

COMMUNICATIONS

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Message Matters

5 steps to message development

A Washington, D.C., think tank wanted to go public in 2003 with a radical new strategy for preventing child abuse and neglect, but it faced two major obstacles: the strategy was difficult to explain and the organization had no direct means of implementing it.

Yet within three years, half the states in the country were beginning to incorporate the strategy, developed by the Center for the Study of Social Policy (CSSP). The federal government had started to support it. And, a professional association had incorporated its elements into requirements for licensing programs nationwide.

How did it do it? One of the success factors, according to CSSP's project director, was the strategic message that the organization created to recruit critical collaborators. It performed exactly as a strategic message should: it captured the attention of target audiences, engaged their self-interest, and structured the ensuing conversation in a way that kept them listening to more detailed information.

The CSSP experience is a case study in how to create a strategic message. The five-step message development process it used can be used by any organization to effect almost any kind of action - to prompt audiences, for instance, to vote your way, quote you, fund you, join your organization, collaborate with you, buy your products, participate in your programs, or use your services.

Looking at how CSSP worked the five steps provides a primer for developing powerful messages.

Step 1: Decide what action you want to prompt.

The first decision CSSP made was to articulate what action it wanted to effect through delivering its message. Its action was clearly stated. The goal was to change the way America works to prevent child abuse and neglect. For decades, the dominant prevention strategy essentially has been to jail the abuser and put the abused child in foster care. CSSP's strategy is to embed prevention efforts in the early childcare system where trained professionals can

identify potentially abusive situations and program changes can remediate them before abuse or neglect occurs.

CSSP avoided the mistake that so many nonprofits make right at the start of message development. It didn't choose awareness or education or persuasion as its message purpose; those would only be stepping stones along its communication path. CSSP wanted to make change, and it knew that change requires action; it articulated that action as its message goal.

Step 2: Determine who can make that action happen.

The second decision CSSP had to make was to identify the players who could effect this radical change -- in other words, its target audiences. CSSP was clear about who it needed to activate and why:

- Early childhood professionals, who would execute the new approach;

- State government welfare and early childhood agencies, that deal most directly with child abuse and with early childhood programs; and,

- Child abuse prevention activists, who are the recognized public voice for how to prevent child abuse.

Step 3: Determine why those audiences would take the action.

This decision was one of the most challenging, identifying why these target audiences would want to change the way they'd been doing business and adopt the CSSP approach.

CSSP knew why the groups should change. The old strategy hadn't permanently reduced child abuse during the previous 40 years. However, CSSP avoided the "should" trap into which

many nonprofits fall. It recognized that message success didn't lie in telling its audiences why they needed to do what CSSP wanted, but it lay in telling its audiences how doing what CSSP wanted would result in satisfying their desires.

These were audience desires that CSSP identified:

- It knew all three groups wanted a doable solution, not a great-sounding idea;

- It knew early childhood professionals, overworked and under-resourced, wanted a solution that could be implemented with minimal cost in time and money;

- It knew state agencies wanted better outcomes for children and a solution that would keep children out of the welfare system; and,

20 child-care centers around the United States that used elements of the strategy in their everyday programs;

- It could be implemented with minimum monetary investment and small (but important) changes in professional practice;

- It would lead to better outcomes for all children and keep children out of the welfare system. By noticing signs of stress that might lead to abuse in any family and knowing how to help remediate the situation, early childhood professionals would improve outcomes for all children, whether at risk for abuse or not; and,

- It would move the primary focus of prevention out of the judicial system and into the early child care system, which makes prevention a mainstream activity that serves "normal" families and not just aberrant ones.

Step 5: Write the message.

Finally, CSSP had to write the strategic message -- the core message that reached all target audiences and the sub-messages for each individual audience.

In today's saturated communications environment, CSSP knew that its message had to be brief, yet connect to audience desires and use the audiences' language, not CSSP's tone. This is CSSP's core message, which has successfully captured and engaged its target audiences for four years: Small but significant changes in early childhood programs offer an effective new strategy for supporting parents under stress and preventing harm to children.

CSSP has been so successful in generating widespread adoption of the strategy that it's launching a national network to link all who are implementing it. And what is one of its key actions as it designs the network? It's creating a strategic message that engages its target audiences and moves them to participate in building and using the network. *NPT*

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- It knew activist groups wanted a solution that would handle abuse situations outside the judicial system, and one that would make prevention mainstream rather than an effort focused only on aberrant "other" people.

Step 4: Confirm that there will be mutuality of satisfaction.

CSSP handled this step quickly and easily. It recognized that it could satisfy the desires of its target audiences and that their subsequent changes in practice would satisfy CSSP's desire. It knew that unless there was mutual satisfaction of desire there would be no sustained action and, hence, no permanent change.

These were the desires CSSP knew it could meet with its new strategy:

- The strategy was practical and doable. They could point to more than