

Conveying the Essence of Your Organization

BY KELLI B. NEWMAN, APR

Nonprofit organizations are very good at communicating facts and figures: the number of constituents they serve each year, how long they have been in existence, the geographical reach of their service area and, of course, the logistics of what they do. All of that is important content for an annual report, but when it comes to engaging the public, statistics messaging is not enough to inspire donors and increase funding.

Rather, focus on the unique essence of your organization—the philosophies that shape what it does, why it does what it does and how that benefits the community it serves. This is Essence MessagingSM. (See Figure 1.) Your organization has its own purpose (mission), ideology (philosophy and principles) and culture (personality). Together, these elements define its unique essence. The challenge is how to effectively articulate these defining qualities in distinguishing your organization from other like organizations and, more importantly, to motivate support.

Figure 1. Essence Messaging



Step 1: Define the “Why” of Your Organization or Specific Initiative

You may be familiar with Simon Sinek, who teaches a graduate course in strategic communications at Columbia University in New York and is the author of *Start With Why* (Portfolio Trade, 2011, reprint edition). Sinek’s premise is that organizations make a mistake when they focus their messages on what they do and how they do it rather than on why they do what they do—articulating their purpose, cause or belief. Inspired leaders and organizations, Sinek says, communicate from the inside out of what he calls the Golden Circle, where “why” is at the center of his communication model.



“People don’t buy what you do, they buy why you do it,” Sinek says. Although he is using a for-profit reference, the same principle applies to why donors support a nonprofit.

Child Advocates of Fort Bend (www.cafb.org), located just outside Houston, is an excellent model of Sinek’s principle. The following are among the organization’s “what”:

- For every Fort Bend County child in Child Protective Services custody, provides a specially trained volunteer who advocates for the child’s emotional, physical and educational needs in court.
- For children under age three in foster care, services include support that ensures pediatric visits, health screenings, court appearances and collaboration among agencies.
- For youth (ages 14–18), the organization’s WINGS project mentors teens in foster care to actively plan for successful and productive adult living.

These are admirable and substantive services, to be sure, but when you visit the organization’s homepage, what you learn first, because it is positioned front and center, is the why: “We provide a voice for abused and neglected children because we believe that every child has the right to a safe and permanent home.” Child Advocates starts with the “why.”

To articulate the why of your organization, examine its purpose. What need was it created to meet? What was the original intent of its formation? You may not find the answer in the global language of a mission statement, but the why is certainly the mission your organization’s founding was based on.

Step 2: Identify the Genuine Emotion in Your Organization or Initiative's Story

The why of what a nonprofit does engages the emotion of its story. That is important because scientific research has determined that emotion is biologically indispensable to people's ability to make decisions, including decisions to make donations.

Dr. Antonio Damasio, chair of neuroscience at the University of Southern California (USC) and director of the USC College Brain and Creativity Institute, is internationally recognized for his studies of emotion and reason in the human brain, especially how emotions function to guide actions. In fact, his research has determined that decision making is highly dependent on emotions. In a study of patients whose brain damage blocked their ability to generate emotional responses, Damasio found that it also had disturbed their ability to make decisions. Emotions are triggers for decisions and key to creating a desire to give.

There are three important components to successfully engaging the power of emotion in your messaging:

- Any emotion you draw on must be genuine. Donors have become weary of gratuitous emotional appeals. Yes, emotion is a powerful tool for motivating a desire to give, but it is essential that it sincerely conveys the impact your organization has on the lives of those it serves.
- Focus on impact. This may seem obvious, but organizations that get stuck in communicating what they do and how they do it sometimes rely too heavily on statistics to convey results. The motivating factor of emotion is in the impact your services have on people's lives and the needs they fill.
- Be strategic in deciding who delivers your message. Just as it is important that the emotion of your message be genuine, it also must be delivered by someone who is sincere, passionate and credible.

Step 3: Convey the Unique Experience Your Organization Delivers

The "experience factor" is another important component of messaging. Some consultants recommend that organizations distinguish themselves through a brand promise—what the organization stands for. Certainly, defining an ideology is important, and incorporating those ideals into an organization's policies is valuable. You need to differentiate your organization from its competition through the unique experience it delivers.

This is particularly relevant in healthcare. Often, healthcare organizations focus on the state-of-the-art equipment they own or the number of sophisticated procedures they perform each year. These are certainly important indicators of expertise, but reciting an inventory of capabilities is not engaging. Articulating an organization's unique philosophy of care—and how that translates into what patients and families experience—is.

Like other healthcare systems headquartered in the Texas Medical Center, Houston Methodist opened a hospital in the thriving district of West Houston. Messaging for the Houston Methodist West Hospital Birthing Center (www.houstonmethodist.org/BirthingCenter) was formulated in advance of producing online video to distinguish its services both narratively and visually. The storyline revealed the hospital's commitment to customizing its family-centered care to a mother's preference and achieving optimal bonding through couplet care, which keeps mother and newborn together with one nurse attending to both their postpartum and well-baby needs. Parents of multiples that require the hospital's sophisticated neonatal care experience the same commitment to bonding through side-by-side ICU rooms that convert into one. The messaging interwove the center's board-certified expertise with the experience its philosophy of care was designed to deliver.

This approach is particularly important to creating a compelling online experience.

Step 4: Communicate Messages Through In-Person Experiences

Suppose you take experiencing an organization's unique messages one step further. What in-person messaging experience can you create for supporters? It can be particularly effective in motivating funders.


In their book *The Experience Economy*, Joseph Pine and James Gilmore describe the competitive advantage of providing "customers" with a compelling experience. They stress that "creating experiences is not so much about entertaining customers as it is engaging them." To engage an audience is to effect action—a prime objective of Essence Messaging.

What messages do donors, key influencers and potential volunteers experience at your organization? "Experience staggers," as described by Pine and Gilmore, "develop a list of impressions they wish guests to take away and then think creatively about different themes and storylines that will bring the impressions together in one cohesive narrative."

Take the opportunity to engage all five senses in conveying your messages. The more sensory an experience, the more memorable it will be. Just think about what the aroma of Starbucks coffee has done for the Barnes & Noble experience. To again use Houston Methodist West Hospital as an example, each time a new baby is born in its Birthing Center, "Brahms' Lullaby" is broadcast throughout the unit—not the commonplace sound of "Happy Birthday." The tender melody reinforces the essence of the center's care philosophy and evokes a much more emotional experience.

While educating donors and other supporters is serious, an element of entertainment makes lasting impressions. Pine and Gilmore use the term "edutainment." The goal is to be engaging.

The essence of an organization—its purpose, ideology and culture—is what makes it unique. When you formulate messaging that successfully articulates your organization's why and the philosophies that shape what it does, incorporates the genuine emotion of its impact and allows supporters to experience how it benefits

the constituents it serves, you motivate action. And for nonprofits, that's what it is all about. 

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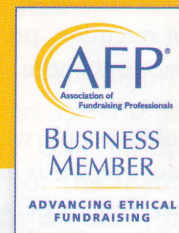
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