



Messaging:

How to reach people online with your message

Overview

The Internet is jam-packed with information, and you are competing with all of it for your audience's attention. According to The Industry Standard, your site is just one of over 800 million Web pages out there. Your email newsletter is just one of over 432 billion emails that will be sent in the U.S. this year.

When organizing off-line, you use eye contact, tone of voice, hand-out literature, signs, and a host of other tools to express your concerns and get your message across to folks. These kinds of organizing tools rely on face-to-face communications to grab the attention of the would-be supporter and begin to build a relationship that will last. But the online world is crowded and impersonal, so most valuable face-to-face communication skills don't count. That means that your messages have to overcome the impersonal nature of the Internet to make a connection, and they have stand out in the crowd of information.

To do this, you must know your audience, know your medium, and know what you most want to communicate. In this document, we'll review basic messaging principles and learn how to apply those principles to email, web sites, and Internet advertising tools. You'll know you've succeeded in writing more effective messages because you'll see an increase in response rates to email messages, the amount of time visitors spend at your site, and the number of people who respond to your Internet advertising.

Basic Principles of Messaging

No matter what issue you're writing about, or what medium you're writing for, some key principles will apply. You have to tell a good story and know who your audience is. These are the basic building blocks you'll use to create messages in any medium. For you seasoned veterans, the basics of messaging will be review, but they're worth reviewing since they're integral to making messages on the Internet work.

Telling A Good Story

A small percentage of your supporters will do anything you ask of them, now matter what, when, or how. Just tell them what the problem is, and what to do about it, and they'll take care of the rest. But most of you supporters aren't as easy to motivate, which is where good storytelling comes into play. Just as some books are page-turners and others are not, some messages are compelling and some are not.

When you start to craft any message, begin with the basics of good storytelling. What are those? Just think about your favorite book or movie. Good stories have several things in common:

Good characters – you relate to them

Conflict – almost always a struggle between good and evil

Climax – the pivotal moment where the fate of the characters is decided

Resolution – the end of the story isn't always ideal, but is satisfying in some way

Clear – all of the above are woven together in an easy to understand format

Let's take, for example, what is arguably one of the greatest stories ever told: Star Wars.

Good characters: Chock full of people to love and hate. We all know someone we who seems bent on undoing everything good we do (Darth Vader). We all know a rogue romancing scoundrel that we can't help but love (Hans Solo). And we probably all are, to some degree, a person who aspires to greatness but wouldn't know what to do with it if it landed in our laps (Luke Skywalker).

Conflict: The evil empire vs. the little people. There's never been a better conflict. And let's not even get started about the tension that builds from the conflict between Hans and Leia.

Climax: All the tension from the conflict builds toward the ultimate moment when Vader will either succeed in blowing up Princess Leia's planet, or his plans will be foiled.

Resolution: We get a mixed result. We succeed on the immediate front of saving the planet, but fail to stop Vader permanently.

Clear: There's just enough going on to make things interesting, but not too much to confuse us. And even though this all takes place in a galaxy far far away, the funny gadgets and druids are all explained so we know why they are there, and what role they will play. There aren't any unanswered questions.

Your goal in crafting each message is to write a "Star Wars" for the progressive movement:

There is a dark force (read: bad legislation) threatening the empire (read: good social program). If the empire is eliminated, millions, including Luke (read: your activist) will suffer under the dark hand of Darth Vader (read: reduced access to social program). Luckily, Luke possesses a special power to overcome Darth Vader (read: can take action at your online campaign site). If Luke acts, Darth will be defeated and the forces of good will prevail.

That's a compelling story. Your compelling story is not that Darth Vader destroys 1 out of every 2 planets he sees, or that 56% of all Ewoks face extinction. What makes this story compelling is the power that Luke has – we're all rooting for him to defeat the forces of evil. Your compelling story lies not in the problem, but in the power your supporters have to overcome that problem. The resolution isn't always known when you write your story, but you imply what the resolution will be should your supporters act.

So before you begin your next email alert, web page, or banner ad, take the time to list out all the characteristics of a good story, and the specifics you will use in your message.

Your Audience

The old organizing adage is that you have to "organize people where they are at." In terms of writing your online organizing materials, it means that you have to deliver the message that your audience wants to hear. If you're creating a banner ad to run on an outdoor sports site, you will want to deliver a message that appeals to outdoor enthusiasts. If you are writing an action alert that will be sent to mothers, you will want to talk about why your issue is important for kids. So, once you've crafted your basic story, you'll want to think about the specific audiences you'll be addressing and tweak that message so that it appeals specifically to each audience.

