Crafting a Persuasive Message

This Chapter . . .

• Identifies hot buttons for use in message development;

• Introduces tools and techniques for building a compelling communications strategy; and

• Provides guidelines for bringing the strategy to life with powerful language and rich visual imagery.

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Part I: What Are You Selling?

Charles Revson, the legendary head of Revlon cosmetics, had it right. “We manufacture cosmetics,” Revson stated, “but we’re selling hope.” Right-on, Mr. R. From selling lipstick to filling seats, identifying the right selling message is job #1 for any marketer. Knowing what to say, and to whom, is essential. Knowing how to say it is equally important.

If you think that sounds like a tall order, it is. But rest assured, there are any number of time-tested tips and tactics that can make the job easier from Day One.

Tip #1: Think advertising . . . and more.

When we speak of crafting a persuasive message, it’s not just your advertising message we’re talking about. It’s your whole marketing program.

“Message” is the underlying theme that runs through all of the communications that touch your public: direct mail, publicity, e-blasts, your subscription brochure, event posters, flyers, newsletters, telemarketing, your web page, social networking, radio and TV interviews, the way your ticket sales people answer the telephone ... and yes, even your advertising!

Different people are reached and persuaded by different communications vehicles, so a multimedia approach is definitely in order. But even with different media, every message should communicate the same benefit/uniqueness. Marketers refer to this as Single Voice Communication. The more consistently your communications speak with a single voice, the more effectively they can build upon and reinforce one another to create a single, strong, memorable impression for your organization.

Tip #2: Think words . . . and pictures!

From the billboards crowding our highways to the graphics competing for attention on the web . . . we live in a visual world! And, the impact is being felt everywhere. Think of your own experience. What is it that makes you pause when you’re flipping through your mail?

What is it that causes you to open one piece of direct mail and toss the next?
While it’s true a clever headline or “teaser” message can do the trick, more often than not, it’s something about the visual appearance of the piece that pulls you in and gets you involved. A drop-dead color that conveys a mood or feeling. An emotion-charged photo. An intriguing graphic. An overall feeling that rings true or relevant and makes you want to know more.

And doesn’t the same thing happen when you’re flipping through a magazine? Perusing the newspaper? Or surfing through channels on the tube?

That’s why, when we’re considering message development, what you see is as important as what you say. As America’s savviest marketers know for sure, it’s that inspired blending of words and pictures, of verbal and visual imagery, that causes the sparks to fly and makes 1 + 1 = 3.

When you’re dealing with the limited budgets so typical of the arts field—that kind of return on your investment is not only nice to have, it’s mandatory. So where do you start?

3 Key Drivers of a Powerful & Persuasive Message

1. An intimate understanding of the target.

2. A product that is positioned to take advantage of a customer need or want.

3. A communications strategy that answers the question: “How do we sell this thing?”

“It’s that inspired blending of words and pictures, of verbal and visual imagery, that causes sparks to fly and makes 1 + 1 = 3.”

— Wayne Childers
Part II: Understanding the Target*

No matter what product you’re charged with marketing—from the opera to the art museum, from dance to dinner theatre—you’re in luck. Two out of three consumers say they would like to attend artistic events more often. So why don’t they?

Time. Time. Time.

Not surprisingly, 68% of research respondents report they don’t have time to attend arts events more frequently. Cost, child-care, the logistics of getting there and parking are frequently mentioned deterrents.

But consumers would make time (and find the money, or babysitters, or parking) if they thought the trip was worth it. How do we know?

• They make time to go to a professional sporting event—even though ticket prices are high and neighborhoods can be problematic.
• They make time to go to the city-sponsored Fourth of July fireworks—even though the crowds are excruciating and parking is nowhere to be found.
• They make time to go to rock concerts or tourist attractions. Ditto for the crowds and the parking.
• They make time to go to singles bars and social clubs.

So what’s the secret? It’s not so secret, really. It’s what every marketer of cereal, fast food, automobiles or cosmetics knows for sure. In a word, or three:

Successful Need Fulfillment.

