

# How Can You Tell When Your Message Starts Falling Flat?

## A Short Roadmap for Energetic Nonprofit Communications

Steven Skyles-Mulligan  
Evoke Strategies

Tires need to be pumped up periodically in order to remain functional. We know it, we do it, we think nothing of it. Messages, too, begin to flatten with use.

The unfortunate fact is that every message, no matter how potent it was at one time, will eventually lose its steam. This is especially painful for nonprofits, founded in passion to address critical issues. Donors may not reach quite as deeply into their pockets, client populations may drift away and the broader public may not attend your programs in the same numbers as before.

This problem is not limited to nonprofits. Profit-driven businesses face similar issues, but they may have the luxury of spending tens of thousands of dollars to craft a new message or try a new set of tactics. They also tend not to risk as much; a single product or service can fail without substantially decreasing the business' chances for survival. Nonprofits tend not to have such generous budgets and any failure or lowering of profile can cut uncomfortably close to the bone. When your message begins to lose its punch, you could find yourself on the express train to irrelevancy.

If this is happening to your nonprofit, what can you do? If it's not yet happening, but you're worried that it might, how can you plan ahead so that you don't end up running on the rims?

### *That hissing sound*

Before we look at how to address the issue, we need to consider why it crops up in the first place. The discussion starts with two things that have become commonplace in our fast-paced world:

- Most of us are too busy working on the urgent to focus consistently on the important.
- It is increasingly difficult for any organization's message to cut through the noise and reach the people it was intended for.

These are the fundamental reasons why it is so difficult to create an effective marketing communications program for any organization. They are also big contributing factors to "message fatigue," which causes campaigns to lose their effectiveness over time.

Our collective attention spans are getting shorter, we have a jaded sense that we've seen it all before and we are truly and deeply hungry for organizations to reach out to us in ways that seem real. Nonprofits are particularly likely to count on the inherent value of their messages to keep people tuned in. They can also be more reluctant than businesses to try innovative new things. And, in a cruelly ironic twist, although most are dedicated to helping people in some way or other, they are profoundly susceptible to appearing to lose the human touch. Ouch.

### *Patching the leaks*

It is urgent that you begin addressing these perils and pitfalls right away. But don't think it's going to be as simple and straightforward as initiating a new program or revising your newsletter. Those are tactics which may be effective in the right circumstances, but will not remedy the underlying structural problems. If you're the Executive Director, Chief Operating Officer or Communications

EVOKE



Director for a nonprofit, you will need to make strategic changes in the way you view — and execute — communications in your organization.

Here are four things that can make a profound difference and help you create a marketing communications program that furthers your mission while keeping itself fresh.

### 1. Rely on in-house expertise.

You have a treasure-trove of knowledge, experience and stories to tell right at your fingertips. It's easy to overlook your agency's employees and clients; after all, what do they know about marketing and communications? Maybe nothing, but they know a lot about what goes on in the agency, what's important now and what might be the next emerging trend. You simply cannot run an effective marketing communications program without talking to as many of these people as possible on a regular basis.

*Get in touch with the people who know what's really going on.*

### 2. Stay relevant and on-message.

Every agency has a fundamental “brand” that includes its name, logo and mission statement. Like all human endeavors, these were created at a particular point in time and reflect the ethos of that time. Unfortunately, the issues your agency was created to address have not stood still. Health issues that originally impacted one demographic group have a way of creeping into others. The neighborhoods around arts organizations change dramatically, sometimes in as little as a decade. The desires and expectations of children, seniors and underserved populations shift radically. You must reevaluate and fine-tune your mission statement periodically to reflect what your agency is actually committed to doing.

Most organizations will find this difficult because they have gotten accustomed to using their mission statements as the lead market-facing message. I cannot count the number of agency brochures and websites I have seen that start off with those deadly words, “our mission is.” Announcing the mission statement outside the organization gives it the weight of proclamation and makes change and reevaluation unlikely. It also makes it hard for those inside the organization to take it seriously. There's a much better way to use your mission statement: rather than presenting it externally, make it your primary *internal* message — what every staff member needs to know and live. It then becomes much easier and far more important to keep it up to date.

Some organizations will also need to consider name changes if the original mission was enshrined too literally in the agency name. And every organization should review and update “look and feel” on a periodic basis.

*Remember, you're not just on a mission; you're on **your mission**. Know it, feel it, live it. If you don't, it's time to change it.*

### 3. Be edgy!

It is very easy for any of us to fall into the “tried and true” trap. People like to stick with what worked before and are usually afraid to try new things. We're also very worried about offending people, so we err on the side of caution. When it comes to the organizational message, this approach is not going to produce the results we need to stay relevant and keep people coming in the door, sending in their checks or whatever it is we want them to do. Trying new things and developing innovative ways to talk about what goes on at your agency is not a small task. It can, however, be a fun one, and once you've generated some fun and excitement inside the organization it is much easier to do it outside as well.

One way to help things along is to capture snippets of what people say when you talk to them (see #1 above). People who are not busy trying to create formal messaging for an organization usually have a faster track to what's important — and interesting. Another way is to deliberately look for the most outrageous things you can say about your agency and what it does. Of course you're not likely to use these in your market-facing messages, but they will get you off the reservation and may lead you to some things you can apply. Finally, rather than starting with the answers, make sure you've thoroughly mapped out the questions. Nearly all questions are intriguing and irresistible; few answers are.

*Ask whether it sounds interesting before you ask whether it sounds good.*

#### **4. Keep communications right in the middle of things.**

Communications — both internal and market-facing — is mission-critical. If the head of your communications group isn't already part of the very top circle of management, consider changing your reporting structure. The head of communications should be involved at some level in most critical decisions; he or she is the one who is going to have to figure out how to explain or present them. Some organizations try to get around this by having the Executive Director, Chief Operating Officer or head of development review all marketing pieces and critical communications before they go out. In our opinion, this simply isn't good enough. It reduces your chief communicator to a functionary and your communications to an afterthought ("we made the decision and then we thought about how to communicate it"). You'll have muddy messaging for sure, and may simply not be able to cut through the noise.

*Never forget that the mouth is an integral part of the head.*

#### ***Getting back on the road***

Following this advice is not going to solve all of your communications and marketing issues — or even come close to it. What will happen if you implement these ideas is that your agency will begin to develop a culture that notices when the tires are starting to get flat and knows how to pump them up before something worse happens. You may still need an outside perspective when you're creating particular pieces or campaigns, but your work with your consultant or creative professional will be far more effective — and enjoyable.



**Steven Skyles-Mulligan**

steven@evokestrategies.com

245 Eighth Avenue, #364  
New York, New York 10011-1607

**212.967.7611**

www.evokestrategies.com



**Keep your message fully inflated with Evoke.**

An outside perspective can help you stay fresh, provide a sounding board for your own ideas and offer strategic expertise. It can also be useful in creating systems for leveraging the value that's already at your fingertips. We're experts at making dull organizations interesting; we even won an industry award for work we did for an accounting firm. If we can do that for them, just imagine what we can do for you.

Call us today at **212.967.7611** or email us (**info@evokestrategies.com**) for more information. We'd be delighted to speak with you, and the initial consultation is always free.