There are several ways you can think about addressing your specific audiences:

Interests

There are dozens of reasons why any one person gets interested in an issue. In the case of fuel-efficient vehicles, for example, spending less at the pump, improving air quality, or alternative technologies for vehicles could all motivate different activists. You should identify what motivates your audience and then send them a message that addresses those motivations.

Tone

If you are reaching out to a list of college students, you will use a different tone than if you are reaching out to educators. It's perfectly appropriate to use sentence fragments and slang when addressing GenX-ers, in fact, it's expected. However, you would want to use a more formal tone, with correct grammar, when addressing educators. Spelling will count with that audience.

Here's an example of an alert addressed to twenty-somethings:

If you think the weather is weird—that summers are hotter, storms are more severe, and droughts more extreme—you're not alone. More and more people are taking global warming seriously. Now you can do something about it! Check out [HYPERLINK "http://www.hotearth.net"](http://www.hotearth.net) <http://www.hotearth.net> and find out what you can do.

Here's an alert on the same issue, addressed to the academic community:

When we hear the term "environmental justice," many of us think of toxic waste or other urban issues. Such a narrow

definition, however, ignores a huge threat to environmental justice the world over.

Although global warming is due to energy consumption by the world's wealthy, industrialized countries, it is disadvantaged nations that bear the brunt of its effects. In the next century, global warming could:

Increase the average temperature of the Earth as much as 3 to 5 degrees Fahrenheit.

Cause sea levels around the world to rise up to 3 feet

Destroy low-lying coastal areas and perhaps entire island nations.

Your relationship with the Supporter

You'll also need to keep in mind how well you know your activist when crafting your message. When you meet a new person, you don't spill your deepest darkest secrets right after the handshake, you start out with some basic information that will let that person know who you are, and what you are all about. As you get to know the person, you reveal more involved details. Use this same principal when considering the audience for your message. If you are sending a message to people new to your organization, stick to the basics on your issue and organization. If you're crafting a message for an audience of hard-core activists on your issue, include the details that will interest these highly-engaged people.

Geography

Tailoring your stories for specific geographies can be one of the most powerful ways to catch and keep your audience's attention. Provide information about the problem, or even better, information about solutions to the problem, that are specific to certain geographies. For example, if you are writing for a fundraising appeal, talk about which local projects the money raised will go towards.

Messaging in Electronic Mediums

Once you've crafted messages for each of your audiences, you'll need to consider the medium in which the message will be delivered. We all know that writing a direct mail piece is much different than writing a phone-banking message, and the same holds true for electronic communications forms. There are limitations and advantages to every kind of Internet medium. You must know what you can do with each medium to tell your story effectively.

Email messages allow you to tell complete and thorough stories. Though you still want to be concise – long paragraphs and lengthy messages will go unread – you can craft a complete story in this kind of text. You have significantly more room for text in an email message than in any Web site or marketing piece.

Web sites allow you to complement your written message with imagery. Unless you are sending HTML email, you can't include images in email messages, and images can be key in telling your story. On a Web site, you can place a picture of the animal you are working to protect or the people you are working to help. These images will often

say as much about the problem as any text you could write – and the viewer will have an immediate emotional reaction to the image.

Advertisements blend both images and text, on a much smaller scale. You can use images to get the immediate emotional reaction, but you can't use too many, or your ads will take too long to download. You can use text, but the geography available to you in an ad is small – they often have very small physical dimensions. You will often have to develop one image and one sentence to tell your campaign story, a challenging task.

Email Messages

Email messages are probably the most common way you will communicate with supporters. The medium of email can be particularly effective because you have the opportunity to tell the story of your campaign in a complete narrative. There are several things you can do to make your email messages as effective as they can be:

Address the recipients by name

"Dear Friend," and "Dear Supporter," are nice openings for an action alert, they're polite enough. However, you would never start an email to your friends that way. And your activists want to be treated like friends. So use a mail merge program to address your action alerts to "Dear Mike," and "Dear Jane." Some programs that allow you to do this are:

ebaseTM: [HYPERLINK "http://www.ebase.org" http://www.ebase.org](http://www.ebase.org) (Low-costs relationship management software from TechRocks)

