

Your Message in an Era of Mixed Messages

By Louis M. Markwith, Vice President

The CEO, the Board Chair and the Board of Directors (Trustees) should pay close attention to your organizational message when we are in an era where everyone is questioning what is being communicated. There is a need to be sure your message is consistent and clear.

Too often, the staff or the board is tired of saying the same thing over time. If you have something new and different about your nonprofit that will enhance your image or will improve the perception of your special contribution to society, use it. It is always good to improve, but if you are changing because you want to change, Stop and Think!

Remember your organization may have spent years establishing a solid reputation among your constituents, especially your donors. They know you. Unless you have changed your mission, your service components, or your relationship with other nonprofits. The secret is repetition of your core message. You may change the “way you say it,” but the core message remains. Be careful not to change messages for the sake of change!

The Origin of Your Core Message

Your message is informed by your organizational mission. It is important that your mission remain in the forefront of everyone’s thinking who is directly related to your nonprofit. Everyone the Board member, CEO and staff, insiders of the organization, should be able to recite the mission and explain the mission to any constituent. If you have read our materials before, you may have seen: **NOIABTIBWITB**: It means **No Organization Is Any Better Than Its Board Wants It To Be**. This philosophy of mission begins with the Board of Directors; what they demonstrate will permeate the organization.

We suggest that the Board of Directors have a mission moment at every meeting where the mission statement is read aloud at the opening of the meeting. This is a centering technique to remind everyone why they are attending the meeting and that discussion and challenges to be considered are all related to the mission. The same should be true for all committee meetings throughout the organization.

What you already recognize

We need to look what the Big Boys are doing. For example: Toyota. The Toyota message is “Let’s Go places.” There have been a number of sub messages over the last four years but the message is we are doing this together. The singular spokesperson is Jan, who started as the “showroom receptionist.” Her role has grown over time; the key has been the repetition of the core message and the personality.

How many times have you heard, “Take 15 minutes and save 15% with GEICO.” Have you seen a Gecko, lately? How many years have you been “in good hands?”

Nissan is changing its message because something has happened to its brand. Their new message is “America’s Fastest Growing Car.” Their message is “join a new winner.” All of their vehicles in their ads are red to grab your attention. A reason for change.

Who is responsible for your message?

The obvious answer is the CEO and staff. That is true because they are the individuals who are writing the copy, appearing on TV and meeting with supporters on a regular basis. However, the Board of Directors is responsible for everything that happens, including your message.

At DeWitt and Associates, we continually write and talk about the four duties of Board Members. The duties are: Steward, Builder, Policy Maker and **Ambassador**. Too often, Board members gloss over the Ambassador role. Your organizational messaging falls in the ambassador area. As a Board Ambassador, your role is to spread the word about the nonprofit you serve, whenever and wherever you can. Because of your position in the community, you have the opportunity in both formal and informal settings to promote your nonprofit and expands its reach.

The best method to be effective in the Ambassador role is preparation. As a Board member, you need to be knowledgeable about the organization’s mission, programs and its service constituents. This knowledge informs all of your actions related to your governance function with other Board members. This knowledge also enable you to communicate with others outside the organization about the important work your nonprofit is doing in our community.

An easy way to prepare is what we call an “elevator speech.” This technique gives you a quick way to tell another person about your nonprofit. The elevator speech is what you can tell a person about your nonprofit organization on a 10-12 story elevator ride.

You can use your “elevator speech” at a social event when you see a friend who asks, “What have you been up to?” It is good “icebreaker” when someone ask, “What do you do?” To get all of the important points down, it is good to have another Board, or staff member, coach you in the development of your speech. It should be short and fit on a note card. You can carry it in your pocket, or purse. Before long you will know your points and you can use it, quickly and naturally

As an Ambassador, you want to be able to communicate the core message of your nonprofit. Being an ambassador is listening function as well. Because you are a community leader, you will have an opportunity to ask questions about what others know about your nonprofit. You may learn about opinions and misconceptions that need to be corrected. This can be an important way to gain feedback for the organization.

Every good Ambassador is practiced and confident.