It works like this: First, determine what people want from their leisure activities. What is the need you are attempting to satisfy with your artistic offering? To enable customers to have a great time, to relax and unwind, to share a great emotional experience, to see the world in a new way—what? Next, identify how you can position your product as a way to satisfy the need. Finally, bring your venue to life by communicating the kinds of experiences prospects can expect to have if they attend your event.

*Audience data taken from “Research as a Bridge Between Cultural Institutions and Their Community,” conducted by Metropolitan Chicago Information Center (MCIC)
Successful Need Fulfillment Starts Here

• Determine what people want from their leisure activities.

• Position your product accordingly.

• Communicate the kinds of experiences prospects will have if they attend your event.

THE ARTS AS A SOCIAL ACTIVITY

First and foremost, arts patrons see participation in an arts or cultural activity as an opportunity to have a good time—to have a “rewarding social experience” with their families or friends. In market research, they speak of having a “special evening” together ... a “night out” ... an enjoyable experience with “lots of people” or “out of town guests.”

As opposed to attending a sporting event—where “having fun” or a “good time” or “meeting new people” are frequently cited as the reasons to go—arts and cultural events frequently carry an aura of being an Event. HINT! If your offering is not in the Event (with a Capital E!) category—if it’s more spontaneous, casual, fun, not a big deal—you’ll want to make sure this comes across in your message.

Children are frequently mentioned as arts companions. Parents want to socialize their children through leisure activities. Moms and Dads are actively on the lookout for cultural institutions that offer enjoyable and accessible venues for providing this exposure — even if the parents don’t particularly enjoy the activities themselves. “Arts, ballets and plays—I don’t enjoy them,” one research respondent confided, “but I think my children should be exposed to them.” Typically, however, parents talk in terms of wanting to “share experiences I love” and of “letting children know there are other cultures out there.”

WHY PEOPLE ATTEND THE ARTS

• Rewarding social experience
• Valuable educational experience
• See examples of an artist’s creativity
• Escape from the stress, routine and boredom of everyday life

RECOMMENDED READING

Gifts of the Muse: Reframing the Debate about the Benefits of the Arts by Arthur Brooks, Kevin F. McCarthy, Elizabeth H. Ondaatje, and Laura Zakaras, commissioned by The Wallace Foundation

Crafting a Persuasive Message

The Arts as an Educational Opportunity
The second most frequently reported attitude about arts and cultural activities is that they are “educational.” But what does that mean? What hot buttons are lurking behind that term “educational”? Frequently, it depends on the artistic venue being discussed.

Education in the visual arts. When people say art is educational, they frequently mean that it offers a social or personal encounter with the artist... one that highlights creativity, technique and message. Ask museum attendees what they most appreciate about the museums they attend and almost no one will say “the paintings.” Rather, they speak in terms of learning about technique, professional standards and point of view of the artist.

Education in the performing arts. The personal encounter with professional creativity and technique also is seen as the leading educational feature of the performing arts. Listen to these responses from theatre aficionados and then think about how you would turn them into compelling sales messages:

WHY THEATER AFICIONADOS ATTEND

- I enjoy the creativity of people and drama on the stage.
- There is a certain energy that I get from watching live actors as opposed to seeing them on TV.
- It exists while you are there. Then it is gone, never to be the same again.
- I like to watch people perform, no matter what it is.
- Live performances seem more exciting.
- I enjoy hearing it live... the atmosphere!
Bottomline: Education = something different and new.
It can be: New subject matter. A new artistic style. An avant garde production. It can be a new way of looking at an old art—anything that focuses on aspects of human experience, folklore, popular culture and points of view that go beyond the common events and personalities of American history.

The Arts as a Way to Relax
In today’s busy world, stress and relaxation are themes anyone can relate to. They may be viable for your organization. But proceed with caution. You may find it difficult to convince people that the claim is true. Typically, people do not think trips downtown or to an unfamiliar neighborhood are relaxing. Ditto for parking, finding a sitter, finding a place to eat, etc., etc.

So what does it all mean?
How do you put it all together to craft a persuasive message?
Part III: Think it Square, Say it With Flair

Those seven words were the secret behind the success of legendary New York ad woman, Shirley Polykoff. Shirley is credited with almost single-handedly legitimizing the hair coloring industry some forty years ago by “thinking it square,” and then “saying it with flair.”

