

Communications Primer Step 4: Develop Your Message



Your message is a paragraph that provides the basic template for all your specific communications. Your message paragraph should be clear, compelling, and short. Imagine you're at a neighbor's door and you have about one minute to engage and convert him or her to your cause, what do you say?

Your message should do four basic things, illustrated below by message components from Biodiversity Project's Great Lakes Forever public education initiative:

- **Give your audience a reason to care about your issue by appealing to values.**

These are your audience's values, not your own. Don't get hung up on winning for the "right" reasons, as you define them. And remember, you're making an emotional argument – don't be afraid of being a bit effusive. Always put values first, facts second.

"The Great Lakes are one of the natural wonders of the world and it is our responsibility to protect them. They are a place we call home and a resource for us to use and protect – they are the heart of the ecosystems that we rely on for life. They are a gift of nature whose beauty and bounty enrich our lives and identify our region...."

- **Describe a threat and who is responsible for the problem.** What's the problem? Why does this put what your audience values at stake?

"Careless and excessive land development and poor land management are rapidly destroying wetlands, shorelines and other critical habitats that are vital to the health of our local water resources and the Great Lakes. When we lose this habitat, we lose critical homes for native plants and wildlife, and places for our families to fish, boat, hike and just plain enjoy...."

- **Provide a solution.** Stress benefits and show how the solution addresses the threat. As embattled or pessimistic as you may feel, lend your audience faith in the solution's potential.

"Fortunately, solutions are available for us to make a difference for the Lakes and our communities today. Incentives for well-planned, "smart" growth initiatives, urban re-development and protection or expansion of existing urban green space can go a long way toward controlling unchecked growth...."

Values First, Facts Second

Let's say we want to talk with suburban parents about the importance of protecting local wetland habitat from development. We could start the conversation with wetland hydrology and its benefits to the local water table, the richness of amphibian species, and other facts, OR we could start by thinking about what the parents' values might be. Most parents care a great deal about the world their children will inherit, as well as about their health and well-being. Here's how you might speak to those concerns:

Like other parents who live in Smith Meadows, we want our children to grow up in a healthy and beautiful community. The wetlands in our area help keep our drinking water clean and provide our families with an opportunity to enjoy wildlife throughout the year. But developers

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Describe what action will help solve the problem. Be specific about the action. For example, rather than asking your audience to reduce polluted runoff from their homes, let them know how they can do it (e.g. bury pet waste, pick native grasses that thrive without pesticides, etc).

“Attend a public hearing on the Responsible Growth Initiative this Wednesday, April 18th at select locations throughout the state. Bring a friend! Visit <http://www.greatlakesforever.org> for more details.”

are seeking an exemption to our wetland regulations to build a new housing tract and shopping mall. We have a responsibility to our community and to our children's future to protect these special areas. By protecting the wetlands, we're protecting the quality of life in Smith Meadows.

Then, you can mention the water table and the amphibians if the need arises. Starting with values places the issue in a realm of doing what is right for one's family, community and the future. The data can inform the decision, but the issue is not limited to data, and whose scientist has a better wetland map; it has expanded to include what our audience values.

Making sure your message speaks to the way people sort through problems can strengthen a message. Does it appeal to their emotions? Does it provide them with information? Does it offer a solution? Does it give them something to do in response to the threat?

A slogan and a sound bite can be easily lifted from your message. A slogan might be: “Development is forever.” A sound bite might be: “We must protect our families’ quality of life. If Smith Marsh is destroyed, it will be gone forever.” These are shorthand applications of your message that can be useful as a tag line in communications, but they are not a substitute for a thoughtful, well-constructed message paragraph.

values

who's responsible

threats

solutions & specific actions

Be Careful with Language

Sometimes what we are saying is not what our audience is hearing. Different audiences bring different perspectives on issues, especially on environmentalism. A logger in the Pacific Northwest may have a different attitude toward “government regulation” than a suburban mom in New Jersey. No one set of “preferred” words or phrases may be appropriate for all circumstances. The best advice is to be sensitive to your audience. Here are some other suggestions:

- **Take care how you describe yourself:**

In some regions, the word “conservationist” is much more acceptable than “environmentalist” to large segments of the public. In other areas, the word environmentalist may be a plus.

- **Avoid jargon:**

Avoid using bureaucratic words and acronyms (like TMDLs) to describe a problem. Your audience isn't likely to know what you're talking about, and jargon sends the message that you're from Washington, D.C. – rarely a positive point to make.

- **Use words that work for you:**

Habitat and ecosystem are positive terms that the public usually understands as homes for plants and animals. Ecosystem has the added virtue of conveying that all things in the environment (eco) are connected for a purpose (system). It is one of the best words to use when describing biodiversity.

- **Be sensitive to the subtleties of language:**

Consider the difference between contamination and pollution.

Both relay the presence of a dangerous substance, but pollution suggests a responsible party. It may seem like you're splitting hairs, but if you've only got one minute to be heard, it's important to use every word to drive your message home.

- **Talk about real places:** Speak of protecting rivers and forests instead of talking about natural resource protection. Talk about protecting communities instead of needs assessments or growth management.

- **Appeal to balance:** Americans generally believe that no side has a monopoly on true wisdom, so an appeal to balance is often welcomed. This can be used most effectively in the negative, accusing the other side of advocating policies that are out of balance.

- **Be inclusive:** *Values-based messages tend to be most effective when they are inclusive: “We value our children’s future” instead of “You value your children’s future.”* But use inclusive language only when it's authentic.

Defining Unfamiliar Terms

Don't shy away from using a term that is unfamiliar to your audience if it's necessary to convey your message. Just be sure you provide a concise, accessible definition. Here are a few definitions that the public is generally unfamiliar with:

biodiversity - the grand diversity of life on Earth and all the interconnections that support these myriad forms of life; consider using “biological diversity” or “rich diversity of plants and wildlife.”

drainage basin - the land from which all rain and melting snow drains - traveling over land, via rivers and streams, and even underground - to a body of water.

groundwater - underground water; rain and melted snow that is absorbed into the ground, where it flows through fractured rock and loose soil, to eventually rejoin surface water.

polluted runoff - rain and melting snow that has picked up chemicals, livestock and animal waste, and excess fertilizer as it drains to rivers, wetlands and lakes.

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