

Eleven Elements  
to Mold a  
Magnetic Message

How to Shape Your  
Story for the Press,  
Policymakers, and  
the Public

Ed Barks

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“From all the rest I single out you,  
having a message for you.”

Walt Whitman



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**H**ow many times have you seen an executive flub an interview on CNBC? What about that presentation you attended where the speaker droned on and on, never getting to the heart of the matter?

What causes these communications shortfalls? Often it is due to sloppy messaging. Amazing as it may seem, some executives fail to think through what they want to say in advance, or they lack the self-control to say it. As a result, they meander meaninglessly.

How can you and your organization avoid a similar reputation-bashing fiasco? By fashioning a magnetic message and mustering the discipline to stick to it.

That's easy to say, yet begs the question, how do you go about it? Sorry to tell you there is no easy, one-size-fits-all solution. It's challenging work. This resource is intended to provide you with a blueprint for your company's messaging efforts.

Some of these eleven elements to elicit a magnetic message are universal. Others may apply only in certain circumstances. It's up to your communications team, top executives, and the expert consultants you utilize to implement these steps correctly.

What are the 11 elements that can help you fortify your message development and delivery capabilities? Let's examine each so you can begin to implement this system right away.

## *1. Identify*

A magnetic message requires, first and foremost, a target audience. Identify those groups and individuals you need to reach and aim your communication toward them. Of course, this target is likely to change from issue to issue. For example, your company may plan release of a new product today while confronting a thorny public policy issue tomorrow. The upshot? Be sure to identify your prime audiences for each message you shape.

Address your audience with a foundation of four strong points, or legs—the main tenets you want to convey in your presentations, during your media interviews, and when visiting your elected officials.

Think of your message as similar to a sturdy, four-legged chair. If one of the chair legs is weak, it collapses, sending you crashing to the floor. So it is with your message. One weak point, and your communications efforts fall in a heap.

The fact is many companies neglect to create formal messages tailored to their key constituencies. Or if they do, the messaging is sometimes weak. Experience shows that

the size of the organization makes little difference. I have worked with smaller organizations possessing well-crafted messages and with Fortune 500 companies (and, sad to say, sometimes their PR agencies) who either have not thought things through properly or who are ignorant in message development techniques, resulting in abysmal communication with key groups.

## 2. Construct

Just as there are many ways to create a great tasting recipe, there is no universal best way to cook up a magnetic message. You need an internal communications staff or an external consultant experienced in message development to lead your company through the process.

That said, the fact is many an organization's messages lack two important legs. The first is context. We all tend to take our issues for granted since we deal with them day in and day out. Your target audience knows far less, so offer a framework to help them understand.

"My message is that there is tons of room at the top."

Margaret Thatcher

The second overlooked ingredient involves next steps. What do you expect your audience to do with your message? What call to action are you issuing? Unless your message is purely informational (a rarity), explain what you want them to do after consuming your quotes in a news article or listening to your speech.

## 3. Collaborate

Pay attention to who's in the room during your message development sessions. The composition of your team is likely to change for each issue. Some groups, for example, may include the CEO, regional vice presidents, issue experts, lawyers, communications staff, and relevant consultants. Other teams may involve just a few of these people or include those from other disciplines.

The important consideration is that everyone with a stake or special expertise needs to be there. Of equal importance, anyone superfluous to the issue should be kept out of the room. This helps you avoid too unwieldy a process.

Also, keep the sycophants away. You need executives and experts willing to lay their ideas on the line. As Hollywood producer Samuel Goldwyn said, "I don't want yes-men around me. I want everyone to tell the truth, even if it costs them their jobs."

## 4. Focus

There are no shortcuts to developing a magnetic message. Indeed, message development workshops can often be sweat-producing, heart-pounding, headache-inducing affairs.

You won't necessarily see fireworks and hear shouting (though some sessions can be intense). Still, honest and civil dissent should be viewed as productive.

To begin the process, devote some time to brainstorming or brainwriting. Begin to winnow the thoughts only when you have exhausted everyone's "blue sky" contributions.

"My message isn't  
perfectly defined."

Kanye West

And make sure to put your ideas on paper, so nothing gets lost in what is often a hectic procedure with ideas flying fast and furious.

To smooth out the process, choose a facilitator who can remain impartial in guiding your deliberations. This person could be someone inside

your organization who has no personal stake in the issue at hand or an outsider. Just be sure he understands and agrees that his role is solely to move the process forward, not to take part in substantive discussions.

