



## **Messaging Magic: Crafting Compelling Content**

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Marketers love to reduce things to “series of four” – those four simple elements or steps that define a process, whether they be the four A’s, the four T’s, the four M’s...pick a letter and someone’s probably got a list to give you. Of course, there’s nothing sacred about any of these formulas. As mnemonic devices they often feel contrived, but sometimes they do serve as a handy reminder of what’s important. Indeed, as I’ve plied the trade of brand messaging, I’ve found it useful to develop a simple set of markers myself. They don’t exactly turn the art of communications into a science, but they do help focus my clients on the essentials. What are they? I went for the C’s: Clarity, Consistency, Character, Currency.

Each touchstone is important in and of itself, and they all work together as a whole: Be clear about what you need or want to communicate; make sure you communicate that message across the board; imbue all your content with your brand’s personality; and, make sure that what you’re talking about is relevant to what people are up to today.

While there is a fundamental simplicity to this framework, each element requires clients to think through important questions about how to communicate effectively. In doing so, they can open up new insights into the nature of their business, as well as the interests and mind-set of their audience. The result is brand messaging that resonates deeply and effectively in the marketplace.

### *Clarity*

It’s funny how the things we’re most familiar with – the things we do every day – can be the hardest things to talk about. Think about it for a moment; how would you sum up your job in a few short words, or tell someone about the latest project you finished, or on a slightly larger scale, explain what your company does to someone outside your field? In a twist on the old expression, these things are sometimes easier done than said. This is true even for professional communicators. The humbling fact for all of us is that clarity and its counterparts (simplicity, straight-forwardness, etc.) can sometimes be the very toughest goal to achieve.

So, when I sit down with clients, I tell everyone at the table that common-sense reminders often lead to the most important revelations. It’s always good to start any communications initiative with a basic refresher in what your message is, and how to best express it. After all, each one of us is so close to what we do that, to invoke a classic metaphor, the tree right in front of us can loom larger than the forest as a whole. It’s all a matter of perspective, a question of where you stand. Clarity starts by stepping back and taking a fresh look at the larger picture.

The practical application of this philosophy begins with a few basic questions. Can you articulate why your business matters, or should matter, to people? What is its value to those you serve? How can you attract people who aren't yet within your orbit?

The answers to these questions don't just help shape the way we communicate with the outside world; they can help to focus an entire business by aligning the understanding and efforts of all of its employees.

### *Consistency*

Once you're sure you're saying the right things, the trick is to keep saying them. Remember Emerson's axiom that consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds? Forget it. That's nice for personal philosophy, but when it comes to communicating a brand, consistency has its merits.

The marketplace is big, diverse, crowded and noisy. Consumers have short attention spans. You have very little time to get your message across in lots of different contexts, etc., etc. ...you know the litany. But, the fact of the matter is that no matter how familiar we are with these truths, they can still be difficult to address. The temptation is to let context drive content rather than use content to shape context; messages can easily wind up all over the place in both literal and figurative ways. There's an important equation to be balanced here; that is, how to ensure relevance to specific environments while preserving the overall uniformity of your brand.

This question can be re-phrased in a slightly more human way; how do you get across the same set of messages everywhere without being boring? Sometimes brand managers can come off as a bit rigid. After all, no one wants to listen to a one-note song played over and over again. On the other hand, it's good to remember that what *you* live and breathe every day, *other people* have only a few seconds to focus on. Consumers don't have nearly as much time to become bored with your message as you do. To a certain degree, you really do have to "hit them over the head" if you want things to sink in...but you have to do so with finesse. The trick is to balance frequency with freshness. Remember – in this case, repetition does not equal redundancy. Repetition is the ongoing statement of key points; redundancy is when that ongoing process slips into sameness.

Consistency requires calibration between the *how* and the *what* of messaging – between the vehicles you use to communicate and the content they carry. Consistency also requires coordination both within media and across media. For example, a series of print ads can reinforce each other even as they reference a message that's been brought to life through moving media such as television or streaming video. At the same time, press placements can pick up on these themes by incorporating key words, phrases or iconography in editorial and sponsored content. The critical principle here is "alignment." Different media, different audiences, different time frames – each must be addressed to ensure maximum impact within their unique parameters. Yet, the messages used in all cases must tie back to a common point of origin; that common point is the unique character of your brand.

