



Bringing Your Message to the People: Messaging as Part of your Organizing Work

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Traditionally, messaging, branding and advertising have been perceived as part of corporate America's strategies. We're activists, not marketing experts. We organize with the coins collected in a coffee can, not the billion dollars advertising budgets of our opponents. This often leaves our movement with the sentiment that if we can just prove that we're right through facts and figures, then everyone will come to their senses and fight for justice. Since that hasn't happened, we should consider revisiting this essential component of successful organizing, and figure out how we can do it well and make it work for us.

Powerful and effective messaging is not born out of facts or figures. It is created by appealing to the core values of people just like us, but who may not see themselves as a part of this movement. Our work is about protecting and enhancing the livelihood, health and well being of hardworking families, and our messages should express nothing less.

The Complicated Put Simply

Many activists helped stop the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) from allowing a proposal to have private companies test pesticides on children and pregnant women in 2007. More than 80,000 individuals joined CHEJ in the fight to halt that deal in its tracks. Over 70% of federal Senators joined in as well. What was it that catalyzed this momentum? Simply put, it was an effective message: *"We Don't Test Pesticides on Pregnant Women and Children."* This message appealed to the most basic of human beliefs about a core value system, and it begs the response, "well, of course we don't." It also explicitly stated what we were fighting for.

Another example of simple messaging comes from groups in Florida where local activists opposed plans by EPA to allow raw sewage mixed with heavy rainfall to bypass waste water treatment and be dumped directly into rivers that serve as a source of drinking water. Given the two statements below, what message do you think got more attention from the general population, *"Vote No on Sewage Blending!"* or *"No Poo Poo in our Drinking Water!"* These statements don't convey the same thing to the non-expert. Sewage blending is a technical term that sounds harmless. The second message says what sewage blending actually is, and gets through to the least technical person in a quick and compelling way. You want a statement like this that sends a clear message to the public, and you never want to use your opponent's words because it reinforces their message.

To successfully advocate for a healthy community, we must have many tools in our toolbox, including well-researched alternatives, credible science, and technical experts. But of equal or greater importance are lots of people, usually for meetings, a petition or a key vote. We do not need to educate a thousand people on the technical information surrounding sewage blending or pesticide testing and regulations. We simply need to tell them a story that gets them to say “*Oh No, Not in My Backyard.*”

Memes and the People Who Love Them

According to *smartMeme* (www.smartmeme.org), a meme (pronounced meem) is: “A unit of self-replicating cultural transmission (ex. ideas, slogans, melodies, symbols) that spreads virally from brain to brain. A meme often operates as a container, anchor or carrier for a larger more complex story.”

One of the oldest memes used by our opponents is NIMBY, or Not In My Backyard. A true self-replicating meme, NIMBY was created by the PR firms hired by the polluters and was cleverly used to marginalize the leaders of thousands of local struggles. The power of this meme is that it has longevity, it says what it means to say, you can remember it, and people can see themselves within it. Those not involved in a local struggle can be persuaded by this meme into thinking that local activists are selfish and community-centric. It implies “I don’t care where it goes so long as it’s not in my backyard.”

Thus, a successful meme conveys the essence of what you are fighting for, and when done well, it carries life and power way beyond how you ever used it. The details come after the meme. In debating our opponents, we often go toe-to-toe on the science and the process, and we often forget to reach those not yet involved in a creative, simple way that gets to the heart of what they care about, and not inundate them with so many details that they go running for the hills.

In 2006, grassroots groups used some great memes to win their fights. The Coal River Mountain Watch group is fighting mountain top removal in their communities and to block a proposal for a new coal silo next to an elementary school. CRMW adopted the meme: “*Remembering the Past, Working for the Future.*” It respects the deep heritage of West Virginia coal mining, while conveying what the group is working for – a healthier economy and environment. River Rescue, of Peoria, Illinois adopted the meme “*Enough is Enough!*” to halt the Peoria Disposal Company’s proposal to triple the size of its hazardous waste landfill. This meme simply stated what the group stood for, which was that they would not accept any more pollution in their already overburdened community.

Message, Message, Message - Say it Again and Again

Consistent use of the same meme is a critical factor in successful messaging. Your main meme (e.g. Enough is Enough!) becomes the central idea or theme for all your outreach materials and activities. It must be a short (less than 12 words), declarative,



and believable statement that addresses your target audience. It should be repeated over and over through the life of the campaign.

Messages can be followed by three supporting points that reinforce its' importance, uniqueness and believability. For instance here is a sample message.

**Enough is Enough!
No More Landfills in Libertyville**

- ▶ Libertyville has a full landfill that will be in our community for generations and has already reduced property values in the town.
- ▶ Landfill gases pose serious health threats to nearby residents and to the environment.
- ▶ Traffic on already congested Route 123 will increase by 40% if this expansion is approved.

These three simple points appeal to the core values of most people: livelihood, health and quality of life.

Crafting a Winning Story

Messaging is much like story telling. To be effective, your story should be told through a consistent voice, enforce a value-based theme, and speak to a specific audience. The story itself should have the following aspects.

- Highlight one conflict and make the choice plain and clear.
- Use sympathetic characters, i.e. the local farmer or the young child.
- Show what you mean by appealing to the values of your target audience.
- Offer your alternative vision. Is your group advocating going back to the Stone Age, or looking towards a vibrant, healthy, forward-thinking community?

Effective messaging helps make your group a visible, compelling, well researched and persuasive advocate for a healthier tomorrow.

