

9 Ways to Make a Powerful Impression

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COMMUNICATIONS

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Why 9 Ways to Make a Powerful Impression?

Are your communications clear, meaningful, and on message? Fantastic—you're ahead of the pack. You can lengthen that lead by using one or more of these strategies—any of them will put extra punch into websites, email blasts, newsletters, reports, and other communications.

We put these methods to work every day for our clients—businesses and nonprofits alike. While not every one is appropriate for every occasion or organization, we encourage you to try something that feels like a stretch. Strategies that challenge you to think differently often have the greatest potential for making your communications more powerful.

Take a chance—as many of our clients have found, you can generate a new level of enthusiasm for what you do, both inside and outside your organization.

Good luck!

The Thinkshifters

1. Take a Stand

A strong, clear position sets you apart from the waffling crowd and builds your brand.

Why?

It strengthens key audiences' attachment to you.

It makes you quotable.

It helps you stand out.

Tips

Be brave. Positions no one would argue with don't constitute a stand.

Express values your organization lives up to.

Don't hedge. If you take a stand, take it fully.

Taking a stand is integral to advocacy organizations, but businesses often shy away from it. That's too bad, because taking a stand—on a social issue, a controversy, or a budding concern in your field—can help you build a devoted core of customers and supporters as well as gain media attention.

For example, Patagonia's 2012 "Don't Buy This Jacket" campaign for Cyber Monday directly challenged the post-Thanksgiving shopping juggernaut and put the company's core sustainability values front and center. It probably didn't sell clothes (it wasn't intended to), but when you really need outdoor gear, what brand will you buy? Another case, this one a classic: The Body Shop's stand against animal testing became a key part of its brand identity and helped drive growth as well as create real pressure for change in its industry.

One caveat: if you adopt this strategy, put a stake in the ground—"We love kittens" won't earn you any stand-up points. It may feel risky, but making core values part of your marketing can be liberating. Entrepreneurial businesses and nonprofits typically are founded by people who see a problem and have a passion for solving it. Taking a stand pulls that passion into your communications.

2. Be Yourself

Letting your organization's personality come through helps show how you're different.

Why?

Your organization will seem driven by people, not a template.

Your communications will be distinctive.

Communications become a joy, not a burden. Producing roboprose is an energy-draining endeavor; natural language taps your true passions.

Tips

Battle the conditioning that leads many organizations to blot out signs of individuality.

Interview colleagues and draw on their phrasing.

Assess the typical communication style in your field. Then do something different.

People often believe they need to talk about their service, product, field, or issue just like everyone else does. They fear that if they don't, they'll seem out of the loop or not as smart as everyone else. Frankly, this makes little sense. How many organizations can you name that have achieved a big impact by meekly following the crowd? And how can you convince people you're different if you sound just like your competition?

We say let your freak flag fly. At least sound like your organization is run by humans—humans who want to talk to other humans. When you tell someone at a cocktail party what you do, what do you say? Use those words. And fight the pressure to run marketing copy through the organizational blanding mill until every unusual word, vernacular phrase, and colorful comment is ground away.

One of our clients, the Silicon Valley finance consulting firm RoseRyan, has gone all in with this strategy. For instance, emails promoting their thought leadership use colorful language in the firm's brand voice: "Excuse me, your cash leak is showing" and "Silicon Valley is no place for bean counters," to name just two examples. If these lines don't sound like they came from an accountant, that's the point. In a marketplace crowded with national firms, RoseRyan—a small, local shop—stands out. Proof of success is that tests of their emails show snappy subject lines are more popular than dull ones.

3. Be Provocative

Challenging received wisdom or jolting people out of complacency can create a buzz and show leadership.

Why?

It sparks conversation.
Unexpected perspectives get people talking.

It's fun. Saying what you really think gives you zest for telling your organization's story.

Tips

Be sure you support your claims.

Balance the negative with the positive.
If you're just a downer, you may turn people off.

Focus on the big stuff.
Pointing out that the emperor has no clothes is a civic duty; saying his new haircut makes him look 10 years older is petty.

Questioning conventional approaches in your field, prodding people to re-examine assumptions, or pointing out naked emperors can be one of the quickest ways to grab attention and establish a thought leadership position.

