

Getting Your Message Across

Knowing what you want to say is the first step in message development. Deciding how to say it – framing the message – is the second. Framing your messages (or “talking points”) is a way to put your information into a context that will make it meaningful, understandable and interesting to the reporter and to his or her audience.

Know your audience -- Go beyond identification

Learn all you can about your target audience. Ask these questions:

- WHO are you trying to reach? (List all, then prioritize)
- WHAT is their age, gender, income level, education level, geographic location, occupation, family size, ethnicity, etc.? (Demographics)
- WHAT do they like? WHAT motivates them? WHAT offends them?
- WHERE do they get their information? (What media do they watch, read, listen to? What are their other sources of information?)
- WHY should/will they care about your message? (What’s the benefit?)

Take cultural differences into account

California is comprised of many ethnicities and cultures. Research clearly indicates that one’s culture profoundly influence how certain messages will be received.

The solution is to bring together colleagues and/or experts in communications who work with these audiences who are knowledgeable about a particular culture and ask them:

- Is there anything in these messages you think would not be well received by this cultural group?
- Is there a way of saying this that would increase its effectiveness?
- What would be the best vehicles for delivering these messages?
- Who would be the best messengers for delivering these messages?

Consider the public’s interest

Statements about what is good for “society” are not usually as effective as more personal messages. People are most likely to respond to messages that answer the question: “Why does this matter to me?” Research has found, however, that there can be a subtle difference in how this question is best framed. When thinking about messaging intended to reach communities of color, these communities often tend to think in terms of a “we”. So, rather than what’s in it for me? What’s in it for “we”, which translates into why does this matter to the community? The information you have gathered in identifying your audiences will help you answer this question.



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State your most important message first

The most important facts should come first. Assume that you will have time to deliver just three key message points.

Keep your messages simple

People who are experts about a particular issue often make the mistake of assuming that everyone else shares their knowledge of the issue. They risk losing the attention of their audience by:

- Using jargon. Terms such as “mortality and morbidity rates,” “youth access” and “prevalence” have little meaning to the general public.
- Trying to deliver messages that are too complex. The language of your messages should be reduced to an eighth grade comprehension level, the level at which most newspaper and magazines are written.

Make your messages quotable and memorable

Keep them short and repeat them often.

Which of these statements from a teen-ager is more quotable? “I’ve decided not to smoke because smoking is bad for me and I want everyone to know it.” Or, “I’m proud to be tobacco-free!” What about these statements from anti-tobacco organizations? “We provide anti-tobacco education through outreach efforts to the community, etc., etc., etc.” Or, “We save lives.” Take a cue from the advertising industry and create messages that people will remember and repeat.

Use facts and figures to back up your message points

The use of accurate, verifiable data will add credibility to your message.

Practice, practice, practice

Review your messages or talking points before making any announcements. You should be so familiar with your talking points that you can remember and repeat them even if you are nervous or flustered.

