

# Developing Messages that Work

By

**Forrest W. Anderson**

Almost every public relations practitioner at one point or another in his or her career is called on to develop a message. The CEO or some other senior executive calls you in and says: “We need to communicate thus and so to customers.” The target audience might instead be employees, shareholders or the community, but the challenge is the same.

Once we have the assignment, one of the very next steps should be to fashion a message that will provoke the response management desires from the stakeholder group.

## **Where the message starts**

Some of you might be saying: “Wait a minute! The executive already gave us the message.” I would argue the executive told you what he, she or the organization wants to get across, and hopefully he or she shared the response the organization is looking for. But the language of the executive is not the language you want to use in a message.

Suppose the executive is the chief technical officer of an enterprise software company. My own experience with executives like this is I myself frequently cannot understand what they are talking about, when they share with me what they want to communicate to customers. Very frequently senior managers speak a language of their own. And even if the executive’s language is not overly technical or laden with jargon, managers tend to speak from their point of view. They understand what they want to happen and think everyone else will immediately grasp what they are saying.

Long experience developing, communicating and assessing the effects of messages tells me otherwise.

## **Cloaking management’s message in the language of the target audience**

I got my MBA in marketing from Kellogg. In classes such as advertising and models of consumer behavior, the professors spent a great deal of time talking about how people process information they receive, how they store it, how they organize it in their minds and how they recall that information when they need it. One central tenet that runs through those classes is that if you wish to communicate with a group of people, the

easiest way to do so is to use language that already is resident in their minds. If you use language that is not, you will have to teach your target what you mean by that language. You will create barriers to communication, which you, as the communicator, will need to overcome.

Having management's version of the message is essential to developing the final message, but it is not the final message. To make the message intelligible to your target audience, you need to know how your target audience thinks about the topic. What are the target audience's wants and needs with regard to the issue? What language does the target audience use to describe these wants and needs.

The analogy I use for developing the final message is cloaking management's message in the language of the target audience.

## **The process**

There are a number of different techniques you can use to understand stakeholder wants, needs and language. These include stakeholder research techniques such as:

- Focus groups
- One-on-one interviews
- Dyads and triads (like focus groups but with only two or three people)

Regardless of the format above you use, the simplest, most straightforward approach probably is to introduce the message topic to respondents in a general way and ask them for their thoughts. Be sure to record exactly what they say. You want the very words they use as they talk about the issues at hand. Through the interview prompt them to give you pros and cons regarding the topic to get all ideas out on the table. After this research, you can rewrite management's message incorporating the language provided by the people in the focus group or interviews.

Once you've rewritten the language to reflect stakeholder concerns and include stakeholder language, do additional research with stakeholders to test the message. Again, begin with general topics to get respondents warmed up, go into their feelings about the topic and then read, or have them read, the message and respond to it. Again take notes, revise the message and present it to a new focus group or set of interviews and continue this process until respondents immediately get the message and suggest no changes.

A variation on this approach is to ask respondents themselves to edit and rewrite the message. If you're doing a group, have people read their edited versions and explain why they made changes and prompt other respondents to agree or disagree to get as many ideas out on the table as possible. Collect all the revised statements and condense them into one new statement and present that to the next set of respondents. Again, repeat this process until new respondents immediately understand the message and suggest no further changes.

## **Are they buying what we're selling?**

In most cases, the process I've outlined will lead you to messages that communicate what management wants to communicate efficiently and effectively. However, you may find that respondents simply do not agree with the message. For example, management might want to say the organization is very customer-oriented. You may learn, as I did in one such case, that neither customers nor employees believed this to be the case. The organization was not aligned with the message. It wanted to talk the talk, but it wasn't walking the walk. In that case, we told management not to use that message. We believed that to do so would make customers and employees view them as untrustworthy (liars) in addition to not being customer-oriented. We suggested they might try a message such as: "We are trying to be more customer oriented, and here are all the things we are doing to serve you better."

###

I work with organizations that are going through a change in strategic direction (merger, acquisition, building program, new product launch, change program) and that are concerned about what will happen with their relationships with key stakeholders (customers, employees, investors) if they send out the wrong, or confusing, messages. After working with me they have a clear understanding of what their messages should be. I also provide them recommendations on other actions they can take to enhance their relationships with their stakeholders.

Forrest W. Anderson

415-513-5042

fanderson@forrestwanderson.com

www.forrestwanderson.com

Founding Member

Institute for Public Relations

Commission on PR Measurement and Evaluation