

# Minute Message Model

## Messaging for impact

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“So, what does your organization do?” If these words strike fear in your heart, you’re not alone. Many nonprofit organizations have a tough time explaining the vital work they do in a way that really gets to the heart of why it’s important. They’re more familiar with how to launch into program details and statistics than with really connecting with their audience by conveying the impact their work has on the lives of real people.

Our Minute Message Model will change all that.

Developing effective messaging isn’t rocket science, and we’ve been helping good causes get better at it for decades. Whether you’ve got one minute to get your message across during a shared elevator ride, five minutes at a reception, or ten minutes while your audience reads your newsletter, our Minute Message Model will give you confidence that you’re using that time well.

## A Good Set of Messages Is a Toolbox

- It points to the problem your organization is trying to solve
- It reminds your audience why they should care
- It highlights the impact of your work
- It explains how you do it

It's a tall order, but having a structure for your messaging makes it a lot easier.

## A Few Words About Brand

Branding is a complex subject—and having a grasp of your organization's brand is critical to developing effective messages. So let's spend a little time on it here.

Your logo is not your brand. Your mission statement is not your brand. Your name is not your brand. Your brand is the set of thoughts and feelings someone has about your organization when they hear your name or see your logo. In short, brand is another word for reputation. Is the reputation you have the one you need in order to fulfill your mission? What your brand is, is your reputation. And what goes into creating the right reputation? According to Scott Bedbury, a marketing master who has worked for Nike and Starbucks, among others, it's, well, everything:

*[Your brand] is defined by the award-winning [work] and the god-awful [work] that somehow slipped through the cracks.... It is defined by the accomplishments of your best employee—the shining star in the [organization] who can do no wrong—as well as by the mishaps of the worst hire you ever made. It is also defined by your receptionist and the music your [constituents] are subjected to when placed on hold. For every grand and finely worded public statement by the [executive director], the brand is also defined by derisory comments overheard in the hallway or in a chat room on the Internet.*

When we see a corporate logo like Nike's Swoosh or McDonald's Golden Arches, its marketers are hoping the logo triggers a whole set of positive associations. For Nike, that's athletic excellence, self-improvement through exercise, or "Just do it"... not sweat shops. For McDonald's, it's family, value, or Happy Meals...not trans fats and childhood obesity. All of the millions of dollars spent on advertising and marketing by these companies is intended to support a positive view of their brand. Your nonprofit has a brand too, and having a handle on what that brand says about you is critical to creating strong messages. Good messages will help you strengthen your brand, so knowing what you want the brand to do helps set the goals for the messages themselves. If it sounds a little circuitous, that's because it is.

A strong brand minimizes competitive threats, because it makes clear to your constituents how you're different from similar organizations. It helps defend you against negative news about your organization, because a positive reputation encourages your audiences to give you the benefit of the doubt. Most important, a strong brand enhances the self-image of your internal and external audiences because they're excited to be associated with your organization. Clarity around your brand is the cornerstone of effective communications, and provides strategic benefits to the organization as a whole.

## Message Basics

There are a few hard-and-fast rules we remind our clients of during every piece of messaging work we do:

**USE YOUR FULL NAME.** Your name typically conveys a great deal of information about your organization in a way that an acronym just doesn't. Don't forgo the opportunity to remind your audience of who you are and what you believe in every time your organization is identified.

**NEVER ASSUME.** Your audience doesn't know nearly as much about your organization as you do. What's the problem you're addressing, and why should they care? Start there every time, rather than assuming they already know the answer.

**REPEAT, AD NAUSEAM.** It's a fact: you will be sick to death of repeating your message before it begins to sink in with your key audiences. In our society, we're bombarded with thousands of messages from corporations, politicians, and nonprofits every day, and it takes repetition to break through.

**ADD BENEFITS, NOT FEATURES.** Features are what your agency does. Benefits are the solutions your agency provides to problems. People do not donate to features; they donate to solve problems.

## EXERCISE: Brand Personality

Brands have a personality—a set of attributes we associate with a product or organization. They convey...the characteristics of an organization and its uniqueness. To begin to articulate the personality of your organization, choose five words that convey its attributes. To get you started, here's a list of personality traits often associated with nonprofit organizations.

Academic	Down-to-earth	Friendly	Nurturing	Sharp
Activist	Educational	Fun	Outraged	Shoestring
Artistic	Engaged	Funny	Principled	Somber
Calm	Energetic	High-minded	Passionate	Traditional
Caring	Expert	Helpful	Reliable	Trustworthy
Creative	Focused	Lively	Serious	Youthful

String your five words together in a sentence or two that define your organization's uniqueness. This is your brand personality.

# 1 Minute Message

## DEFINE yourself

If you've only got a minute to share information about your organization, you need to make sure you're only covering the most important things about your work. The simplest message, often

referred to as an "elevator pitch," conveys simple, high-level information about your organization; builds comprehension about the nature of your organization; and suggests the problem you're trying to solve.

## EXERCISE: One-Minute Message

A compelling one-minute message provides an introduction to your organization, its brand, and the work that you do. This simple exercise allows you to create a Mad Libs-style one-minute message that will leave your audience asking for more. How do you use it? Just replace the underlined words with your own.

\_\_\_\_\_ *believes* \_\_\_\_\_  
Name of Organization Deeply Held Value  
*Every day we* \_\_\_\_\_ *for* \_\_\_\_\_  
Verb Object Constituents  
*because* \_\_\_\_\_  
Problem Statement

# 2 Minute Message

## DEFINE yourself + tell WHY you exist

If you've got another minute with your audience, you can go a little deeper. Why does your organization exist? What societal problem does it solve TODAY? These messages lay out your vision for how your work makes the world a better place.

