

# Step 8 *Develop the Message Strategy*

## CREATING THE RIGHT MESSAGE FOR YOUR AUDIENCE

In Step 8, we define the message elements and approach, based on all the careful research and decision-making undertaken in previous steps. This step involves identifying key information (*the What*), relevance to the audience (*the So What*), and a call for action (*the Now What*). In addition to these three elements, decisions need to be made about the tone, the appeal, the source and other dimensions (the approach).

This step is critical. It bridges the considerable work in previous steps with the actual production of the communication product. In the end, the product is what is seen and/or heard, but this is only the tip of the iceberg, and rests on a much larger foundation.

Message elements and approach must be carefully considered. We can easily use our resources poorly when, for example, a good message is well executed but delivered by the wrong spokesperson, or conversely when an excellent spokesperson delivers a message that is unclear or lacks meaning.

Step 8 is also critical to the relationship between the program planners and the creative team. A well-briefed creative team already faces plenty of challenges crafting complex messages in short timeframes, with limited resources! We do not want the creative team to face additional hurdles if they must set direction or tone and frame the issue. This can lead to the "It Won a Prize" syndrome where a product may be wonderfully produced but not in line with the values and needs of your organization and/or the audience.

Message elements consist of *the What*, the *So What* and the *Now What*.

The approach of the message includes the tone, source and other dimensions.

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Messages themselves are not intended to be divided into the *What*, the *So What*, and the *Now What*. A given turn of phrase, an image, or a gesture might provide one or more critical elements all at once. An effective message, however, will cover all three.

For some in the audience, identifying a benefit might be most important, while others might be encouraged to take a single starting step.

Good messages depend on knowing the audience and what they want to know, the costs or benefits that are most powerful to them, and what steps they might likely take.

## THREE MAIN ELEMENTS OF MESSAGES

*The What* refers to the basic information being conveyed – it may be factual information, it may break down behaviours into small steps, or it may address a concern or problem directly by offering alternatives or solutions.

*The So What* addresses the reasons or benefits for action. Specifically, what are the social, health, psychological, financial and other incentives for action? What action is important now—what is compelling? What are immediate benefits? What is the threat if current inaction continues?

*The Now What* clearly defines some desirable and productive action. It may mean seeking out further information, it may mean reaching out to someone, or it may mean taking a mini-step to “test the water” of some proposed solution.

## DETERMINING THE APPROPRIATE APPROACH

The other half of developing the message strategy is to determine the appropriate approach. Approach has many aspects—you should consider at least the following three dimensions:

*Tone* Should the tone be light or heavy? Is humour appropriate? Would using fear be appropriate and effective?

*Source* Who should speak? Would a professional, such as a physician, be a credible source? How about peers, or others who have successfully made a change, or used a particular resource? Celebrities are often a high profile choice, provided they do not “fall from grace.”

*Type of Appeal* Should the appeal, that is the persuasive argument, be rational or emotional? Should it be positive or negative?

## TIPS FOR MESSAGE DEVELOPMENT

### Tips for Structural Presentation of a Message

- ❑ **Develop a Strong Theme Line**  
For all audiences, the message should prominently and concisely present a statement that captures the main idea or pose a question that provokes thought.
- ❑ **Consider the Physical Dimensions of a Message**  
Impact generally increases with greater size of printed messages, but is curvilinear for broadcast messages.
- ❑ **Arrange Message Elements Appropriately**  
For most audiences, the strongest copy points should be placed near the beginning of the message; secondary incentives and appeals that refute the message should be located after.
- ❑ **Use Short, Simple Words and Sentences**  
Messages should feature simplified vocabulary, short sentences, and low density of text in order to make comprehension easier for the intended audience.
- ❑ **Fit Message Presentation and Production to Your Audience**  
Effectiveness of A-V factors (e.g., music and pictorals) depends on the taste preferences of the intended audience. In general, production (e.g., pacing, camera angles, colors, layout, and graphic devices) should be technically sophisticated and high in clarity, but responses to certain techniques vary by intended audience.
- ❑ **Present an Identity Throughout**  
For all audiences, each campaign message should include an element that symbolizes the overall campaign and provides a unifying common thread across different presentations of the message or channels.