Ears in any audience perk up when New Resource Bank President and CEO Vince Siciliano asks the question, "Do you know where your money spends the night?" Most people don't consider (or would rather not think about) what their bank does with their deposits, and even if they do, many assume they don't have positive options. By asking this provocative question—which New Resource has also used in a campaign connected with "move your money," in ads and on its event banner—the bank gets people to think about taking control of how their money is used.

Provocation for its own sake will seem like a cheap ploy. But if you have strong support for a controversial position or a good reason to blast people out of complacency, do it. Even if people disagree or feel uncomfortable, you'll earn respect for making them think.

4. Go for Bold

A bold visual identity amplifies your message and makes a distinctive statement.

Why?

You'll stand out in a crowd.

The confidence it expresses will enhance your brand.

Boldness tells people you're groundbreaking.

Tips

Reach beyond your field for a visual statement that sets you apart.

A bold visual identity doesn't mean garish or loud. Bold can be spare—and often it should be.

In a world full of great graphic design, a professional look is the minimum standard for credibility. If you want to stand out from the crowd, go for a bold identity.

That might mean intense colors, unusual formats, striking graphics, or looking completely different from everyone else in your field. How far you go depends on the conventions you're working within—in most cases you'll want to break the mold, not pulverize it.

Method is the shining example in the sustainability world. The cleaner cleaning products company made a splash in a hard-to-crack market dominated by corporate behemoths with alluring modern product design. Method gave the most pedestrian of products a hint of glamour, and its packages command attention on shelves full of tired-looking, often ugly competitors.

One caution: bold visuals not only make your brand more memorable, they amplify your message and draw people in—so be sure your words are as strong as your design. Bland, generic prose paired with bold design can communicate that you're all hat, no cowboy.

5. Be on Message

Communicating clearly and consistently about your organization and your work creates a lasting impression.

Why?

It increases staff confidence in talking about your work.

It strengthens your identity and makes you more memorable.

It supports a long sales process.

Tips

Make sure the messaging feels authentic.

Train people in using the messaging—practice leads to use.

Communicate the benefits of using approved messaging.

Good messaging is the foundation of powerful communications. It provides a crisp and compelling explanation of what you're all about (especially important if you have a complex or novel product or service). It makes it easy for everyone in your organization to speak clearly and confidently about your work (which expands your marketing reach). And it makes your organization more memorable (it's hard for anyone to remember what you do if they've heard it described three different ways).

What is good messaging? It's concrete—it creates a clear picture of what you're doing. It's relatable—it's in plain language and relates new ideas to things people already understand. It's catchy—it's easy to remember and say. And it's flexible—it's readily adaptable to the person using it, the communication channel, and the audience.

Hitting all those marks is just part one, though. We've found in creating messaging platforms for a range of clients that follow-up support is key to realizing full benefits. It's essential that top executives embrace the messaging enthusiastically, that everyone understands the benefits of using the messaging, and that people get training in using the messaging in real-life situations.

Do all this and you'll have powerful messaging—people throughout the organization will use it, it will get picked up in media coverage, and audiences will respond to it.

6. Tell a Story

**Stories pull people in like nothing else can
and make accomplishments memorable.**

Why?

People are trained
(possibly hardwired)
to remember stories.

Stories help people
relate to what you do.

Compelling stories
help you get media
attention.

Tips

Make it personal.
Have a central character
your audience will
relate to or be
fascinated by.

Character counts.
Don't just recount
the plot—include
feelings, intuitions,
or drive.

Remember the moral.
Spell out how the
story expresses your
mission or value.

Stories are the oldest form of “mass” communication, and some researchers think we’re hardwired to respond to them. We’re certainly trained to draw messages from stories—think Aesop’s fables and classic novels—and that makes them invaluable for marketing communications.

Stories have a plot with a beginning, middle, and end; crisis (or challenge) and resolution; and characters. High-tech companies have long recognized the value of the founder’s story—so much so that the inventor developing breakthrough technology in his garage (naysayers be damned!) has become a cliché.