Worldmerge: [HYPERLINK "http://www.coloradosoft.com" http://www.coloradosoft.com](http://www.coloradosoft.com) (Free beta version that adds a message about Worldmerge at the bottom of every message you send, or \$40 license for a version without this feature)

Aureate Group Mail: [HYPERLINK "http://www.group-mail.com/" http://www.group-mail.com/](http://www.group-mail.com/) (\$49.95)

In addition to addressing your supporters by name, try including other details that will personalize the message. For political messages, if you have the information, tell your recipients what district they live in and who represents them. For membership messages, tell the recipient how much they gave last year, and when they gave it. It's like remembering that your friend doesn't like to eat bell peppers. It's not always useful, but they sure do appreciate the fact that you know that detail when you cook them dinner.

Get to the point already

Although it's seems akin to reading the last page of a book first and giving away the ending, you want to tell your supporters exactly what you want them to do and why in the very first sentences of your email. Many people will not read through your entire

email message, but would take action if they knew what you wanted them to do right away. So tell them right away, then launch into your full story. A good example of this kind of writing style can be found in your newspaper. Good news journalists know to summarize the “Who, What, When, Where, and Why” in the very first paragraph of the story, then follow with the compelling details.

Subject Lines

The very first thing your recipient will probably notice about your message is its subject line, so make it good. Your subject line is like the headline of a newspaper story, and you should think of the subject line as your best chance of hooking a reader. It’s definitely an art. Your subject line should balance both function and form, giving the reader enough information about what you want that they know what the email is about, but it should also be surprising or clever enough to grab their attention. Some things to avoid in subject lines:

Alarmist: The Fate of the World Rests in Your Hands TODAY!

Non-informative: We Need Your Help

Informative, but not compelling: Contraceptive Equality Action Alert

Some good examples of subject lines include:

One Step Closer to Your Tax Cut (RNC alert, 4/9/2001)

Election Countdown: The “animated” Truth (Sierra Club, 10/28/2000)

Truth vs. Gore (RNC alert, 11/29/2000)

OpposeAshcroft Update: You Made History! (opposeashcroft.com, 2/2/2001)

Who’s it From?

One of the other pieces of information your reader will see right away is who the message is from. It’s imperative that the email address displayed in the “From” field of your message is related to your organization, immediately allowing the reader to relate the message to your organization and (hopefully) increase the likelihood that the message gets read. In the best scenario, your organization has its own domain name (organization.org) and can brand the message this way. If you do not have your own domain name, then make sure that your email messages are sent from an email account that includes the organization name in the email address ([HYPERLINK "mailto:organization@isp.com" organization@isp.com](#)).

Include the basics

In addition to your compelling message, there are some specific pieces of information that, if included, will help clear up a lot of confusion before it begins. Don’t forget to include the following in your messages:

Who you are and how your readers can contact you. (You’d think everyone would know exactly who you are, but people are surprisingly forgetful). Don’t forget your URL

How the recipient can “unsubscribe” from the list. Always include a way for people to let you know they don’t want email from you.

How you got their email address. If someone gave you their email address on your web site six months ago to register for your raffle, tell them that. Many people will forget that they actually willingly gave you their email address and will think you're spamming them unless you include this piece of information.

Web Sites

Web sites are dynamic and fun, and the possibilities are nearly endless. Here, you have the opportunity to combine text, images, and links in myriad combinations. However, one of the keys principles to creating a web site that works for your organization is to create a site that reflects your organizational priorities. That means that your site should emphasize most the one organizational priority that matters most. If you're in the middle of a membership recruitment drive, then membership information should be highlighted. If you're in the middle of an action campaign, then opportunities for your supporters to take action should be emphasized.

Whatever that priority is, sticking to your carefully crafted message will help increase the likelihood that your web site visitor will stick around your site long enough to do what you want them to do – whether that's reading a fact sheet or signing up for your newsletter. The following tips will help you maximize that potential on your web site:

Keep the text short

There are two reasons you don't want to bog your Web site down with too much text.

Internet users do not read Web sites. Reading from the computer screen is 25% slower than reading on paper, so most users skim sites for important information.

More importantly, adding too much text will detract from your priority item. If potential supporters have to scroll down through 5 paragraphs of text before they can find the action you want them to take, chances are they'll never get there, and they'll never do what you want them to.

