

Message Development

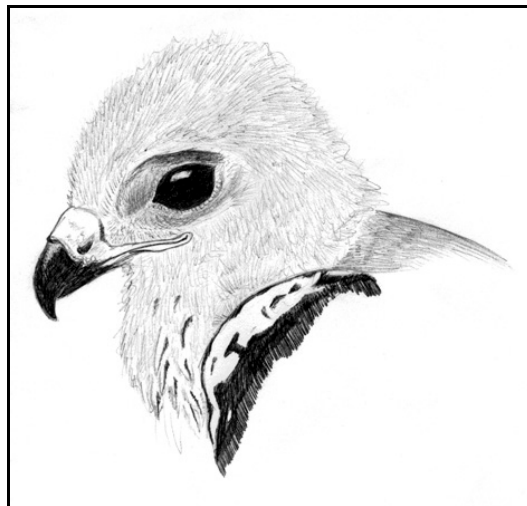
Message Development: Overview

Effectively communicating your issue to your target audience is probably the most important component of a winning conservation campaign. Understanding your audience, developing your message, refining it, delivering it, and repeating it are vital to effective communication. We can boil this process down to three steps:

Step 1 – Identify your audience.

Step 2 – Develop a message for your audience.

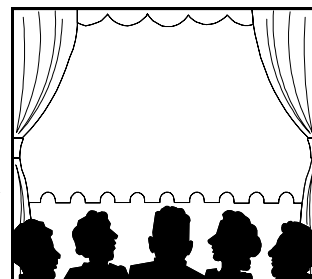
Step 3 – Deliver this message to your audience over and over again.



Juvenile Red-Tailed Hawk by Emily Thompkins

Identifying Your Audience

Identifying your target audience(s) is a key first step to any successful grassroots advocacy campaign. This is the person, persons, or legislative body you are trying to persuade. In order to do this, determine who is clearly on your side. Next, determine who is definitely *not* on your side. Those who are left are the undecided, and they can be persuaded to move to your position. It is this undecided group that is your main target audience. (An exception is if you are seeking action or trying to increase support from those already on your side.)



Getting to know this audience is the next step. You must understand the attitudes and biases of those you hope to influence. You need to know as many of the relevant points about your audience as you can. You should know what your audience thinks, feels, needs, and wants. However, do not rely on stereotypes of your audience. Talk to *real people* to gain information and test ideas. Knowing this information is important because it will help you manage your time and resources most effectively.

Elected Officials

When targeting undecided elected officials, you should carefully review their voting record and constituency base. This includes exploring their votes on similar types of legislation, the demographics of their district, and even their list of campaign contributors. This information will help you identify where on the undecided spectrum this particular legislator likely falls.

Remember that elected officials represent their constituents, so much of the time you are targeting elected officials, you will be targeting the general public as well. Elected officials will often wait to gauge public opinion before making a decision on an issue. See below for more information on the public as a target audience.

Another indirect audience will be the legislative staff. These people play a major role in the decisions of their boss. Busy elected officials often rely on their aides to research issues and make initial recommendations. Do not underestimate the influence staff have, even if they appear very young or inexperienced.

The General Public

The undecided public is considered the “swing.” This swing is usually not constant; it will vary some from issue to issue. However, polls have shown that suburban, Republican mothers are usually undecided on environmental issues, so this demographic is often a target audience. Here are some examples of other possible target audiences:

Possible Target Audiences

Registered voters	Outdoor recreation enthusiasts
Women with children	Health professionals
Taxpayers	Water sportspersons
Senior citizens	Small business owners
College students	Labor unions
Baby Boomers	Homeowners
People of color	Hunters and fishers
Birdwatchers	Farmers
Teachers	Tribes
Transit users	Faith-based groups
Gays and lesbians	

It is extremely valuable to have a good network within your community so that you can reach out to these audiences. In other words, get to know and maintain relationships with these folks. You will need to do this in order to test messages and gain insight and understanding.

The Press

The media often serves as a liaison to the general public and to elected officials. Therefore, the press has a significant place in your advocacy efforts and is always a target audience.

