

Stop Memorizing, Start Storytelling: 5 Key Message Techniques

By Claire Guappone

The media landscape and consumer expectations of brands have changed. A reporter could be a professional or an everyday person sitting just behind you at a restaurant. People's attention also is shifting to focus on topics that interest them, in the format and channels they prefer, on their schedule. While these combined changes have made some media relations traditions like faxing news releases outdated, other practices remain that could use an update.

Today, too many brands forget that consumers are people who demand authenticity and transparency. Media training sessions that focus on canned quotes and polished delivery styles may satisfy lawyers and reassure executives, but this approach disappoints the audience—assuming they have not tuned out all together. This disconnect stems from brands treating audiences like consumers, instead of people who can choose to engage or disengage based on how a brand acts and talks with them.

To succeed in this new landscape, brands need to start talking like people. The following five techniques can help your brand's spokespersons create and deliver messages that are:

- Real
- Relevant
- Personal
- Tangible
- Memorable

1: Speak in Real Language

Use of jargon is a common mistake highlighted in media relations courses. With an objective eye, brands can see how complex medical procedure names and technical equipment specifications might not be known by all audiences. Substituting more easily understood terms is a great first step in making sure your brand and its benefits are communicated directly to your audience.

To make your brand truly conversational, every word in the message needs a second look. Do messages include the word “utilize” when “use” would work just as well? Would anyone outside your organization mention the adjective “innovative” when describing your brand's product or service? Does it take five sentences to explain how a product works when its key benefit is how easy it is to use?

Reviewing messages with a critical eye can help your brand spot opportunities to make its language more real. Everyday words show your audience you are willing to speak with them on their level and treat them like friends or family. A brand who speaks in real language automatically demonstrates its values and shows what it means to have a relationship with it.

Tip: Say your messages aloud like you are in the middle of a conversation. If they sound awkward, continue rephrasing them until you find a more natural flow.

2: Keep Messages Relevant

Brands refresh logos to stay up to date with changes in technology and culture. After 10, 15 or 25 years, a logo that was once young and modern begins to look old-fashioned. Messages require the same care and attention to remain relevant, except the pace of change is faster.

Think about the last time your brand's messages were updated and which products or services you were selling at that time. What technology were people using? In July 2007, about 9 million people had smartphones. By the end of 2012, smartphone owners are expected to become the majority of mobile phone users, according to comScore—and they will be vastly different consumers of your messages in the news, through brand channels and via social media. When news can break first on Twitter, your brand needs to have short and pithy messages to become part of the story.

From a cultural perspective, what music, fashion or food was popular when your messages were developed? Your brand needs to continually update its cultural references

and vocabulary to remain relevant. It's unlikely you are using terms as outdated as "rad" and "psyche," but you may be missing out on opportunities to more closely align with people's interests and show how your brand shares people's passions. Keep in mind that being relevant is not the same as being trendy (unless your brand really is "cool").

Tip: Think about how you explain your brand when you are at a party and asked what you do—you put it into context of what matters to your listener. Maintain this audience focus as you develop messages and you will show how your brand is naturally a part of people's lives.

3: Make Messages Personal

While the expression "it's not personal...it's strictly business" is one of the most famous quotes from *The Godfather*, the idea of keeping people at an arm's length is no longer acceptable for modern brands. People want to talk to brands directly and the most successful brands respond in ways that engage people's emotions. Even though not all brands are sentimental, every brand should express sentiment.

Using words that convey emotions in positive stories and in crisis situations makes your brand human and relatable. A good test for whether or not a message has enough emotion is to read it aloud. If the sentence sounds the same when you read it enthusiastically as when you read it in a monotone, the message likely does not engage your audience on an emotional level.

Brands that are personal also connect with audiences on a one-to-one basis. While your brand should have a set of key messages, your spokespersons need to feel empowered to make these messages their own. Audiences respond to spokespersons who talk like people on the brand's behalf, not spokespersons who memorize and recite messages robotically.

Tip: Conduct internal mock interviews to help spokespersons practice speaking consistently about your brand in their own words. Play back the recordings as a group to help them learn and experience different interview styles.

4: Connect Messages to Experience

Most people are selfish beings. They are focused on the people and objects that directly affect their daily lives. Product details and service guarantees are only abstract promises until they are told in the context of what a person

will feel as a result of experiencing the product or service.

For some brands, connecting products or services to the five senses is easy. For a laser vision correction brand, the key benefit of its services is not clearer vision (although that is a benefit). The key benefit of laser vision correction is what you can do with that clearer vision—swim without contacts, play with your toddler without glasses getting in the way or read the alarm clock from across the room.

Consider how you can engage your audience through their senses.

Other brands without a direct connection to the end experience may need to think about the bigger picture. For example, a travel agency could say that it books trips to 100 different countries on four continents. Or, if it tapped into people's senses, it could talk about how it makes it easier for travelers to hear the sound of the elephants on safari, touch handmade textiles at a bazaar and taste and smell the finest cuisine in the Mediterranean.

Each time your brand is speaking, consider how you can engage your audience through their senses. Competitors might be able to match specific attributes of your product or service but they cannot copy how your brand makes a person feel.

Tip: Imagine you are experiencing your brand's products or services for the first time. Use those sensations to shape your brand messages.

5: Tie Messages with a Memorable Story

The shortest distance between point A and point B often is a story. Storytelling helps brands share information more quickly and it helps people remember the information more easily. With Epsilon reporting the average consumer receives more than 5,000 brand messages a day, standing out is becoming increasingly difficult and important.

The best kinds of brand stories are those that:

- Represent your brand's values (e.g., founding story)
- Prove your brand's benefits by connecting them to real-life examples (e.g., celebrities or everyday people who have used your product or service)
- Highlight an emotional or tangible space only your

HOW TO SIMPLIFY YOUR BRAND MESSAGES

Two common errors brands make when communicating are: 1) focusing on what they are selling, instead of the benefits of buying it, and 2) using big words and industry terms to show expertise, rather than speaking directly.

Practice talking about your brand to a less sophisticated audience. This can be a very valuable exercise in simplifying your messages. For example, if you were talking to a five-year-old, could you explain:

- Who your brand is
- What you do
- How you do it
- Who you do it for (people and where/ when it is appropriate to use your product or service)
- Why you do it (your purpose)

If you can answer all of these questions on the first try, your brand is already speaking conversationally. If you find this exercise challenging—and most brands do—keep fine-tuning your messages until they are simple and clear. These messages not only will make your brand more conversational in the news but also in customer service, social media and other channels.

—*Claire Guappone*

brand can own (e.g., life-changing experiences or first-of-its-kind product benefits)

When preparing for an interview, your brand's spokes-

Your clients should feel like the sessions are far more about business than communications.

persons should feel comfortable telling a minimum of two stories. One story should be a consistent anecdote all spokespersons share about the brand and the other story should be unique to that person and his/ her experiences working for the brand. Combined, these stories will show what it means to have a relationship with and be a part of your brand.

Tip: Partner with your customer service team to stay up to date on the latest feedback and stories about people's experiences with your brand.

By following these five techniques for crafting and delivering messages, your brand can genuinely engage your audience. Conversational and relatable messages give people a better sense of who you are and what you stand for as a brand—and how your brand can benefit them. This approach also empowers the people who buy your product or service and the media who report on it to talk about your brand more often. **PRN**

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