

Want to Build a Strong Brand? Get Messaging Right. Here's How...

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Messaging—or verbal **branding**—is as essential to bringing your brand to life as your organization's name, tagline, and graphic identity.

Yet many companies—especially the bootstrapped kind—don't know they need it. They don't see when their startup messaging is past its sell-by date, or they throw up their hands when a relatively fresh platform isn't working.

Whatever the reason, the result is the same: The company can't communicate effectively with the people who matter most to its success.

Developing a strong message platform—think of it as a house style guide for messaging—and then activating it across your organization, ensures that everyone can communicate clearly and consistently about your company's value.

And that, in turn, vastly increases your chances of attracting the people you want to attract by helping you to...

- Build a strong brand.
- Stand out from competitors.
- Connect with different audiences.
- Support business development.
- Explain complicated products or services.
- Communicate efficiently as well as effectively.

If you're now wondering whether you need messaging work, you probably do if you're experiencing any of these symptoms:

- You're undergoing a change in organizational culture or business strategy.
- You're moving into new markets, or markets are shifting.
- People have a hard time explaining what you do and why it matters.
- Partners and other stakeholders—even your own employees—don't describe your

company consistently or accurately.

- You're planning a website redesign, new graphic identity, product launch, or similar project, and you want to be sure you get the best results.
- Your messages are inconsistent across channels or product lines.

Nuts and Bolts: Elements of a Strong Message Platform

A corporate message platform typically includes the following:

- **A core message** answers "What is [your business] and why does it matter?" It quickly conveys your value proposition, and it's also aspirational, reflecting your vision as well as what you are today.
- **Secondary messages** amplify the core message or speak to specific audiences, such as investors, potential hires, and customers.
- **Product and service messages** clearly define benefits.
- **Talking points** will help people answer common questions and stay on message.
- **A boilerplate paragraph** describes the company and its value proposition; it's for use in press releases, sales materials, and elsewhere.
- **An elevator speech** answers "What is [your company]?"
- **Usage guidelines** cover how and when to use the messages in both written and spoken contexts.

A platform provides messages that are as close to plug-and-play as possible, with examples for as many contexts as it makes sense to have. People throughout the organization should consult the messaging whenever they're writing or speaking about your company, in any format. Looking for just the right word or phrase? It should be there.

But messaging is not a straightjacket. It should adapt to circumstance, the person using it, the communications vehicle, and the audience, among other factors.

How to Tell Whether Your Messages Sing the Right Tune

Successful messaging hits the following marks; if it doesn't, it's time to take another swing at it:

- **Messages are credible and exact.** Good messaging is built on a foundation of research (on your market and customers) and exploration (who you really are and what you want to be). It is both true and accurate.
- **Messages feel right.** Messages not only *are* true but also *feel* true. The key authenticity test is whether they connect with users and audiences alike. For that to happen, messages need to be written in natural, ordinary language, so people are comfortable using them and audiences respond to them. Jargon, corporate-speak, and vague phrasing won't cut it.
- **The messaging is flexible.** Good messaging provides a starting point for any communications task, whether it's a pithy quote from the CEO in a press release, a company description, or the brand voice for a report, presentation, or website.
- **The messaging gets used.** Reporters use it. Partner organizations use it. Employees

use it, not just in formal communications but also on their LinkedIn and Facebook pages and when they talk about their work with friends. This is the ultimate test.

Keys to Making Messaging Stick

When messaging sticks, it feels real both inside and outside your organization: It's what people think of when your brand comes up. For that to happen, your messaging needs to get beyond your marketing team and leadership.

People won't start using new messaging just because you sent them guidelines or a handbook (if only!). The following are the keys to successful implementation:

- **Enthusiastic leadership.** Driving adoption is not as simple as saying "Do it." Leadership needs to embrace it and use it—internally as well as with external audiences. Otherwise, everyone will see messaging as optional.
- **Communicating the benefits.** Good messaging solves problems. It explains difficult concepts, clarifies values, and provides good answers to common questions. Let people know how the new messaging will help them talk about their work more comfortably, effectively, and consistently. (They'll even get cut-and-paste options. How great is that?)
- **Training.** Practical exercises using the messaging in real-life situations are essential. That is especially true for sales teams and customer-facing staff: They're primary message carriers, and they need to feel comfortable carrying your messages. Facilitated role-playing sessions are ideal.

Using new messaging will feel uncomfortable at first—even if it rings true to everyone—simply because it's unfamiliar. Without reinforcement, people will revert to the words they've always used, even if those words inspire reactions like "Huh?" or "That's nice, I have to go get another drink now." In short, without reinforcement, your messaging will live only in your marketing, and you won't get full value from your investment.

Done right, on the other hand, messaging will build esprit de corps, and your people will tell your story well, everywhere. They'll bring your brand to life.

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