## *Character*

Today, we often talk about brand personality. The idea is that brands, like people, have distinct personas that affect what they do and how they do it. Your organization's persona is the amalgam of its values, beliefs, goals, attitudes and actions. It gives your enterprise a sense of identity, and it creates an innate power of attraction between your brand and the people you serve. It triggers a critical connection in the mind of the consumer – the “I know these guys” response that is key to building relationships.

Nowhere is your personality more important than in messaging. Some brands have done such a good job of infusing their communications with a particular point-of-view that even without seeing a logo or other visual mark we recognize the company just by the style of its verbal communications. Think Apple, Disney, Nike. Every brand can follow in those footsteps, creating distinction for themselves through the ideas they generate and the language they use to express those ideas. Through a particular turn of phrase, the use of certain vocabulary, an infusion of humor or fun, you can immediately signal that “something special is going on here.” You can create a magnetism that elicits attention from both existing and new audiences.

I've often written and spoken about how brands are stories that attract customers and rally employees. By metaphorical extension, in order to be the best "brand author" you can be, you must find the unique language that captures the individuality of your company. It's in your messaging that you find your voice – your personality evoked through words and content to make a lasting impression. In both fiction and in life, you can't separate the voice from the rest of the character. Think of the tics of some of our favorite icons – Bugs Bunny's “what's up doc,” Bette Davis' “what a dump,” and FDR's “fee-uh itself.” In each case, the voice signals the persona. The same is true of brands – character is the twist on top of clarity and consistency that makes what you say interesting and engaging to people.

## *Currency*

Clarity, consistency, character – the messaging equation solved...almost. There's one final step, and in some ways it's the toughest step of all. But, it can also be the most fun.

Here's the question: How do you accomplish everything outlined so far *and* make sure that your messaging is relevant to The Now? After all, no matter how clear and consistent you are, no matter how full of character, if you don't have something to say that matters right here and now, people aren't likely to pay much attention to you.

Being a brander today means being something of a “culture vulture.” It means being a political junkie, a sports nut, a news carnivore, an entertainment maven, a tech guru and a science nerd. It means living deeply in your local area, and being broadly aware and engaged with what's going

on around the world. It means keeping up on pretty much everything that your customers are interested in as well as the trends shaping your industry.

But, making sure that your brand is current introduces a set of issues that can potentially compromise the other three touchstones we've discussed; in fact, in some ways it works against them. Consider this; you're not clear if you're simply chasing fads, you're not consistent if you're changing with the wind, and you're not reflecting your own character if you're mostly mirroring what's around you.

So, how do you successfully manage these competing impulses? Perhaps the best metaphor is that of a dancer; he must be absolutely aware of the movements, limitations, capabilities and possibilities of his own body, while maintaining an absolute synchronicity with the music around him. In the space between the two, a good dancer creates new forms and postures and inspires us with the beauty of motion. Branders make a similar type of art through the medium of messaging – they must display the specific characteristics of their own brand while moving in step with the culture at large. In the end, each shapes the other. It is said that you change something simply by observing it. Message creators go one step further; they both tap into the Zeitgeist and help to fashion it.

Another way of putting this is to say that message creators are translators. They take the particular content of their industry and their company and put it into terms that other people not only understand, but desire. They are the ones who create the power of attraction between what a company does on the inside and what it accomplishes in the marketplace outside. In some ways, messaging is the hardest part of branding – it's the area where you have to be most on your toes, where you have to be most aware, most nimble. It's also the most exciting part – it's where you get to offer new ideas, new ways of thinking and doing, to the world.

### *Putting it all together*

Clarity. Consistency. Character. Currency. What at first glance appears to be a simple list is actually a set of practices that combines both common sense and nuance. When taken all together, they demonstrate that simplicity is the Holy Grail of communications; as with any complex endeavor, it takes a lot of work to make it look easy. When clarity, consistency, character and currency are delivered across a brand's entire message portfolio – from advertising to PR to marketing communications to digital media – the consumer is invited into a rich, compelling and dynamic relationship. The result is a brand that is fully a part of the world it inhabits – and customers who have made that brand a part of *their* world.

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