Developing Your Message

Your message is what will persuade someone to support your cause. Determining how to frame your issue to garner support for your position is critical. The way you communicate about the issue to the media, elected officials, and the public must be consistent, appealing, and persuasive. How you frame the issue to them is known as the “message.” Developing, polishing, delivering, and repeating your message are the fundamentals of effective communication.

Define Your Audience

Any successful grassroots advocacy campaign must first define its audience—the person, persons or legislative body you are attempting to influence. An effective grassroots message is one that resonates with the people you are trying to convince. Your message may differ slightly for each of your audiences. Keep in mind that if legislators are your target, you must target the public as well. Elected officials wait to hear from constituents before they take action.

What’s in a Message?

- *Explanation.* It must answer the question, “Why care?”
- *Expression.* It conveys in basic terms that you share the audience’s values.
- *Integrity.* It is in line with the organization’s mission and goals.
- *Accuracy.* It contains facts, which lend credibility and provide a framework. Don’t exaggerate!
- *Clarity.* It is clear and concise.

Do Research on Your Audience and Opponents

Consider the results of public opinion polls and focus groups. Doing your own polling is costly, so use information from existing research. Check on the Internet and with other local conservation organizations to see if they will share any recent polling or research information they may have. This research will help you identify the themes and messages that best resonate with voters and, through them, hopefully reach elected officials.

Research your opponent and your opponent’s message as well. Your message should contrast with theirs. Every time you talk about yourself, talk about your opponent as well. By saying who and what you are about, you are defining the differences between you and your opposition. Demonstrate how your opponents don’t take responsibility for the damage they do and how, at the same time, you are doing your work from the heart and for the greater good. Show the trail of money your opposition is following; this makes a big impression with the public. However, be careful not to come across as mean; always deliver your message in a respectful, credible way. Stating the truth about your opponent is usually harsh enough to do its own damage.

Define the Issue in Terms of People

One common mistake of environmental messages is that there are no people in them. The direct impact on humans is the key to the most effective arguments for conservation. Therefore, you must relate your message to humans to reach your audience at an emotional or personal level. People are most often compelled to take action when they see how the issue relates to them and their family.

Begin by asking yourself questions about your issue, such as:

- How does it affect people, either by helping them or hurting them?
- In what ways is the issue local? How about regional?
- How will solving the problem and the work of your organization help people, particularly in their everyday lives?
- What misconceptions do people have about your organization or your cause?
- Do you have examples of real people that have been helped or hurt by the issue or the work of your organization?

Answering these questions will help you to define the issue in terms of its effects on local people, such as their health, quality of life, heritage, and economic prosperity. Your message should let them know that you are fighting for their best interests.

Next, craft a simple, focused paragraph that explains the theme of your campaign or issue. All of your communications with the public, media, and elected officials should be tied to this central theme. You can pull a single statement from this paragraph to use as the “slogan” for your campaign.

Connect Your Values with Your Audience’s Values

When people see that you share their values, they begin to feel as part of a group or team. This makes it more likely that they, in turn, will support your cause or get involved. One way to do this is to use key “value” words and phrases to frame your issues, such as:

- **Respect.** Show how your position represents respect for the environment, the community, and our future.
- **Rights and Responsibilities.** Explain that in order to exercise our right to enjoy the land around us, we must also take on the responsibility to care for it and use it fairly without abusing it.
- **Accountability.** Make sure you emphasize that everyone, including business, corporations, and government, needs to live up to their responsibilities as individuals in the community; if they don’t, they will be held accountable.

- Right to Know. Show people that they have a right to know about the issues that are going to affect their lives.

Watch Your Language

Opinion polls have shown that certain language used regularly by the environmental community may not be effective or well understood by the general public. Make sure you use language that people can relate to when you develop your message. As one communications expert put it, “You must be able to explain the problem to your Mom.”

If your issue is scientifically complex, be sure to use common-sense arguments and language that non-scientists can understand. For example, let’s look at the term “riparian corridor.” You probably know what it means, but the average person probably doesn’t. If you simplify your language, in this case changing “riparian corridor” to “river or stream bank,” then you are communicating in a way that the majority of people can easily understand. Always avoid using acronyms or jargon in your message.