Browse through these Web sites, which are excellent examples of how to blend text and your images to create a compelling site:

[HYPERLINK "http://www.ppgg.org/"](http://www.ppgg.org/) <http://www.ppgg.org/>

[HYPERLINK "http://www.ourforests.org"](http://www.ourforests.org/) <http://www.caral.org/>

[HYPERLINK "http://www.dontblowit.org"](http://www.dontblowit.org/) <http://www.dontblowit.org>

[HYPERLINK "http://www.weeempowers.org/"](http://www.weeempowers.org/) <http://www.weeempowers.org/>

Make Effective Use of Images

We've all heard the old saying, "A picture is worth a thousand words." Well, it's true. You can tell as much of your story with a carefully chosen image as you can with 10 paragraphs of text.

For example, below are two different Web sites that address the same issue:

The first site, DontBlowIt.org, effectively blends the use of graphics and text to give potential activists a complete and compelling story. The picture of the small child will appeal to activists and reinforces the message of the text: we have the opportunity to protect our children's future.

The second site, for the Nuclear Control Institute, makes almost no use of graphics to accent its advocacy message. Their Web site does not capitalize on the medium, losing the opportunity to connect with their potential activists on an emotional level visually.

Advertising

Advertising costs money, and it would be a shame to waste your money by not creating compelling materials. A lot of online advertising is flashy and fun – but you can't let the technology get in the way of your message. The same principles that apply to messaging on your site, or in an email alert, apply to advertising materials. Tell a story that speaks to your audience succinctly.

It's difficult to tell a story with some online advertisement mediums. The standard banner ad, for example, is not the biggest canvas for painting the picture of your campaign. Many campaigns, faced with this challenge, choose to paste slogans that sound good, but say little, on to their banner ads, thinking that if the slogan sounds good, it will be persuasive.

However, if you stick to the basics and speak to your audience, you can create much more effective materials.

Here's a banner that gets at those principles pretty well:

The text "Help Save our Heritage Forests" clearly states what the viewer is being asked to do. The bullet points above speak to many possible motivations to which the viewer could relate. The picture of the children creates an emotional connection between the issue and the viewer. Of course, the word "free" is also very popular in the Internet, and is the added bonus for the viewer, that last bit of motivation they should need.

Good General Messaging Tips

Keep it short

Unless you're addressing supporters who have been involved in your issue for a long time, they probably don't want to hear all the nitty-gritty details of your issue. In fact, they probably won't hear the details if you include them. They'll drag that email into the recycling bin, ignore your ad, or leave your site. Edit your text. Then edit it again.

One easy way to help you keep the word count down is to avoid "code-words."

Comment periods, NOIs, filibusters - these are all foreign words to most people who live outside Washington, DC, so don't use them.

One ask

Only ask your supporters to do one thing. No doubt, there are at least six important things someone could do to support your cause, but if you give a supporter six different options, chances are that they'll choose none. You've got priorities for your organization – so ask your supporter to act on the top priority.

Encourage viral marketing

Never miss an opportunity to let your supporter do some free advertising for you. With your encouragement, your alert can reach people well beyond your network. Every message you send to your supporters should include a short sentence urging them to forward the message to interested friends and family.

Structure your message for easy reading and navigating

In email, short line breaks are essential. Every email program will auto-wrap your text at a different point, causing some alerts to become impossible to read. Compare the readability of these two messages:

```
Dear Friend,  
Visit GreenCar.org today and tell automakers to produce  
more  
fuel efficient,  
lower emissions vehicles - for a clean environment!  
  
The signs of auto pollution are everywhere - we all know  
that the  
Los Angeles skyline  
looks like a bad case of ring-around-the-collar. Even  
worse, more  
of America is  
following LA's dubious lead - Houston just surpassed Los  
Angeles  
as the smoggiest  
place in the U.S.
```

or:

Dear Friend,

Visit GreenCar.org today and tell automakers to produce more fuel efficient, lower emissions vehicles - for a clean environment!

The signs of auto pollution are everywhere - we all know that the Los Angeles skyline looks like a bad case of ring-around-the-collar. Even worse, more of America is following LA's dubious lead - Houston just surpassed Los Angeles as the smoggiest place in the U.S.

And, if you're going to make short line breaks, you'll need short paragraphs. Otherwise, you'll end up with page long paragraphs that no one wants to read!

You should also double space between paragraphs since not all email programs recognize indentations. And double space around the links to your site - it helps them stand out.