## 5. Examine

Here's a quick review of some of the questions you'll need to address as you craft your message:

- Who is my audience?
- What are my goals and objectives for this campaign, issue, or crisis?
- What is the audience's current perspective and baseline of information?
- What matters to my audience and what benefits can they expect?
- What do they care about on an emotional level, and how can I connect with that?
- What do I want them to support, condemn, or take action upon?
- What is likely to motivate them to take action?
- Where are my vulnerabilities?
- Where is my data or proof weak, making me subject to attack?
- Which are the most concrete proof points I can offer?
- What facets of my personal background give me an edge in their eyes?
- What makes my contention better than my opposition's?
- What is the single best quotable quote I want them to recall and restate?

- How can I best transform them into disciples of my message?
- What “call to action” must I sound?

You'll be able to ignore some of these questions depending on your situation. And you will no doubt explore additional questions specific to your issue or industry. The important point is to unearth the concerns that put you on the fast lane of the message highway.

## 6. Flavor

The spoken word must contain some spice, so cook up some quotable quotes to support the four legs of your message. When skeptics say, “Prove it,” your quotable quotes need to do just that.

Let’s review some of the tools you have at your fingertips:

- Stories
- Numbers
- Extremes (the best, the first, the only)
- Case studies
- Ju jitsu (citing the opposition)
- Quotations from famous individuals
- Anecdotes
- Analogies
- Topics du jour
- Clichés
- Humor

“Apt words have power to  
suage the tumors of a  
troubled mind.”

John Milton

## 7. Fortify

There is no substitute for ongoing practice. Just as baseball players take swings in the batting cage before every game, the best media interview subjects and public speakers take practice seriously.

This preparation should occur both formally and informally. On a formal level, schedule regular communications training sessions with all of your spokespeople. Discuss your messaging to ensure they have internalized it. Then conduct a few practice rounds to confirm they can verbalize it. Your internal staff (assuming they have the wherewithal)

can handle some of these sessions, though it is helpful to bring in an experienced communications training consultant on critical issues and for the occasional tune up.

Informally, look for popup practice opportunities. You don't always need to devote the hours it takes to hold a formal training workshop. For instance, take those 10 minutes between meetings to review your message or develop a quotable quote for it. Toss questions at one another during random encounters around the water cooler. Develop quick-hitting scenarios you can accomplish via e-mail. For instance, pretend a reporter just called with a tough question; how would you use our message to respond?

The confidence gained during such exercises will help put some steel in your executives' spines when it comes to broadcasting your message during media interviews, presentations, and exchanges with elected officials.

## *8. Heed*

I guarantee this will happen at some point. It's human nature to tune out the familiar every now and again.

Internal experts lose their sway at times. Don't worry. It's probably not you. It's not your executives. It just happens over time. Being a prophet in your own land does have its drawbacks. How to handle this diminishing return?

I can best illustrate by sharing a story from my time in the association realm some years ago. We produced an internal media training program for our officers and other key members to help them better understand our organizational messages and to polish their communications skills. It was well received and empowered the organization with a more elegant and disciplined approach to media outreach. Nonetheless, at least once annually we brought in veteran media training consultants.

Why did we do this, given the success of our internal program? We found that a different voice—not necessarily better or worse, just different—helped our leaders grow as communicators. As an added benefit, when we needed to rein someone in, the consultant could frame things in terms more stark than we could (I did want to keep my job, after all). We had frank conversations with our consultants during the preparation phase, discussing what issues needed to be placed on the table and how best to address them.

## *9. Test*

Once you have achieved a first cut of your magnetic message, it is time to see if it can withstand rigorous questioning. What is the best way to test its attraction? Think of all the tough questions reporters, audience members, and public officials could toss at you. If your message responds successfully, you are in good shape.

It is vital that your preparations include practice dealing with hardballs. Going over questions in your mind is not enough. Simulate the real thing by having co-workers give you the third degree. Make the office skeptic a part of your routine. If one or more of your message points is responsive to the salvos of this cynic, you likely have attained the necessary magnetism.

Another method of testing your message is to seek reaction from trusted colleagues and peers outside your organization. This external criticism can provide you with the unvarnished insights you need before venturing into the real world.

For higher stakes opportunities, you may wish to consider more formal measurements, such as surveying key constituencies.

“When I use a word, ‘said Humpty Dumpty, in a rather scornful tone, ‘it means just what I choose it to mean—neither more nor less.’”

