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# Is your messaging still fit for purpose?

Guidebook

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# The environment around you is changing

Even when your mission stays exactly the same, the environment you operate in doesn't. Organisations are currently navigating cost-of-living pressures, housing affordability challenges, workforce and skills shortages, tighter government budgets, rising demand for measurable outcomes, climate and sustainability considerations, AI and digital transformation, and shifting political priorities.

Effective advocacy and communication now requires organisations to be credible inside their sector and legitimate outside it.

# Stakeholders are asking different questions

Historically, organisations focused their communications on describing what they do — the services they provide, the programs they deliver. Today, stakeholders are increasingly interested in understanding: what difference you are making, why your work matters, how you are responding to current challenges, what evidence supports your claims, and what makes your organisation different.

Whether you're engaging government, media, members, donors, customers or the broader community, stakeholders want clear evidence of value, outcomes and impact.

# Messaging rarely fails overnight

In most organisations, messaging does not suddenly stop working. Instead, it gradually becomes less relevant as organisational priorities, stakeholder expectations and the external environment evolve. Because teams use messaging every day, it can be genuinely difficult to recognise when it's no longer having the desired impact. Some organisations continue to use messaging frameworks developed several years ago, despite significant changes in their strategy, services, stakeholders, or operating environment.

# Five shifts shaping stakeholder expectations

| Shift | What it means |
|---|---|
| **Trust and credibility** | Stakeholders place greater importance on evidence, expertise and transparency when deciding who to engage with and support. |
| **Impact and outcomes** | Audiences want to understand what has changed as a result of your work, not simply what activities you've undertaken. |
| **Authenticity** | People respond more positively to genuine, human communication than highly corporate or promotional messaging. |
| **Personalisation** | Different audiences have different priorities. A message that resonates with the government may not resonate with customers, members or employees. |
| **Transparency and accountability** | There is increasing expectation that organisations communicate openly about challenges, decisions and performance. |

# Five warning signs your messaging may no longer be fit for purpose

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## Everyone explains the organisation differently.

This often happens when messaging frameworks haven't been updated, staff have developed their own versions of key messages, new programs or priorities have emerged, or teams are communicating in silos. Common signs: different descriptions on the website, annual report and social channels; leadership team members using different language; difficulty explaining the organisation concisely; stakeholders receiving mixed messages.

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## Your messaging focuses on activity rather than impact.

Many organisations are very good at describing what they do — programs delivered, events held, services provided, participants reached. While these activities matter, stakeholders are increasingly asking a different question: "what difference did it make?" Effective messaging moves beyond activity to demonstrate impact, outcomes, value, community benefit and organisational contribution.

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## Your messaging sounds like everyone else's.

Across most sectors, organisations compete for attention, funding, influence and engagement — yet many use remarkably similar language: "we are committed to making a difference," "we put people at the centre," "we deliver innovative solutions." These statements may be true, but they rarely explain what makes an organisation unique. Ask: could another organisation use exactly the same language? Are we clearly articulating our distinctive value?

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## Stakeholders are not repeating your messages back to you.

Signs your messaging may not be landing: stakeholders misunderstand your purpose, media coverage focuses on the wrong issues, government stakeholders associate you with outdated priorities, members or customers struggle to explain your value, and common misconceptions persist. Strong messaging creates consistency between what you say, what stakeholders hear, and what stakeholders repeat.

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### Your organisation has changed but your messaging hasn't.

Many organisations experience significant change over time — new strategic plans, new services, growth into new markets, changes in leadership, new policy priorities, shifting stakeholder expectations. Messaging, however, often remains largely unchanged, creating a disconnect between who the organisation is today and how it's being described publicly.

# Good organisations can still have ineffective messaging

One of the most common misconceptions is the belief that if an organisation is doing valuable work, stakeholders will naturally understand its value. In reality, many organisations delivering meaningful outcomes struggle to clearly articulate their purpose, impact and relevance — often not because their work lacks value, but because their messaging hasn't evolved alongside the organisation itself.

Over time, messages become layered with additional priorities, programs and stakeholder requirements. What starts as a clear story can gradually become more complex and less compelling. Strong messaging is not about communicating more frequently or creating more content.It's about ensuring stakeholders can quickly understand who you are, why your work matters, and why they should care.

**List your possible core messages below:**

| Possible core message | What works? | What needs strengthening? |
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**Write the strongest version below:**

Use supporting messages to reinforce your core message. These may explain the problem, the solution, the evidence, the human impact or the action needed.

