

## High Impact Messaging: Beyond Words:

By Kathleen M. Hosfeld

*Once upon a time there was a nonprofit that sought to create a better world. But its members were having trouble getting their message out so they contacted us. One of the things we noticed was that the board wasn't serving as ambassadors for the organization because they didn't really understand how the work got done and who benefited. "You need to find shared language with the board," we told the staff. "No," they said, "The board needs to work harder at understanding our language and what we do."*

That's a true story from my practice that illustrates one of the mistakes organizations make with regard to messaging. The messages we send to customers and stakeholders are essential to their decisions to engage with us. Yet many businesses and non-profits take their messages for granted. In fact, the messages we send must be evaluated on a continuous basis to make sure they are achieving their intended outcomes. The messages we send go beyond the words and images that we put into our brochures, media announcements and Web sites. They include actions and the subtle, even unconscious, ways members of an organization telegraph support or lack thereof for its mission.

Many things go into creating effective messaging, but to start with I emphasize the Three C's: clarity, congruence and consistency.

**Clarity** – "Be clear," I often say to friends and clients. "And if you can't be clear, be clear about getting clear." It's true in both life and in work that if you are vacillating between competing scenarios or simply spread too thin, you won't accomplish as much in any direction. Many clients who came to us for help with low visibility or unclear messages were holding unresolved questions about direction, purpose and strategy. Getting clear sometimes means making tough choices and letting go of things we value. It sometimes means conflict, as champions of different alternatives lobby for what they believe is right. The most important first step in getting clarity is naming the unresolved questions and finding a life-giving way to find resolution. We also need to distinguish between unresolved questions and things that are too new or nascent to make decisions about. As we make clear choices, like pruning an overgrown tree, what we let go of most often makes room for healthy growth.

**Congruence** – Perhaps it's obvious that messages must resonate with their intended audience. But I've found most organizations with unclear messaging pay more attention to their own resonance than that of their clients. They talk about what they care about in language that they understand best. Effective messaging reaches intended audiences at the intersection of what they and the organization care about (shared values and desires) in language that communicates to both sides. Going on a journey to discover these shared values and language can be an eye-opening, in some cases life-changing experience.

Engaging internal stakeholders with messaging is the other side of the external messaging coin. Many companies think it is expedient to create messages at the top, and force compliance on the rest of the organization. Not many organizations can actually pull this off. So, it's important that when new messages are developed that the organization takes internal stakeholders along during the process. This allows the messages to be developed in a way that feels authentic to those who must deliver them on a routine basis.



**Consistency** –One of the first questions I ask employees when I begin working with their organization is how they describe what they do. Before going through a messaging or branding process, most employees describe their work in their own terms – often sending completely different messages. Messaging – and internal alignment of resources – becomes more clear and effective when everyone shares the same means of describing the organization, work and its benefits. Consistency means saying the same things and saying them consistently over time. For maximum impact, core messages must be used for a period of years to reach full visibility. It's important to make conscious distinctions between core messages and messages that can and must change more frequently.

Does clear messaging sound like a lot of work? It's definitely more than word-play and spin! Great messages are more than words deep. But the rewards come back in the form of new customer relationships, increased sales, more grant opportunities (if you're a non-profit) and more. If you feel you're missing opportunities because your messaging isn't right, ask yourself:

- Are we clear about what our messages should be? (Hint: Have you created a written core messaging document?)
- Are we speaking about the things our audiences care about in language that they understand?
- Are we sending the same message and giving our messages enough time to be heard and remembered?

If you'd like to know more about how we can assist you in developing and communicating effective messages, please contact us.



Kathleen Hosfeld is the President of Hosfeld & Associates, Inc. Since 1989, Hosfeld & Associates' marketing expertise and services have launched, grown and inspired visionary for-profit and non-profit organizations and projects. We help clients think more clearly and boldly about their goals. We provide the skills and resources clients need to implement breakthrough strategies for profitability, service, and contribution. For more information, please visit <http://www.hosfeld.com>