Lewis Carroll

## 10. Chronicle

Put your messages in writing—always, even if the issue seems fairly minor. This will aid greatly with your company’s message discipline and consistency. Keep it simple. There’s no need to waste time and energy doodling with an overly complicated diagram or trendy infographic (of course, it’s fine to develop such tools for outreach purposes after you’ve assured your message is ready for prime time).

Stick to a one-page document that highlights the four legs of your message. Below each main point, include bullet points that support your contentions and suggest quotable quotes. Sticking to this one-page format also helps you keep things streamlined, automatically instilling discipline that helps you avoid the verbal excess that afflicts so many organizations.

Revisit your message regularly, for it is a constantly evolving creature. There is no guarantee that today’s magnetic message will suffice tomorrow, so reexamine your message on a quarterly basis at a minimum, more often for rapidly shifting issues. The frequency depends on such factors as how swiftly your environment changes, the profile of the issue, and changes in your C-suite team or spokesperson roster.

Refuse the temptation to entrust your chief communications officer with remembering your messages. What happens when she departs or gets hit by a bus? There goes all your institutional memory. To emphasize, write it down, then revisit habitually.

## 11. Broadcast

You have a tool kit full of useful instruments available to you when getting your message out to the media, to target audiences, and to policymakers. Some fit in certain situations and not in others, so make some conscious decisions about what makes sense when. This list is by no means exhaustive, though it gives you a good starting point:

- Media interviews
- Speeches to industry conferences
- Presentations to clients and prospective clients
- Congressional testimony
- One-on-one “fly-in” visits with members of Congress
- News releases
- Written statements on breaking issues
- Editorial board visits
- Satellite media tours
- News conferences
- New media tools like Facebook, Pinterest, and Twitter
- Your web site
- Guest articles and op-eds for newspapers and trade publications
- Newsletters
- One-sheet leave behind for elected officials
- Organizational blogs
- Webinars

“During my years as a press secretary, I developed a powerful internal filter, which worked to strip all things ‘off message’ from my thoughts before they came out of my mouth.”

Dee Dee Myers,  
former White House press secretary

## *The Bottom Line*

Your company's reputation is next to impossible to rehabilitate, once tarnished. Shoddy messaging is one surefire way to sully that reputation.

“Have fun’ is my message. “

Jimmy Fallon

Let your competitors be the ones who deliver those embarrassing presentations, spew mealy-mouthed quotes to the press, and undermine their encounters with policymakers.

Crafting a magnetic message with four strong legs, holding a workshop to ensure you've got it right, involving the right people in its development, and bringing on board an expert consultant for critical issues goes a long way toward gaining victory for your company.

Also, don't forget to instill your executives with the discipline to deliver your message, road test it, and commit it to writing.

Follow these common sense guidelines. They can help your company raise the odds of achieving your long-term business goals and public policy objectives. Your reputation hangs in the balance.

## About the Author



As a communications training consultant and author, Ed Barks zeroes in on the messages and skills that executives need on a daily basis. As a result, they gain sharper verbal and nonverbal talents, greater confidence, more opportunities for career advancement, and achievement of long-term business goals.

He wrote the book about verbal and nonverbal communications, *The Truth About Public Speaking: The Three Keys to Great Presentations*, and the training guide, *Face the Press with Confidence: The Media Interview Companion*.

Ed contributes to leading industry journals and is the former “Speaking Sense” columnist for the *Washington Business Journal*. He has published numerous additional works such as “A Buyer’s Guide to Communications Training Consultants,” “How Important Are Nonverbal Signals?” and “Maximize Your Next Media Training: Best Practice Standards.”

He is also the author of the research reports *But Mom Told Me Never to Brag: Overcoming the Thought Leadership Hurdles*, *The Lasting Effects of Media Training: Lifelong Learning or Temporary Phenomenon?* and *Can We Talk Off the Record? Resolving Disagreements, Increasing Understanding Between Reporters and Public Relations Practitioners*.

Ed has taught more than 4800 business leaders, association executives, government officials, athletes, entertainers, non-profit executives, and communications and public affairs staff. His clients say he “knows how to elicit peak performance.” They call him “a master at connecting with his audience” and “an effective educator,” and give his communications training workshops “two thumbs up!”

He has served as President of Barks Communications since its founding in 1997. He also holds several other leadership roles including service on the Board of Governors of the National Press Club, the board of directors of the Institute for Management Consultants National Capital Region, and the faculty of the U.S. Chamber of Commerce Institute for Organization Management.

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