



What the Heck Are You Trying to Say?

Why are nonprofits so bad at delivering messages? What's the remedy?

By Max T. Russell

One of the most obvious problems in nonprofit organizations is cloudy messaging. I'm going to give you some concrete tips on fixing that. I've been evaluating nonprofit messages during the past 16 months and have found only four cases in which the messages were delivered clearly and properly. (I know I haven't see everyone's messages, but I've seen many.)

So, what's the problem? Why are nonprofits so bad at composing messages to supporters, volunteers, and partners? Well, most businesses are just as bad at marketing. In fact, most businesses don't really market. They may run ads, but that's not necessarily marketing. I'm talking about *predisposing people to buy or buy into what you're "selling."*

Let's start with deciding what the heck you're trying to say. When my kids were in elementary school, struggling with writing a good paragraph, I would ask them to tell me what they wanted to say — in one sentence. No fancy language. Nothing for the teacher. Just raw thoughts. "What do you want to say?"

Then out came the words. "I want to say that I like going to the park on Saturdays because my friends are there and we get to stay for a long time."

"OK," I would say, "write that." And they would, and the rest of the writing would follow in clear fashion. Nothing super classy. No world record being set. But it was basically perfect and pleased the teacher.

Few nonprofits do that. In an effort to say something meaningful, they get lost in momentous verbiage and too many concepts. I have to dig two thirds of the way down into the letter, the e-mail, or whatever to isolate their intended point.

Nobody needs a fancy message from you. People need to know why the heck you want them to read or watch or donate, and they need to know it NOW.

“In only four cases were messages delivered clearly.”

“Does each sentence pull the reader into the next one?”

Establish a reputation for getting to the point fast. Headlines go a long way toward this: "Measles No More: All Local Neighborhoods Declared Clean."

Or a headline can tease the reader into the story by revealing part of the main idea: "They Said Measles Couldn't Be Stopped. They Underestimated Your Determination."

Neither of these headlines, which are possibilities among millions, is creative. You merely have to ask yourself what you're trying to say and then say it. Then briefly edit your words and get away from them for an hour or maybe a day, and check them again.

Answer these questions: Is your main idea up front where the reader can judge the value of reading further? Does the headline or subject line compel the reader into the opening sentence? If you're telling a story about the measles outbreak that terrified parents and schools, does each sentence pull the reader into the next one? If so, that's perfect, because each next sentence rewards the reader, until the whole point has unfolded in a delightful — or at least interesting — fashion.

Before you send out a message, ask people you trust to look it over and tell you whether you're being clear. In the next issue, I'll give you more tips for being clear from the start. 



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