

Message Development



Dave Carter

Bald Eagle along Drawyer Creek



Message Development: Overview

Effectively communicating your issue to your target audience is probably the most important component of a winning community campaign. Understanding your audience, developing your message, refining it, delivering it, and repeating it are vital to effective communications. We can boil this process down to three steps:

Step 1: Identify our Audience.

Step 2: Develop a message for our audience.

Step 3: Deliver this message to our audience over and over again.



Dave Carter

Blackbird Creek along Delaware Rt. 9



Identifying Our Audience

Identifying our target audience(s) is a key first step to any successful grassroots advocacy campaign. This is the person, persons, or government agency or legislative body you are trying to persuade. In order to do this, determine who is clearly on our side. Next determine who is definitely **not** on our side.

Those that are left are the undecided, and they can be persuaded to move to our position. It is this undecided group that should be our main target audience. (An exception is if you are seeking action or trying to increase support from those already on your side, such as with other SNCCA members.)



Getting to know this audience is the next step. We must understand the attitudes and biases of those you hope to influence. We need to know as many of the relevant points about our audience as we can. We should know what our audience thinks, feels, needs, and wants. However, do not rely on stereotypes of the audience. Talk to real people to gain information and test ideas. Knowing this information is important because it will help you manage your time and resources most effectively.

Elected Officials

When targeting undecided elected officials, you should carefully review their voting record and constituency base. This includes exploring their votes on similar types of legislation, the demographics of their district, and even their list of campaign contributors. These can be very different between the districts in northern and southern New Castle County. This information will help you identify where on the undecided spectrum this particular legislator likely falls.

Remember that elected officials represent their constituents, so much of the time you are targeting elected officials, you will be targeting the general public as well. Elected officials will often wait to gauge public opinion before making a decision on an issue.

Another indirect audience will be the legislative staff. These people play a major role in the decisions of their boss. Busy elected officials often rely on their aids to research issues and make initial recommendations. Do not underestimate the influence staff have, even if they appear very young or inexperienced.



The General Public

The undecided public is considered the “swing.” This swing is usually not constant; it will vary some from issue to issue. Here are some examples of possible target audiences.

Possible Target Audiences

Registered voters
Woman with Children
Taxpayers
Retired Persons or Senior Citizens
Baby Boomers
People of Color
Birdwatchers
Hunters
Fisherman

Teachers
Outdoor Recreation Enthusiasts
Health Professionals
Small Business Owners
Labor Unions
Homeowners
Farmers
Faith-Based Groups
Developers

It is extremely valuable to have a good network within your community so that you can reach out to these audiences. In other words, get to know and maintain relationships with these folks. You will need to do this in order to test messages and gain insight and understanding.

The Press

The media often serves as a liaison to the general public and to elected officials. Therefore, the press has a significant place in our community advocacy efforts and is always a target audience.



Developing Our Message

Our Message is what will persuade someone to support our cause. Determining how to frame the issue to garner support for our position is critical. The way we communicate about the issue to the media, elected officials, and the public must be consistent, appealing, and persuasive. How we frame the issue to them is known as the “message.” Developing, polishing, delivering, and repeating our message are the fundamentals of effective communication.

Define Our Audience

Any successful grassroots community advocacy campaign must first define its audience – the person, persons, group, or legislative body we are attempting to influence. An effective grassroots message is one that resonates with the people we are trying to convince. Our message may differ slightly for each of our audiences. Keep in mind that if legislators, such as County Council, are our target, we must target the public as well. Elected officials wait to hear from constituents before they take action.

What’s in a message?

- ***Explanation.*** It must answer the questions, “Why care?”
- ***Expression.*** It conveys in basic terms that we share the audience’s values.
- ***Integrity.*** It is in line with the organization’s mission and goals.
- ***Accuracy.*** It contains facts, which lend credibility and provide a framework. Don’t exaggerate!

Do Research on Our Audience and Opponents

Consider the results of public opinion polls and focus groups. Doing your own polling is costly, so use information from existing research. Check on the Internet and with other local civic organizations to see if they will share any recent polling or research information they may have. This research will help us identify the themes and messages that best resonate with voters and, through them, hopefully reach elected officials.

Research your opponent and your opponent’s message as well. Your message should contrast with theirs. Every time you talk about yourself, talk about your opponents as well. By saying who and what we are about, we are defining the differences between our opposition and us. Demonstrate how our opponents don’t take responsibility for the damage they do to our quality of life and how, at the same time, we are doing our work from the heart and for the greater good. Show the trail of money our opposition is following; this makes a big impression with the public. However, be careful not to come across as mean; always deliver our message in a respectful, credible way. Stating the truth about our opponent is usually harsh enough to do its own damage.