First, the “square” part: To Shirley, thinking it square meant stating the marketing challenge in straightforward, nonpromotional language. Specifically ’60s women wanted to cover their gray, but this was not something “nice women” did. They feared the results would be harsh and unnatural, and brand them as cheap.

Now the “flair” part: To put their fears at rest, Shirley chose the most reassuring of visuals—gorgeous, radiant-haired moms enjoying life with their kids. What could be more natural and unthreatening? To provide a double-whammy, she supported her visual promise with a verbal one—that comforting, yet slightly naughty campaign line: “Does she or doesn’t she? Hair color so natural only her hairdresser knows for sure.”

Fourty-something years later, hair coloring is a way of life for everyone — from superstars to supermoms. “Think it square, say it with flair” has also stood the test of time. Today it is still the one-two punch of marketing messages that get noticed . . . and acted upon.

It starts with the Communications Strategy.
The Communications Strategy
What It Is. What It Does.

• The foundation for a message that works
• Answers the question, “How do we sell this thing”?

Articulates the underlying marketing issue the communication has to address:

• Who are you talking to?
• What do you want to tell them?
• With what promise?
• In what tone of voice?

Identifies the basis on which you expect the target to purchase your product in preference to the competition

What’s the difference between a Marketing Strategy and a Communications Strategy? Or is there a difference? You bet there is . . . and it’s critical!

The Marketing Strategy comes first and focuses on marketing objectives. It asks: What should I do to reach my objective? It finds answers by examining the marketing P’s: Product, Place, Price, Promotion, etc.

The Communications Strategy focuses on the message. It asks: WHAT should I say? To WHOM should I say it? HOW should I say it to generate the most favorable results?
Building a great strategy is easy. It typically addresses five key parameters. We've highlighted them below, and provided some thought-starter questions to get the ball rolling. Try to make your strategy as complete, yet as concise, as possible. If it fits on one page, that's great!

**The Building Blocks of Strategy**
- Objective
- Target
- Message
- Support
- Tone

To use our hair coloring example, the message is: Your hair will look natural; you will look natural; you won't look hard, harsh, brassy or cheap. The execution that brings it to life: Gorgeous moms and kids coupled with the promise: “Hair color so natural only your hairdresser knows for sure.”

**Communications Strategy Parameters**

- **Objective:** What do we want the communication to do? Raise awareness? Get people to change their attitudes? Move people to action? Buy a ticket? Buy season tickets? **What?**

- **Target:** Who are we trying to reach with our message? In defining your target, go beyond demographics. Also consider attitudes, psychographics and enriching characteristics. The more precisely you can define and understand your target, the more likely you are to hit the mark in terms of message and media. **Who?**

- **Message:** Some people call this the promise, others call it the main point. It is one concise statement—just a line or two—that tells your target why you’re different and better. The words of the message are not likely to appear verbatim in your communications. The message statement is the articulation of your motivating benefit. The execution will bring the benefit to life. **What?**

- **Support:** These are the facts and features that support what you’ve just promised. They’re the reasons why, the permission to believe that your message is true. **Why?**

- **Tone:** What is the feeling you want the consumer to take away from your communication? What is the personality of the product or service you’re offering? If the tone of your communication isn’t compatible with your consumer’s mindset, you’ll miss the mark.
Part IV: Bringing the Message to Life
How do you move from flat to feeling? How do you bring your communications strategy to life? It starts with the “4 A’s” of communication:

Attention: Your sales messages can’t do anything until they get noticed—until they stop the consumer in his tracks and cause him to say, “this is important to me. This fills a need. I should pay attention to this message.” But getting noticed doesn’t always mean your communication has to jump out at your customer. It’s far more effective when your customer can jump into your communication.

Awareness: Generating awareness doesn’t happen overnight; it’s a building process. It starts with getting noticed. It moves through building interest. It culminates in being remembered—and being remembered for the right reason! Throughout the process, the key is being relevant.

Attitude: What people feel about your product is usually the result of an experience—an ad, imagery, using the product, word of mouth . . . or all of the above!

Action: Your target acts—becomes a customer—buys a ticket, signs up for a class, sends for your brochure, becomes a subscriber.

