

Developing a Road Map: A Step-by-Step Guide to Message Mapping

By Tripp Frohlichstein

By considering the specific audience you want to reach and the needs of that audience, you can able to zero in on your overall message for the media. In many cases, your message will be a concern for the customers and how the company is helping them. Sometimes, the shareholder, employee or community is the focus of the message, but you will find that by focusing on concern for the customers, the needs of the shareholders are, in turn, usually met.

Home Base

The first thing you must do before a media interview is know your home base—this is your main message. Knowing and communicating your home base is the most important factor in conducting a successful interview and the most important communication objective.

A question from a reporter is merely a starting point—you don't evade it, and you don't avoid it. You address it. Then, you move on to discuss your own objectives and ultimately reach your home base.

Positive Points

Having a home base is not enough. Any company can say that it cares about its customers, so you need to develop positive points, or primary messages that support your home base. If the home base is “we care about our customers,” a positive point might be, “we listen to our customers.” It's a sub-message that adds credibility to your home base. Most interviews should use no more than three positive

points—although you can have many more—to support home base.

Positive Proof Points

The positive proof point for the above example could be, “we've added illustrations to our instruction manuals because customers said more visual support was needed to learn equipment operations.” The positive proof point is the addition of illustrations to the manuals. Another proof point for this home base might be that, “when calling a customer service operator, your call is usually answered within four rings.”

More examples of positive proof points:

Positive Point

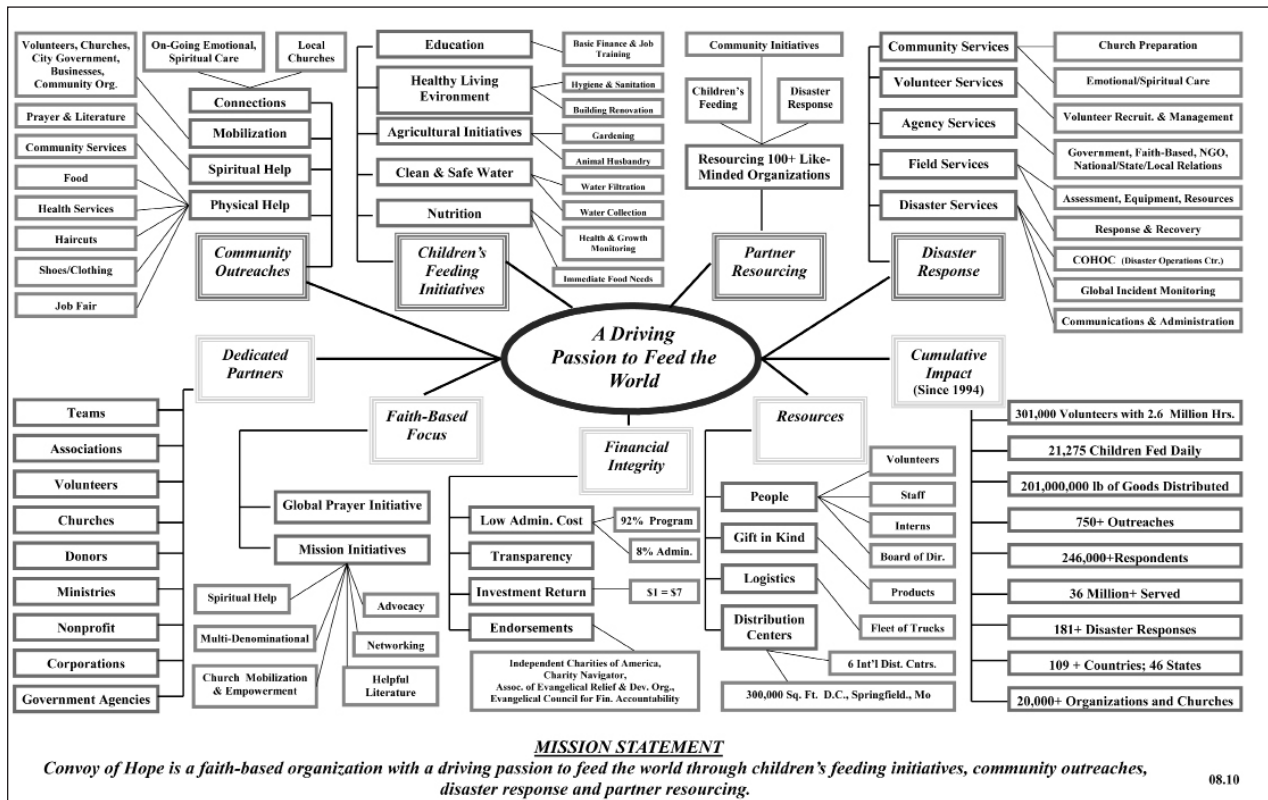
- We have expertise
- Product reliability
- Competitive pricing
- Assuring delivery quality
- Excellent customer service

Positive Proof Point

- Average length of employee service
- Product warranty or guarantee
- Price reductions/volume discounts
- Use of quality packaging
- 24-hour toll-free product support

Distinguishing Points

In establishing positive points, you should search for distinguishing points as well. For example, some companies might offer support services during normal business hours. Yours might be the only one offering weekend sup-



In this message map, for nonprofit organization **Convoy of Hope**, based in Springfield, MO, the group's home base is the core of its mission: to provide international feeding efforts. The first level positive points look at how they accomplish this. The map is used as a basis for their internal and external communication efforts.

port, along with live operators, which makes that a distinguishing point. These also may be “hot buttons” for the audience. Although others may offer similar positive points, it is important that the audience knows that you have them, too. If might be, for example, that while fairly common, a volume discount is important to customers. If so, it belongs in the interview.

Positive, proof and distinguishing points are often difficult to find. Remember the following when searching for positives: What is routine to you is not routine to me. In other words, something you do regularly may not seem worth mentioning to the customers or your audience. But, in fact, it might be fascinating to others, and worth mentioning.

An Outsider's Perspective

So when developing positive points, you

must look at things as an outsider would. They must also pass the “who cares” test. If an automobile dealer tells you the car you are looking at was delivered to the dealer by train, you probably couldn't care less. However, if that fact is important to the sale, it is incumbent on the dealer to explain why—such as, “more life from the engine because the car wasn't jostled on the highway.”

The most effective way to present your message effectively is with a message map. It maps your way from your positive points to your home base, in a logical way, so that you can take control of delivering your message.

Hub and Spoke Model

A message map is similar to a road map in its function. It points you in the direction you want to go (home base) and tells you how to get there. When complete, the diagram will re-

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semble an airline hub and spoke map, with all routes leading to home.

From the central message, or home base, one spoke may focus on how employees help customers, while another focuses on the product line, customer service or cost.

These maps can be used to develop answers

to questions from customers, the media, shareholders, colleagues and just about any other stakeholder. It can also help organize marketing brochures and help plan a speech. A master message map may be extensive; after developing it, use only the parts you need for any given situation.

In the end, using a message map helps you control most communications situations by helping you prepare your message in an honest, straightforward fashion. **PRN**

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