepancies of how the organization sees itself vs. how it wants to see itself vs. how its target audience actually sees it to give us an accurate reflection of the brand.

Of course, the questions you ask may be different based on your audience. Below we break out brand-related questions that would be asked internall vs. those that may be asked to members or those outside the organization.

Employee Questions

1. Describe, in your own words, the value of the organization. How would you define our target audiences and the ways we provide value to them?

2. What are the "core values" of the organization? These are the qualities you believe stand the test of time (commitment to members, how we serve them, etc.) and help to differentiate us from competitors.

3. What 5 adjectives do you want members to use when describing us? What adjectives do they currently use?

4. What are the key moments in the member experience?

Member Questions

1. Describe your relationship with us.
    (How long have you been a member? How did you hear about us?)

2. Do you believe that we do a good job representing our mission and capabilities to others? Please explain.

3. What do you like about how we work with members? Where can we improve?

4. What are your top 3 headaches [related to how you can help]?

The differences between the answers to these questions will help you to identify who you think you are and what your value is vs. how that is perceived by others. This, when combined with market analysis and a flurry of third-party data, helps to identify the opportunity that exists for the brand, as well as your unique ability to fill it.

Here, we're able to determine messaging elements like **positioning statement**, **vision statement**, **mission statement**, **voice & tone,** and **initial key messages**.

Identifying Audience-Specific Messaging

Now that we know who YOU are, we want to dig deeper into understanding your audience. The first stage of this process gave us a pretty good understanding, but this lets us go deeper to understand things like:

- **What excites them?**

- **What makes them nervous?**

- **What are their specific use cases?**

- **What programs and benefits have they used during the year, and how often?**

- **How much did they invest in our association during the year, including dues + add-ons?**

- **What mediums are they most receptive to?**
  (direct mail, email marketing, social media, website, text, etc.)

- **What are the problems they're coming to us with?**

- **How does our positioning make us well-suited to address them?**

Knowing these juicy tidbits about your audience helps you to identify the messages they'll most respond to, what words to use or not use, what proof points to show, etc. As a marketer, it also allows you to clearly frame and segment your audience in your mind.

While your core positioning statement will remain the same, how that statement applies to different segments will not.

Brand positioning:
The benefit you offer to your main audience, partners, and stakeholders.

Key messaging:
How you provide value and the products/services you offer to deliver it.

For example:

If I am a social advocacy organization, my brand position is based on advancing a specific belief — ending childhood hunger or providing services to women who have been sexually assaulted. Key messaging will outline how, specifically, the organization accomplishes those goals through its initiatives, as well the different audience segments it works for.

If I am a professional organization, my brand position may be to elevate the knowledge of a particular industry or field — helping dentists to access key trainings or connecting marketers to one another. My key messaging will provide details about the different resources, trainings, and opportunities the organization provides and how those uniquely benefit different member segments.

If I'm a credit union, my brand position may be that I improve the financial well-being of members in the community. Key messaging will include HOW I do that differently for different audiences — millennials, established families, businesses, etc.

Knowing what proof points to stress for different audiences saves time, provides clarity, and (quite frankly) makes sure you don't muck it up. It allows you to craft copy correctly to hit on the right intent and needs.

Some brands will find it useful to go even further to create product- and feature-level (sometimes called tertiary) messaging; other brands will find it unnecessarily complex or simply won't have a use-case. Do what works best for you.

Document & Distribute

Once defined -- document and distribute.

When documenting your messaging architecture, you'll want to keep it tight, keep it simple, and — whenever possible — keep it to bullet points. Don't spend a lot of time "showing your work" or explaining how you got here (like this guide does...). Adding too much context or too much fluff will detract from what you're trying to do. It also gives people something to argue.

Instead, succinctly identify messaging elements:

- **Positioning statement**
- **Vision statement**
- **Mission statement**
- **Voice & tone**
- **Key messages**
- **Audience-specific proof points**
- **In-use examples**

The last bullet is super important. Providing in-use examples will help your team see how to put these elements into action by offering a model to follow.

Once it's created and distributed -- live it.

Your messaging is a constantly evolving thing — come back to it annually to ensure it reflects where you're going. You'll never be done, but this will give you a good start.

Need help finding your voice?

Or, putting the plan in place to effectively use it?

Let us help.

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