In web sites, make sure that essential text is just that, text, and not graphics. This means that your message will load, even if the complimenting graphics don't due to a poor Internet connection. Also make sure that you watch the color of your text - black text on a white background is the most readable, but if you need to have colored text, make sure it contrasts highly with the background color.

Follow Up

If you know that someone responded to your email or visited your web site, let them know by thanking them. This kind of politeness will help build your relationship. Similarly, let people know what the actual resolution of your story was. If you defeat the bad guy or meet your internal goals (or even if you don't), thank your supporters and let them know what happened and why.

Success Story

In the spring of 2000, the nation was coming upon the first anniversary of the Columbine High School shootings in Colorado. Among the gun-control advocates who saw this as an opportunity to organize citizens to oppose special gun interests was California Senator Barbara Boxer.

Senator Boxer had an activist list of 1,100 citizens who supported progressive issues like gun control. Her goal was to activate this group and deliver several thousand signed petitions to Senator Trent Lott.

Her tools were simple, but effective. She chose to post the petition online so that any person anywhere with Internet access could easily log on and sign his or her name. Her means of promoting the petition was an email message. She took great care in picking her words and facts to make sure that the message would connect with her audience and would be passed around the Internet.

The message went out to her list of 1,100, and in one week she had collected about 6,000 names. In two weeks she had 10,000. At that point she sent out a new message to appeal to her new list of 10,000, and her list grew to 20,000 in the next week! Her original list of activists grew 20-fold, and she was able to hand deliver the stack of pages with 20,000 electronic petition signatures to Senator Lott's office calling for sensible gun control.

Here is a copy of the message that went out:

From: Senator Barbara Boxer
Sent: Monday, April 24, 2000 6:42 PM
Subject: An Urgent Message From US Senator Barbara Boxer

An Urgent Request From U.S. Senator Barbara Boxer

I need two minutes of your time to help fight the efforts of the National Rifle Association. When you finish this, I want you to join our effort and pass this on to 8 friends.

The NRA is up to its old tricks again. This time they have accused those who support common sense gun control measures of actually wanting more senseless and tragic killings. This is unspeakable and we must oppose their efforts by calling on the Congress to pass sensible gun control now. You can add your voice to our efforts by going to:

<http://www.onedemocracy.com/GunControlNow>

These sickening facts should make you act right now:

- Thirteen children die every day from gun violence
- During the entire 11 year Vietnam War, about 58,000 Americans lost their lives; in the last 11 years in America, over 380,000 Americans have died as a result of gun violence.

Go to <http://www.onedemocracy.com/GunControlNow> and sign our petition.

In the next four weeks, we want to build a list of 100,000 names to forward to Congressional leaders urging them to take action now. We need large numbers to counter the efforts of the 3.5 million NRA members.

Please do these two things NOW:

- (1) Sign the petition,
- (2) Forward this e-mail to 8 friends.

Thank you from the bottom of my heart for your concern.

Barbara Boxer

There are several reasons why this message was a successful one:

1. **The Language is personal.** Even though it is actually a form letter, Senator Boxer uses an intimate tone to make you feel like a valued insider. For example, she closes with, "Thank you from the bottom of my heart for your concern."
2. **The actions are very clear and focused.** It would be hard to read this email and not remember the two actions she wants you to take. (1) Sign the petition, and (2) Forward the e-mail to 8 friends. These actions are very specific. For example, she does not say "forward this message to everyone you know." Nobody does that in real life. However, most people can think of eight people who care about a given issue, so she sets the specific goal at eight. Of course, eight is a minimum, and many people will send the message to more people than that!
3. **There is a clear sense of urgency.** Just like in off-line organizing, many well intentioned people forget to take action if they don't do it right away. It's especially important when using the Internet to have people act immediately because otherwise there are too many distractions. Remember, speed is one of the greatest advantages the Internet offers a campaign.
4. **Well-chosen facts.** The facts she uses are not highly technical or confusing. They are tangible, easy to understand, and memorable. She is not trying to convert her audience. Instead, she chooses facts that will motivate them to take action because the gun situation is so bad.
5. **The message is short.** Senator Boxer is concise. She packs a lot of important information into a short, digestible message which even her busiest activists will have time to read.

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Don't Blow It

<http://www.DontBlowIt.org>

Nuclear Control Institute

<http://www.nci.org>