They set the context for everything else you say about your organization, and you should return to them over and over again. Your two-minute message is visionary. Your goal is to build an emotional connection with your audience by defining a problem they want to help you solve.

# 5 Minute Message

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**DEFINE** yourself + tell **WHY** you exist + describe your **IMPACT**

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If you have a little longer with your audience—in the hallway at a conference, perhaps, or in a fundraising appeal—be strategic.

Start the same way you would if you had one or two minutes. Never assume that your audience knows your work and the context in which you operate; begin with your one-minute message, explaining why your organization exists and the problem you were founded to solve.

Then tell a story. Describe the impact your organization has on the lives of real people. Try to explain, in simple, clear language, how real people (or animals, or architectural treasures) are actually helped by the work you do every day. Don't explain what programs you offer; demonstrate the importance of those programs. Your five-minute message must be visual—it paints a picture of the difference your organization makes. And what better way to paint that picture than with a story?

Humans tell stories to make sense of the world, to explain cause and effect, to knit together the events of our everyday lives into something that has meaning. The narrative structure itself—first this thing happened, then this other thing happened—builds suspense and encourages your audience to ask “What happened next?” As a tool for building engagement and conveying meaning, it has no equal. And a bonus: people share stories with others...that's a lot of bang for your tale.

In nonprofit storytelling, we use stories to show how the uniqueness of our work made a difference in someone's life. So the “star” of the story is really your organization. Of course, your story has all the traditional elements: a protagonist (lead character) you take the time to describe; a conflict that involves a challenge and most importantly, an outcome or resolution that could only have happened because of your organization.

Once you've taken the time to tell a story that illustrates your impact on the world, remind your audience why that impact is important by reiterating the values your organization holds dear.

# 5 Minute Message continued

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## **EXERCISE:** Storytelling

Your organizational stories should contain these elements.

**Protagonists.** *Who is the main character? What is his/her life like?*

**Conflict.** *What's the problem he is having that your organization is uniquely suited to help solve? Is he newly arrived to your city, missing his dear grandma who helped raise him? Is he desperate to volunteer with an organization that supports older adults? Bring this conflict to life in a way that tees up you, and only you, to be the solution.*

**Outcome.** *What happens to him? How does your organization save the day?*

**Only You.** *Remember to sum up why your nonprofit was the solution to the problem faced by your protagonist.*

# 10 Minute Message

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**DEFINE** yourself + tell **WHY** you exist + describe your **IMPACT** + *then* tell **HOW** you do it.

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The ten-minute message leads up to the “Ask.” Think of this longer message as your moment (your ten minutes) to put the entire package in front of your audience. Tailor this message to your particular audience; you’ll be in a stronger position, when the time comes, to make them the heroes of the story: “This happens because of **you**.”

First, you explain the reason you exist. Then, you demonstrate your organization’s impact. Add a story (or two) that allows your audience to form an authentic connection with your work by showing how it plays out in real people’s lives.

And then (and only then) you can get to your programmatic work, explaining in detail how those programs support the mission and vision of your organization. If you’re like most nonprofit

organizations, these are the messages that you convey best, and in fact you probably already have most of them written. They describe the nuts and bolts of how you achieve impact and put your values into action. Be sure to explain the benefit of the program, not just its features. For example: “Our computer literacy workshop gives our low-income clients the skills they need not only to create a resume and look for a job, but also to become more self sufficient and relevant in a technology-charged world.”

**End this message by asking for what you need.**

If you’re speaking to donors, ask for money. Be concrete: how much, from how many, to accomplish exactly what? If you need volunteers, ask your audience to sign on. Use this moment. **Ask.**

## EXERCISE: Walking Backward

Most nonprofits spend too much time talking *about* their programs and not enough about why anyone should care about them. But messages about your work are still important—you just need to ensure that those messages *support* your main points about your vision and impact. Try this simple exercise to walk backwards through the message model to make sure that they do:

- Start with a typical, just-the-facts message about one of your key programs.
- How does that program have an impact on the lives of real people?
- How does that impact fulfill your vision of a better world? How does it help solve the problem your organization exists to address?

If it all adds up, you’re in good shape. But if the final message doesn’t capture the first two priorities (bullets 2 and 3), create a new message that does.

## Conclusion

**No one knows your organization as well as you do.** Even your most ardent supporters can quickly get lost in a stream of data about your programmatic work. The thing that they care most about is how you're achieving your vision and making a difference. Every conversation, every newsletter, every annual report and news interview is a new chance to spend one minute, five, or ten reminding your audiences of why your organization exists, how you have succeeded, and how they can be a part of it. **Use your time well.**

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**Mission Minded** is a branding firm that works exclusively with nonprofits. We believe that nonprofits, foundations, and independent schools only reach their highest potential if people understand the importance of their work—not just what they do, but why it matters.

Every day we partner with clients like National Federation of the Blind, Greater San Francisco's Habitat for Humanity, OneJustice, Walter & Elise Haas, Sr. Fund, and Mile High United Way to help them determine the brand—or reputation—for which they want to be known. Then we help them bring that brand to life through key messages, logo design, web design, and more. As a result, our clients successfully raise more money and attract the support they need to reach their goals.

Have a question? We'd love to hear from you. Write to Jennie Winton at [jennie@mission-minded.com](mailto:jennie@mission-minded.com), or give Jennie a call at 415.785.8355.