For maximum impact, sell the “sizzle” not the steak.
That’s the way the marketing experts do it. They promote the features of a product that appeal to the prospect viscerally and emotionally, those that satisfy real, human, personal needs. Like Charles Revson, they don’t sell cosmetics, they sell hope—the hope of youth, romance, beauty, social success. They don’t sell clothes, they sell attractiveness. They don’t sell shoes, they sell feet that feel refreshed. They don’t sell a book, they sell knowledge. They don’t sell a car, they sell an escape. What could you sell with your arts offering? Don’t just consider your product’s strengths . . . is there a weakness (perhaps a poor location or change in artistic management) that you could turn around with the right kind of appeal?
Cutting through the clutter

Cut through the clutter of apathy, busy schedules and competing messages with powerful language—language that tugs at the emotions, creates a mood, makes a promise, teases, tantalizes, intrigues and invites. They wrap the message in high-impact visuals. Base it on a promise that’s true to their product’s differentiating position. And most importantly, they make it a point to offer it all from the customer’s point of view. Remember, this is not about “me,” the marketer. It’s about “you,” the consumer.

In our over-communicated society, it takes “visual power” to get your message across. To maximize your impact—to stand out on the page, pop out in the mail and come through loud and clear in posters, flyers and banners—remember that LESS IS MORE! Be single-minded. Simplify, simplify, simplify. Focus on ONE visual idea that best represents the benefit of the experience to your customer.

Then photograph it or illustrate it with an ATTITUDE. Get in close or pull way back. Defy gravity. Warp it. Bend it. Twist it. Fog it. Distort it. Blur it. Sharpen it. Colorize it. Age it. Make it familiar or unfamiliar. With today’s electronic technology, there’s no limit to how far you—or a clever designer —can go. When you’re photographing people, make eye contact. Come in close to create interest, intrigue and drama. Above all, go for the drama!

A cautionary note about donated creative services. While pro bono creative services (writing and design) can be tempting, they can backfire on you. By and large, donated services give you less control over the message and how it’s presented. It’s a common reason advertising and collateral for nonprofits is off strategy or just flat out misses the mark.
Design Your Communications to Work Harder

Use color for effect:
- To get attention — especially on a crowded page.
- To highlight a part of the message.
- To heighten the impact of a photo or illustration.
- To depict a feeling.

Make it easy to read:
- Organize your message for a clean, inviting look.
- Always remember, you’re having a conversation with your customer.
- Keep the number of different type elements to a minimum.

Establish and maintain a consistent layout style:
Consider typefaces, color, borders and format.

Develop a logo or logotype:
- Then use it consistently.
- Maintain your graphic standards everywhere.
- No exceptions.

Finally, remember that building from attention, to awareness, to attitude, and finally, to action is a PROCESS. One that takes time. It is important to remain consistent so that your customers get to know you and can recognize you in a crowd.
Seven Tips to “Max Your Mail”

1. **Sell from the outside in.**
   Use your envelope or address panel to tease, tantalize, intrigue, whet the appetite, position your offer. Remember: If they don’t stop here, they won’t stop at all.

2. **Involve the prospect in your piece.**
   Tease with an uncompleted thought. Challenge with a question. Place yourself in the prospect’s shoes. Stop him in his tracks. Cause him to say ... “Hey, they’re talking to me. They understand how I feel. Tell me more. I’ve got to read this message.”

3. **Plan your story to maximize your format.**
   Unfold the story ... leave them wanting more .... pull them through from front to back.

4. **Be a standout.**
   Go for an unusual size, shape or color to stand out in the mailbox, stand out in the mail pile.

5. **Don’t forget your branding.**
   Be a stickler for Single Voice Communication. It’s how to make a 5” x 7” postcard work like a six-page newsletter.

6. **Don’t be timid about asking for the order.**

7. **Make it easy to act.**

   There’s more on improving your return on direct mail in Chapter 10.
Worksheet 8.1
COMMUNICATIONS STRATEGY

OBJECTIVE:


TARGET:


MESSAGE:


SUPPORT:


TONE:


Make copies of this worksheet and develop a communications strategy for each new audience you're targeting.