And there seems to be an endless appetite for stories of improbable success. That’s why, when telling the story of fair trade clothing manufacturer Indigenous for our client RSF Social Finance, we started with the founders’ early days picking burrs out of handknit South American sweaters. It’s a memorable image that shows how far the company has come—Indigenous now produces a full line of premium fashion knits sold under its own label and through major brands—and illustrates the company’s commitment to its artisan supply chain.

7. Focus on People

Highlighting people and how you help them brings your products and services to life.

Why?

It establishes a personal connection.

It aids credibility when others sing your praises.

It puts a human face on your organization.

Tips

Use real quotations— words that people actually said.

Photos that show faces and feature people engaged in an activity make the strongest connections.

People like to read about people; keeping them front and center makes your organization come alive and encourages others to consider you, buy from you, and stay with you.

For instance, a success story featuring someone from your target audience says, “If this person likes it, I will too.” Testimonials from satisfied customers—with quotes that don’t sound canned—also make that kind of connection.

Giving staff and executives a voice—and permission to speak like humans, not robots—is another way to put people in the picture (and it’s essential for successful social media outreach). Provocative thought pieces; apt quotes in articles, press releases, and on your website; and Q&As in your emails or sales kit can help form bonds with your audience. Executive messages crafted by committee or written by staff without executive input won’t cut it.

Customer voices are especially effective in conveying the benefits of new technologies and approaches, which face a high skepticism barrier. For example, our client Powerit Solutions uses robust customer stories as a core tool in selling its advanced energy management technology. We let the customers explain in their own words how the technology works and deliver business results.

8. Hit a Nerve

Striking an emotional chord increases your chances of getting people to engage with you.

Why?

It shows people that you know them, which makes them more confident in you.

People will feel what you're saying, not just hear it.

It startles people out of complacency and prompts action.

Tips

Find out what people do, not just what they say. What people act on is the true sign of what motivates them.

Speak directly to your audience. Your pitch is about them, not you.

Address the emotional component—how this problem (or desire) makes them feel, and how they will feel after engaging with you.

Marketing gurus often talk about identifying your audience's "pain" and showing that you can make it go away. You may prefer to speak to desires and aspirations, but the principle is the same: when you hit a nerve, you get attention. And when you get an emotional response, people are in a frame of mind to listen to your rational case.

Doing this well and consistently requires truly knowing your audience—what motivates them and what drives them crazy; what hems in their choices and what brings them rewards. Be cautious about assuming that you and your staff *get* your audience: even if you are demographic doppelgangers, you're operating with the tunnel vision of insider knowledge. Research as minimal as structured interviews with several target audience members will put you in a much better position to hit a nerve.

Our client Sage Consulting found the nerve by collaborating with the first group to go through its training program for healthcare workers on forming strong relationships with patients. Sage asked participants to talk about the reasons they entered the field and the factors leading to burnout; now the company incorporates that process into its training programs as a way of opening people up to a new approach. Sage also uses this audience knowledge in sales materials to raise—and answer—objections to the program that people might not state directly.

9. Sell the Dream

Describing how the world will be a better place if you succeed inspires people to engage with you.

Why?

Big ideas are inspiring.

It helps people in your organization stay motivated.

It communicates that you're ambitious.

Tips

Relate the vision to the work you're doing.

Paint a picture, if you can, of the ultimate result.

State the dream with pride—don't mince words. It's your dream; own it.

If you want to generate long-term support—and get people truly excited—you need to talk about your grand vision. As some of the most successful money raisers we've encountered point out, people invest more when they think they'll make a big difference.

Businesses are generally more willing to make grandiose claims than to state their vision—which is unfortunate, because claims can be contested but aspirations are unassailable. Nonprofits are more practiced at planting their flag on a high peak, but sometimes fail to plot the route from here to there. It's fine to have a vision that would take decades to achieve, but it should be clear to all how the work you're doing today contributes to that vision.

Communicating about a grand vision goes beyond repeating your mission statement like a mantra. Succinctly state your highest purpose. Paint a picture of how you will make the world better: How will people's lives, work, or environment improve? What will that look like? RSF Social Finance, for example, seeks to transform the way the world works with money—and we're helping them tell stories that illustrate how they're doing that.

Don't worry about seeming too ambitious. Maybe some people will roll their eyes, but no one ever gathered a big following with little dreams.