

# Eleven Elements to Model a Magnetic Message

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

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If you are looking for a fast route to sabotaging your reputation, I can think of no more direct path than neglecting your messaging efforts.

One messaging misstep and your reputation — one you have probably spent many years and much energy cultivating — is out the window. Good luck repairing it. That will prove a long, slow, painful — and sometimes unsuccessful — odyssey.

The reality is some executives fail to think through what they want to say in advance or they lack the willpower to say it. As a result, they meander meaninglessly.

This paper intends to help you avoid the mediocre messaging trap. It outlines 11 practical guidelines capable of moving you toward success in the court of public opinion.

The bottom line purpose of a magnetic message? Move you toward realizing your business and public policy goals.

Think of this: How many times have you seen an executive flub an interview on CNBC or your local newscast? What about that presentation you attended where the speaker droned on and on, never getting to the essence of their case? Or that round of [Congressional testimony](#) laden with mind-numbing legal and technical jargon?

How can you and your organization avoid similar reputation-bashing fiascos? 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 elements to elicit a magnetic message are universal. Others may apply only in certain circumstances. It's up to your communications staff, C-suite leaders, and the experienced consultants you utilize to implement these principles correctly.

What are the 11 elements that can help you fashion your message development and delivery capabilities? They are, in order:

## Eleven Elements to Model a Magnetic Message

1. **Identify**
2. **Construct**
3. **Collaborate**
4. **Focus**
5. **Examine**
6. **Flavor**
7. **Fortify**
8. **Heed**
9. **Test**
10. **Chronicle**
11. **Broadcast**

Let's take a look at each step — that should be followed sequentially — 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. Some examples:

- Today you target consumers with your plans to release a new product into the market
- Next week you might confront a thorny public policy issue necessitating [outreach to policymakers](#)
- Next month it may be a [crisis](#) generated by an accident at one of your facilities requiring you to reach out to the affected community

The upshot? Early on in the messaging process, 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.

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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 enterprise 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.

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.

Also, set some guidelines as to who gets involved when. Your communications shop should be deeply involved from the get-go. They should be the ones banging out the first draft, with guidance from your expert consultant, for others to consider. Then come deliberations with the issue experts and, if needed, legal staff to fine tune and amend any inaccuracies (note that the lawyers serve solely in an advisory role, not as the decision-makers). At that point, your messaging should be as fully formed as possible and ready for review and approval by the [C-suite](#).

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 to avoid too unwieldy a process.

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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. 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 they understand and agree that their 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 or condemn?
- 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?

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- 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 disregard some of these questions depending on your situation. And you will likely discover additional matters 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, e.g.)
- Case studies
- Ju jitsu (citing the opposition)
- Quotations from famous individuals
- Anecdotes
- Analogies
- Topics du jour (headlines, current music and film, e.g.)
- Clichés
- Humor

Some of these techniques prove suitable to certain messages and not to others. And you can likely come up with added ideas that fit your needs. The point is smart spokespeople know they must dress up their message before taking it out on the town.

## 7. Fortify

There is no substitute for sustained [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 email. 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](#)



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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.

### 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. No need to waste time and energy doodling an overly complicated diagram or trendy infographic (it's fine to develop such tools for outreach purposes after you've decided 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 helps keep things streamlined, automatically instilling discipline that helps you avoid the verbal excess that afflicts so many businesses.

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.

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For example, you may need to revisit your messaging during a [crisis](#) on an hour-by-hour or even minute-by-minute basis. Reexamining evergreen issues, on the other hand, may require merely an annual or semi-annual visit.

Resist the temptation to entrust your chief communications officer with remembering your messages. What happens when they depart or get 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 which of the devices below are most appropriate in your situation:

- Media interviews
- Speeches to industry conferences
- Presentations to clients and prospective clients
- Congressional testimony
- [“Fly-in”](#) visits with members of Congress
- News releases
- Written statements on breaking issues
- Editorial board visits
- [Satellite media tours](#)
- [News conferences](#)
- Digital media tools like Facebook, LinkedIn, and Twitter
- Your website
- Guest articles and op-eds for newspapers and trade publications
- Community roundtables held via video
- Newsletters
- One-sheet leave behind for elected officials
- Company blogs
- [Webinars](#)

This list is by no means exhaustive, though it gives you a good starting point. Add other tactics to this list that make sense for you and your endeavors.

## *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.

Now, the big question: Where do you go from here?

- Commit to crafting a [magnetic message](#) with four strong legs for each and every issue you face
- Involve the right people in your message development deliberations
- Put your message in writing
- Road test it
- Hold a [training workshop](#) to assess the magnetism of your message
- Bring on board an [expert consultant](#) to get you started in the process and to guide you when confronting complex issues

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

Adhering to the 11 common sense guidelines presented here will put you well along the road toward gaining victory for your company in the public square.

These strategies can help your enterprise raise the odds of achieving your long-term business and public policy goals. Get to work — today. Your reputation hangs in the balance.

## About the Author

Author and communications strategy consultant Ed Barks works with communications and government relations executives who counsel their C-suite leaders, and with businesses and associations that need their communications strategy and messaging to deliver bottom line results. They gain an enhanced reputation, greater confidence, more opportunities for career advancement, and achievement of long-term business and public policy goals.



He is the author of [four business books](#):

- *Insider Strategies for the Confident Communicator: How to Master Meetings, Presentations, Interviews, and Advocacy*
- *Reporters Don't Hate You: 100+ Amazing Media Relations Strategies*
- *A+ Strategies for C-Suite Communications: Turning Today's Leaders into Tomorrow's Influencers*
- *The Truth About Public Speaking: The Three Keys to Great Presentations*

Ed contributes to a variety of publications and is the former “Speaking Sense” columnist for the *Washington Business Journal*. He has also published numerous research reports and position papers, including “A Buyer’s Guide To Communications Strategy Consultants.”

More than 5500 business leaders, association executives, scientists, government officials, entertainers, and other thought leaders can thank Ed for sharpening their communications edge.

According to his clients, 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 founding it in 1997. He served a nine-year tenure on the Board of Governors of the National Press Club and is a faculty member of the U.S. Chamber of Commerce Institute for Organization Management. He is a former member of the board of directors of the Institute of Management Consultants National Capital Region, and the Consultants Section Council of the American Society of Association Executives (ASAE).

An inside-the-Beltway veteran, Ed has spent more than three decades in Washington, D.C. He brings another critical perspective to his clients’ communications needs — that of a broadcaster and journalist. He knows firsthand the tricks and techniques of the reporting trade, thanks to a decade of experience in radio broadcasting.

Ed also publishes the [Communications Community](#), available by free subscription.