Speaking Out: How to Develop Messages That Help You Sell

In today's relentlessly competitive marketplace, organizations must make every marketing dollar count using every medium possible—web, print, social—to acquire and retain customers.

Those with a strong brand, one that triggers a positive response in customers by evoking value, are more likely to rise above the noise. Many components contribute to a strong brand—a organization's voice, visual identity, and, most importantly, the quality of its products and services, each one well-executed for the people who need it. But even the highest quality product will struggle if its intended markets fail to understand its value.

Communication, then, and the specific messages contained within, are essential to brand strength. Messages that flow out to your target markets must be defined well, supported internally, and released to the public with a zealous commitment to consistency.

That's where the Messaging Framework comes in. It takes a little work to create a set of messages that everyone can get behind and pitch to all who will listen. But the time and effort are likely to pay big dividends for your organization.

Three Steps to Messaging Nirvana

The process of creating a Messaging Framework can be summed up in three steps:

❶ **Know yourself**: What do you offer? Where do you fit in your competitive environment? What makes your organization "you"?

❷ **Know whom you're talking to**: What's important to your target customers? What problems do they face? What's the best way to reach them?

❸ **Know what you want to say**: What exactly do you want to say to each audience, from the overall value statement to the supporting benefits to that final call to action.

STEP 1: KNOW YOURSELF

This step really comes down to completing a simple equation:

You + Marketing 101=Why Your Organization Exists

It's a basic exercise, but like so many basics, it is also the most important. Much like first dates, you're preparing to connect with people you hope to encounter not just once, but many times over. You hope to woo each customer into placing their trust in you and spending their money with your organization and your product.

Confidence in your organization and your product, along with a clear understanding of your place in the market and value to customers, will make you stand out. So, consider this:

What do you offer? Step back and make sure you're clear on where your offering fits in the marketplace. Many related products exist in the same category. Knowing your own niche(s) is vital. Key questions to ask:

Targeted communications is best organized by specific industries or customer types. Selling to Chief Financial Officers, for example, may be quite different than selling to the end customer.

- What business category are we in?

  Examples: health care IT, product lifecycle management, network infrastructure, consumer games?

- Which of our specific product(s) or service(s) offers value to this category?

- What secondary products or services should be part of our offering?

Where are you and where are you headed?

Articulating where your organization is today and where it's going primes your Messaging Framework for longevity and flexibility. It can help carry your company forward, instead of holding it back as you grow. Key questions:

- What are our organization's goals?

- What is our position in the marketplace today?

- What do we expect the business will be like five years from now?

- What are our greatest obstacles to getting there?

Where do you fit in the market?

Understanding your top competitors is a critical part of the process. Key questions:

- Who are our top three competitors and how would we describe each one?

- Which market segments do our competitors focus on? How do those segments compare with our market focus?

- What are each competitor's strengths and weaknesses, and how do they compare to ours?

- What are our overarching concerns regarding the competition?

Spend time studying each competitor's web site, advertising, and social media postings to understand what you're up against. Make sure you are saying something truly unique from your competitors.

STEP 2: KNOW WHOM YOU'RE TALKING TO

Customers come in all shapes and sizes, from many backgrounds and industries. They'll vary by role and degree of influence. They'll have specific problems your product must try to address. They'll have their preferences for how (and how often) they would like to be approached. So, consider this:

Organize your markets: A good way to understand whom you're talking to is to organize target customers by such things as sector, size, role, influence, and buying power:

❶ **By industry.** The messaging for some products and services is best organized by specific sectors, or industries. Selling to government agencies, for example, may be quite different than selling to financial firms or educational institutions. Each of these sectors has its own challenges, processes, cultures.

If you're selling to businesses, rather than individual consumers, identify the people who decide what to buy, as well as those who strongly influence these buyers.

❷ **By company size.** Another way is to delineate target audience is by size (number of employees or volume of revenue) or whether you're selling to small business, Fortune 500 companies, or some range in between. Something as simple as Tier 1, Tier 2, Tier 3 segregation can be helpful.

❸ **By job role or title.** You may want to think of the audiences in terms of their role in the purchasing process. Do they play a part in the purchasing decision, or are they your product's end-customers? If you're selling to other organizations, rather than individual consumers, identify the people who decide what to buy, as well as those who strongly influence these buyers.

Example: In a given organization, it may be the VP of HR, the chief marketing officer, or the VP of a particular business units who is leading the charge to increase the productivity of employees.

❹ **By customer type.** In many businesses, especially large corporations, the people who use the product can have a great deal of influence on which product gets bought and

"pulled" through the company. This is especially true given the power of social media to quickly spread the word, far and wide, about the ups and downs of any product or service.

Example: In human resources departments, HR staffs must constantly access and organize data about employees. As a result, they might lobby for HR-focused database software, such as PeopleSoft, based on their past experience or social media postings for the HR industry.

❺ **By measure of influence.** It is often worthwhile to develop a set of messages that resonate with groups who influence decision-makers from outside the company, such as industry analysts, business partners, the press, or government regulators.

Profile each market segment: Take the time to really profile each market segment by capturing the following information:

› **Description.** This may include demographics or psychographics, especially for consumer markets. Consider using marketing "personas"—imaginary customers with names, lifelike character traits, and general outlook.