**List supporting messages below:**

**Supporting message 1**

**Supporting message 2**

**Supporting message 3**

# The five most common messaging mistakes

### Mistake 1: Focusing on what you do rather than why it matters

Organisations become experts in their own work — programs, services, projects and internal processes — and communications often focus heavily on describing activities. But stakeholders rarely engage because of the activities delivered; they engage because of the outcomes those activities create. Stakeholders want to know: what problem are you solving, what impact are you creating, why is your work important, and how are people better off as a result?

### Mistake 2: Trying to say everything at once

Many organisations attempt to communicate every program, initiative, achievement and priority simultaneously, resulting in messaging that feels crowded, lacks focus, confuses stakeholders, and dilutes key messages. Strong messaging requires prioritisation: what are the three things we most want stakeholders to remember? What outcomes do we want to be known for? What story are we trying to tell?

### Mistake 3: Using language stakeholders don't understand

Every sector develops its own terminology, acronyms and technical language, but stakeholders often don't share the same level of knowledge or context. A useful test: would someone outside our organisation immediately understand this? Effective messaging uses plain language, is accessible to non-experts, avoids unnecessary complexity, and explains technical concepts clearly.

### Mistake 4: Assuming every audience wants the same message

While consistency matters, different stakeholders are interested in different aspects of your story. A government stakeholder may focus on policy outcomes and evidence; a journalist may want a timely issue or human impact; employees may want organisational direction; customers or members may want practical benefits. The strongest frameworks create consistency around a central narrative while allowing flexibility in how it's expressed.

### Mistake 5: Failing to evolve with the environment

Many organisations continue to use messaging developed for a different context — referencing outdated priorities, overlooking emerging issues, ignoring shifting government agendas, and using proof points that no longer resonate. Effective organisations regularly assess what stakeholders are discussing, what the government is prioritising, and how expectations are evolving.

# What the strongest messaging has in common

Regardless of sector, size or purpose, the most effective organisations are usually able to answer three simple questions clearly and consistently. When these three elements are present, messaging becomes easier to understand, easier to remember, and more likely to influence stakeholders.

**Brainstorm the following questions:**

**1. Why does it matter?**

The organisation clearly articulates the issue, challenge or opportunity it's addressing.

**2. Why this organisation?**

Stakeholders understand the organisation's expertise, role and unique contribution.

**3. Why now?**

The messaging connects to current stakeholder priorities, policy developments or broader trends.

# A practical framework for refining your messaging

**Step 1: Review what you already have**

Before developing new messages, understand what your organisation is currently saying — across your website, capability statements, media releases, social content, speeches, newsletters, annual reports, and proposals. Ask: are we describing ourselves consistently? Are our key messages easy to identify? Are we focused on impact or activity? Are there outdated references? Does our messaging sound distinctive?

**Step 2: Reconnect with your organisational strategy.**

Messaging shouldn't sit separately from strategy. It should translate strategic priorities into language stakeholders can understand. Review your current strategy, business plan, advocacy priorities and future direction. The goal is to ensure messaging reflects who you are today, not who you used to be. Ask: what are our current priorities? What's changed in the past 12–24 months? What do we want to be known for?

**Step 3: Understand your audiences.**

Different audiences (government, media, funders, members, employees, clients, community) won't all care about the same things. This doesn't mean creating entirely different messages for each; it means identifying a shared core narrative and adapting the emphasis. For each audience, consider: what do they already know? What matters most to them? What evidence would make the message more credible?

**Step 4: Define your core narrative.**

The central story explains who you are, why your work matters, and what value you create — clear enough to guide communications across channels and flexible enough to adapt to different audiences. A strong core narrative answers the question: what issue are we addressing? What is our role? What impact do we create? Why does this matter now?

**Step 5: Build your messaging framework.**

Once your core narrative is clear, develop a framework that is usable across all communications, providing consistency without becoming a rigid script. This may include a short organisational description, a longer narrative, three to five key messages, supporting proof points, audience- specific messages, language to use and avoid, FAQs, and spokesperson talking points.

**Step 6: Test your messages.**

Once drafted, test whether messages are clear, credible, and compelling through structured conversations with internal teams, selected stakeholders, members, customers, or trusted advisers. Ask: what do people

remember after reading the message? Is anything unclear? Does it feel credible? Does it sound like our organisation? Is it differentiated?

