



Developing Key Messages for Effective Communication

Purpose	This tool provides guidance for developing key messages that can be used for writing a variety of communication materials, such as press materials, talking points, speeches, and social media posts.
Format	This tool describes the importance of key messages, elements to consider when developing them, and the process for developing key messages.
Audience	This tool is primarily designed for researchers from the Model Systems that are funded by the National Institute on Disability, Independent Living, and Rehabilitation Research (NIDILRR). It can be adapted by other NIDILRR grantees and the general public.
Resources	Additional resources on collaborating with the media are identified at the end of this document.

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Guidance for Developing Key Messages

What are key messages and why are they important?

- Key messages are the main points of information you want your audience to hear, understand, and remember. They are bite-sized summations that articulate what you do, why you do it, how you are different, and what value you bring to stakeholders.
- Key messages clarify meaning and provide the takeaway headline of the issue you want to communicate.
- Key messages are important because they serve as the foundation of an organization's branding and marketing efforts and should be reflected in all written and spoken communications.
- Communications cannot always be controlled, but key messages can. They help you to:
 - Prioritize and define information;
 - Ensure consistency, continuity and accuracy;
 - Measure and track success; and
 - Stay focused when speaking with the media or stakeholders.

What are the attributes of good key messages?

Effective key messages are:

- **Concise:** Focus on three to five key messages per topic; write one to three sentences for each key message; should be read or spoken in 30 seconds or less.
- **Strategic:** Define, differentiate, and address benefits.
- **Relevant:** Balance what you need to communicate with what your audience needs to know.
- **Compelling:** Design meaningful information to stimulate action.
- **Simple:** Use easy-to-understand language; avoid jargon and acronyms.
- **Memorable:** Ensure that messages are easy to recall and repeat; avoid long, run-on sentences.
- **Real:** Use active voice, not passive; do not use advertising slogans.
- **Tailored:** Communicate effectively with different target audiences by adapting language and depth of information.



How do you create key messages?

Ideally, developing key messages should be done through a three-phase process:

Phase 1: Brainstorm key message concepts with internal stakeholders.

- Whenever possible, work with your organization's communication staff to hold a key message development brainstorm session. Include internal stakeholders who ultimately need to approve the key messages.
- Make sure the person facilitating the brainstorm has access to flip charts, white boards, or smart boards to capture essential words, phrases, and explanations that can be used in the key messages.
- As you begin the brainstorm, gather core information that will help guide the message development process:
 - Identify your communication goals. The key messages should support these goals.
 - Identify your messaging needs, and consider whether they are long-term or support a specific offering, issue, situation, or combination of topics.
 - Consider the people in your target audience. What do they need and want to hear from you? Do you have multiple target audiences? If so, tailor key messages to each group.
- After you identify your communication goals, message needs, and target audience, then you can develop key messages by answering the following questions. Try to keep your answers concise and avoid using technical jargon.
 - What overarching message do you want to tell the target audience about your issue, product, service, organization, or research finding?
 - Why is this overarching message important to them?
 - Why is it unique or different?
 - Why would the target audience care to know this information?
 - What are the benefits and value proposition? Think about the WIFM (what's in it for me) for the target audience.
 - What are the barriers or challenges? Develop the messages around these issues.
- As you answer the questions, prove your points with supporting information to substantiate, distinguish, and add credibility. Presenting facts, figures, and statistics; quoting authorities; telling stories; and using visuals can be effective.
- Conclude the message brainstorm session by achieving no more than five key messages and have supporting points for each of them.



Phase 2: Refine draft key messages.

After the brainstorm session, refine the draft versions of the key messages by reviewing them with the following questions in mind:

- Do they support your communication goals?
- Can you or your organization “own” them, or can they be applied to competitors as well?
- When read out loud, do they sound conversational?
- Can you simplify the language or make statements more concise?
- Do they motivate the target audience to act?

Phase 3: Test, finalize, and routinely update key messages.

- After you refine the draft versions of the key messages, test those messages to ensure that they resonate with internal and external audiences. This test should also include people in your target audience. Work with public affairs or communications staff from your organization to conduct this outreach and message testing.
- Incorporate feedback from internal and external audiences and finalize the key messages. Work with your communications staff to ensure that internal stakeholders approve the final key messages.
- Over time, routinely revisit the key messages to ensure that they still meet your needs and those of the audience, and that they reflect current trends, research, and issues your organization and research program are addressing.

Sources:

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