› **Assumptions**. Identify what your assumptions are for each audience—how busy they are,

what motivates them to change, their capacity to raise funds, their level of knowledge about your product or industry, and so on.

› **Challenges, "pain points."** If you are very clear about the challenges that each of your audiences face, you'll be able to present your product or service in terms of mitigating those challenges—of relieving the pain. Key questions:

– What are our customers' biggest problems, what causes them the most pain—competitively, economically, other?

Example: Employees spend an inordinate amount of time reformatting information as they move among applications.

– What are the changing market conditions? Have regulatory policies tightened? Are new competitors chewing at our heels? Is our original customer base aging?

Example: Enterprises have difficulty meeting new state and federal requirements for privacy and transparency.

What are the competing forces for our audience (s), both internal or external?

Example: Poor integration of back-end business processes with front-end productivity tools lowers the value of the technology investment, requiring the enterprise to address their back-end technologies first.

What matters most: Another way of thinking about your customers' challenges is to capture the important stuff—the two or three things that matters most to their well-being as an individual or business.

Sample question: Chief Marketing Officers must drive sales pipeline growth. When selling business intelligence software to a CMO, you should think through: How could a CMO use a marketing dashboard to improve his or her understanding of how marketing can help sales be more effective?

An audience profile chart like the one here is a simple but helpful tool to capture the above information for each of your target audience. This particular example is for a Chief Marketing Officer.

Sample Profile: Chief Marketing Officer

Description	Leads product marketing, channel marketing, advertising, promotion, public relations, market research, and, internal communications.
Assumptions	Under constant pressure to accelerate time to market and continuously looks for ways to lower the cost of marketing operations.
	Believes the real impact on the bottom line lies in leveraging Big Data and Social Selling.
Challenges	With millions of consumers using social networks to compare products and prices, Marketing must deliver a seamless brand experience across all customer interactions and channels
What Matters	Greater brand recognition in the company's markets, while adapting to a tighter marketing budget.

The Messaging Framework is a practical, straightforward roadmap for speaking about your product or service in a consistent and resonant way.

STEP 3: KNOW WHAT YOU WANT TO SAY

Now that you're clear about who you are, what you're selling, and who's buying, you're ready to create your Messaging Framework, a practical, straightforward roadmap for speaking about your product or service in a consistent and resonant way. If your audiences vary considerably, you may want to create a Messaging Framework for each one, though very often one framework can service multiple audiences well.

In its simplest form, the Messaging Framework includes:

► **The Positioning Statement:** The genesis of all communications, encapsulating your differentiated promise to customers.

► **Message Pillars** (per audience if applicable): One- to three-word labels that pinpoint each category of messages and supporting benefits.

► **Benefit Statement:** A customer-ready phrase or sentence that summarizes the essence of the

message pillar. The actual wording should be ready to use or adapt in marketing collateral, web site copy, social media postings, and so on.

► **Supporting Benefits**: The benefits detail the specifics of the Messaging Pillars. Where possible, benefits should also include data or other evidence that lend credibility to the assertion.

Collectively these components add up to a company's **value proposition**—the promise to customers of what it sells. Once the Messaging Framework is complete and in play, the value proposition will ripple through every customer encounter and communication.

Constructing the Value Proposition

Because the value proposition typically incorporates several concepts, it often divides naturally into specific categories of value, or "message pillars." To identify the areas of value—the pillars—that most benefit your target customers, consider using some or all of these questions as a guide:

› How is our offering truly unique—what are the main reasons people might choose it over our competitors' products or services? What is the overriding advantage of our offering—its top three benefits for each target market?

› What is most important to each audience?

› What emotional and functional benefits does it offer each market?

› What is the one thing we want to be known for? (This can become a beacon for all the messaging.)

› What would we like the outcome to be after potential customers see an ad, reads a brochure, or visit an online site?
  – What they should feel?
  – What is the call to action?

› Why should people believe this? What actual scenarios and data-based results can we draw upon?

Honest, accurate, and jargon-free answers to questions like those listed above contain the building blocks for a Messaging Framework. All that's left is to identify, consolidate, and organize the nuggets of information into your Value Proposition.

The Power of Your Messaging Framework

At this point, you have closely studied your organization and your competitive environment. You have identified and clarified your point of distinction in the marketplace. You have delineated how your offering is especially suited to each type of customer. And you have constructed a Value Proposition that equips everyone on your team to go out and speak clearly and consistently. You now have in your hand the power to generate the attention that your product or service deserves.

Sample Messaging Framework

Positioning Statement	Optimum helps organizations increase the value of their customer relationship management (CRM) investment with business intelligence solutions that extend the reach and flexibility of their CRM. The integrated solution increases efficiency and improves the return on existing CRM investments.		
Message Pillars	**Improves Business Performance**	**Optimizes the Infrastructure**	**Drives Innovation**
Primary Benefit Statement	*Helps employees make well-informed decisions through quick and easy access to relevant business data, regardless of the data's origin.*	*Automates management tasks to deliver enterprise-ready performance.*	*Helps companies react quickly to business and competitive changes.*
Supporting Benefit Points	Supports efficient, cross-enterprise collaboration and communications by providing a consistent view of back-office information.	Scales easily to accommodate increased workloads and large numbers of users	Provides rapid proof of concept to present corporate data to leadership (CEO, CMO, CFO).

CHASE MARKETING COMPANY