**Step 7: Embed the messaging across the organisation.**

A framework is only valuable once it becomes part of everyday communications — websites, presentations, media materials, social media, stakeholder engagement, advocacy documents, proposals. This includes briefing leadership teams, updating communications templates, training spokespeople, and creating examples of how to adapt messages for different audiences.

# Five trends shaping the future of communications

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| **Growing demand for trust and authenticity.**<br>Stakeholders are increasingly sceptical of overly polished or promotional communications, and place greater value on transparency, evidence and genuine engagement |
| **Increased competition for attention.**<br>The volume of content being produced continues to grow, making clarity and differentiation more important than ever. |
| **Higher expectations for evidence and impact.**<br>Audiences increasingly expect organisations to demonstrate outcomes, not simply intentions or activity. |
| **Rapid policy and stakeholder shifts.**<br>Government priorities, social issues and public expectations can change quickly, requiring organisations to remain agile in their communication. |
| **Artificial intelligence and content saturation.**<br>As AI-generated content becomes more common, organisations that communicate with authenticity, expertise and a distinctive voice are likely to stand out. |

# What are your next steps?

A simple messaging health check is what you and your organisation need. Many organisations review their strategic plans every few years, but rarely apply the same discipline to reviewing their messaging.

**Use this checklist as a starting point:**

- ☐ Does our messaging reflect our current strategy and priorities?
- ☐ Does it address the needs and concerns of our stakeholders?
- ☐ Is it clearly differentiated from others in our sector?
- ☐ Is it supported by evidence and proof points?
- ☐ Is it consistently understood and used across our organisation?
- ☐ Does it reflect today's policy, social and stakeholder environment?

One of the biggest challenges for organisations is knowing how much their messaging should change over time. While priorities, stakeholder expectations, and the external environment evolve, an organisation's core purpose and values often remain relatively stable — the goal isn't to constantly reinvent your story, but to ensure the way you tell it remains relevant. Leading organisations increasingly ask: "What do stakeholders need to hear from us right now?"

**Priority actions**

| Action | Why it matters | Priority (High / Medium / Low) |
|---|---|---|
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## Our top three next steps:

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

# Turning into action

You have done the strategic thinking; now it's time to move on to the implementation phase. Distribute an implementation schedule that includes the task, who is responsible, when it is due, and lists any crucial notes and deadlines. Now commence the rollout!

**An example implementation schedule template is shown below. Feel free to use this or adapt it to suit your project and team:**

| Task | Responsibility | Due date | Notes |
|---|---|---|---|
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# Keep on track

Hold regular work-in-progress (WIP) meetings with your core project team to ensure everyone completes their tasks on time and to answer any questions they have. You can also use these meetings to keep everyone informed and troubleshoot any issues together. Take action items from each meeting to ensure the team is clear on the priorities and next steps.

**An example WIP document template is shown below. You can use this or create your own.**

| Action | Responsibility | Due date | Outcome |
|---|---|---|---|
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# Measure your success

The key objectives you made at the beginning will help you measure and evaluate your success. Depending on your objective, you can measure data from your social accounts or the records of the number of meetings you had with political stakeholders. Take time to reflect on your project once it is complete and record any lessons learned. This will help you improve on your process next time. And always remember to celebrate your wins!

**Below is an example of a measurement matrix – some of these may be relevant to your project.**

| | Organisational objectives | Communication objectives | Target audience | Strategy |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Preparation** | Your organisation's strategic objectives | Agreed objectives for public relations | Identified target audiences | Develop a PR plan<br>Ongoing measurement to enhance strategy and tactics |
| | | **Implementation** | | |
| **Segment** | Data | Data analysis | Insight from data | Strategic implications of the insight |
| **Audience** | Psychographic | Networks, social media use, and consumption of content | Strategic approach to engage targets | Resourcing allocation to grow engagement |
| **Media** | Circulation, key message penetration | Distribution, readership, top messages | Coverage quality, audience reach, and the most effective messages | Is the approach effective in growing the quality and quantity of coverage?<br>Should messages be re-evaluated? |
| **Social media** | Community management | Volume of engagement | Investment to manage the community | Resourcing allocation to grow engagement |
| **Community** | Ambassador activation | Ambassador reach, engagement | Effectiveness of ambassadors | Resourcing allocation for the ambassador program |

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# Thank you.

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