The “Three C’s” of a Great Message:

- Clear
- Concise
- Compelling

Checklist for Your Message

When you have crafted your message, review this checklist and determine if any changes need to be made.

- Is your message clear, concise, and compelling?
- Is all of the language in your message easy for regular people to understand?
- Does it explain what is at stake and connect you with others who share your values?
- Does it contrast with the opposition’s message?
- Is your message convincing and targeted to a specific audience?
- Is your message fair and balanced (which will lend you credibility)?
- Is it solution-oriented and optimistic?
- If there is a deadline for your issue, is it clearly stated in your message?
- Will people know what to do once they hear your message?
- Is your message locally-relevant?
- Are there people in your message?
- Is your message entirely factual (again, for credibility)?

Delivering Your Message

Once you have developed your message, you will deliver it through nearly everything your organization does, and you will repeat it often. How? Most people immediately think of delivering a message through the media. The media is an invaluable tool and often very cost-effective, but keep in mind that it is sometimes difficult for you to control. You should also consider delivering your message through other vehicles that you have more control over, such as brochures, presentations, and advertising.

To get in the news, you must get to know the news. Keep on top of current issues and activities in your community and remember to plan ahead. (For example, reporters need press releases ahead of deadlines, public seminars must be well publicized in advance, etc.) By keeping track of what's happening locally and regionally, you will see trends over time in the kinds of stories your local media reports on, as well as the interests and opinions of individual reporters.

You also need to pay attention to the activities of your opposition. Read the editorial pages and letters to the editor religiously, and be ready to respond if your position is attacked. Likewise, you need to be prepared to move when a news story reinforces your message. There may be many ways to get your message out if you think opportunistically. Be on the offensive. Here are some of the ways to deliver your message:

Through the Media

- Op-eds and letters to the editor
- Radio-spot news and talkshows
- TV- news
- Feature stories by reporters

Special Events

- Workshops
- Your organization's member meetings
- On-site demonstrations
- Media events: rallies or marches
- Press conferences
- House parties
- Exhibit or information table at events
- Tours of the site you are trying to protect
- Personal visits or telephonecontact

Educational Information

- Brochures
- Email alerts
- Websites (yours and others)
- Newsletters (yours and others)
- Publications
- Videotapes
- Public speeches
- Slide presentations
- Overhead transparencies
- Interest-group-delivered information.

For more information on message delivery tools, see other sections of this Activist's Toolkit.

Who Delivers Your Message?

Whatever message you develop, you will want to make sure *everyone* who is on your side who speaks to the public or reporters knows it and can articulate it. In other words: “Many voices, one message.”

For delivering your message through the media, it usually proves more effective to have a single person equipped and prepared to be your spokesperson. For more information on spokespeople, see the “Choosing a Spokesperson” section of this Toolkit.

Environmentalists are not always the most effective messengers for our messages, because the public may not trust us. Think about reaching beyond your organization to experts, local celebrities, or “real” people who share your concerns and who can help amplify your message. In addition, look for others with an independent perspective who can help validate your message. (For example, a local business person, a respected religious leader, or parents.)

Tips for Delivering the Message

- First, connect with your audience. Always try to begin with the tangible, such as real stories about real people, so that your message will resonate with people emotionally or personally. Use images to tell your story as well as words. Don’t begin with scientific or technical information, and avoid jargon altogether.
- Keep your statements specific, but simple. Use plain language and be concise.
- Be optimistic and truthful. You may wish to convey a sense of urgency, but not hysteria. Focus on the positive and speak about lost potential instead of doom. Explain the problem and tell the audience how they can help solve it. When communicating specifics, be factual, not general. This will give you credibility.
- Stay “on message.” A classic mistake is to get bored with your message and go off of it. But you shouldn’t! The reporter you are talking to, or the group you are speaking in front of, may be hearing it for the first time.
- Remember, people need to hear a message several times in order for it to sink in.