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Other important considerations of message development are outlined in the sections that follow.

### Tips for Message Content

#### Use a Positive Approach

For all audiences, there should be a greater emphasis on positive persuasive arguments promoting healthy behaviour rather than negative appeals (especially threats of physical harm).

#### Present a Range of Incentives / Appeals

Most audiences will be more effectively influenced when the campaign presents a broader array of incentives beyond the conventional physical health domain, such as economic, social, and psychological reasons for carrying out the behaviour.

#### Use Multiple Incentives

For most audiences, it is more effective to use several incentives within a typical-length message, and particularly across a series of messages in a campaign.

#### Provide Convincing Evidence

To support promises or threats, dramatized case examples using audience peers generally work better than statistical documentation.

#### Model Behaviour / Provide Recommendations

An explicit recommendation or behavioural modelling of the intended behaviour is generally more effective than a conclusion that is not clearly described.

#### Consider a One- or Two-Sided Message

The relative effectiveness of a two-sided strategy that refutes, downplays or admits disadvantages of the intended/desired response (vs. a conventional, one-sided message) depends on audience sophistication, involvement, and familiarity with the drawbacks.

#### Choose the Right Source/ Messenger

Selecting the type of messenger (e.g., celebrity, public official, expert specialist, professional model, ordinary person, victim, survivor) and the specific individual appearing in the message depends on preferences of the intended audience. Their perceptions of source competence and likability tend to be more universal than perceptions of trustworthiness and similarity.

In all cases, specific appeals should be based on the predisposing values of the audience you wish to reach. Determine these in Step 3: Audience Analysis.

## Tips for Stylistic Presentation of a Message

- ❑ **Make the Message Attractive**  
Entertaining styles generally enhance message impact; cleverness is a broadly effective feature, but humour produces diverse responses among audiences.
- ❑ **Consider Tone**  
Effectiveness of a serious vs. light tone depends on the intended audience, but an overly preachy delivery is almost universally ineffective.
- ❑ **Be Vivid**  
For most audiences, messages should use lively language, striking statements, fascinating facts and vibrant visuals (and alluring alliteration).
- ❑ **Use Realism and Personalization**  
Messages should depict situations and people that enable audiences to connect the material to their own experiences, but specific cases depend on the attributes of the intended audience.
- ❑ **Consider Rational vs. Emotional Styles**  
The relative influence of these basic styles varies according to the preferences of the intended audience and the degree to which they are engaged in the issue (unengaged = emotional style).
- ❑ **Appropriateness**  
Presentation styles should be consistent with the general audience norms and expectations for the health message.

While keeping all these tips in mind, don't forget the most important tip of all — always pretest your message with the intended audience.

Adapted from:

Atkin, C. *Presentation at the International Communication Association*, 1994.

Step 8: Message Strategy Worksheet

Elements	Approach
What?	Tone
So What? Why Now?	Source
Now What?	Type of appeal
	Other dimensions

### HOW TO DEVELOP A MESSAGE STRATEGY

Step 8 involves developing a strategy for messages, rather than developing the message per se. That is, the message strategy provides a starting point for a copywriter if a PSA is being produced, for the speechwriter if a presentation is being planned, and/or for the project spokesperson who is being interviewed.

Good message preparation involves careful deliberation about the key message elements and the approach to create the overall strategy.

Drawing on information provided in this chapter, create your message strategy using the blank worksheet in Appendix A. Consider the three main elements of a message, and the approach, including tone, source, type of appeal, etc.

Step 8: Message Strategy

Elements

What?
So What?
Now What?

Approach

Tone
Source
Type of Appeal
Other Dimensions