

Five Tactics to Help You Communicate Your Mission

THE EDITOR OF *MARKETING LIBRARY SERVICES* SHARES FIVE TIPS ON COMMUNICATING YOUR LIBRARY'S MISSION AND EMPHASIZES THE NEED TO BE PREPARED TO SHARE IT ON A MOMENT'S NOTICE.

BY KATHY DEMPSEY, BA

Helping your colleagues, clients, and administrators understand your library's mission is critical to keeping it funded and yourself employed. Many people still think of libraries as places where they studied in high school or college; they don't understand why they might need libraries after graduation. It would be logical, then, for many people in your organization to be utterly unaware of what your information center can do for them.

Of course, the obvious answer is "provide information." Therein lies the problem: Most people don't think they need help acquiring information. As long as they have Internet access and Google, they feel can find anything they could possibly want or need—without your help. Since that's not really the case, part of communicating your mission has to be explaining why libraries

still matter and why they're so much more valuable than Internet search engines.

Everyone reading this article can probably think of at least three reasons why information professionals are better at finding information than Google. But how many of you could articulate them clearly, in less than a minute? If the person who signs your paycheck asked you to explain why your job should still exist, could you do it? And what, exactly, would you say?

Guidelines for Successful Communication

When you need to communicate your mission and your value, it's imperative you do it well. While each library, knowledge center, or information center is unique, there are general guidelines you can follow that will make your com-

munications more clear and effective. The five tactics discussed below will enable you to do that, whether in a report or brochure, as part of an evaluation, or during a formal or informal conversation.

It's important to note that you need all five tactics, working in tandem, to achieve optimum outcomes. Let me briefly explain each one to get you started.

1. Align your message with your target audience. SLA preaches the importance of libraries aligning with their parent organizations, so hopefully this is second nature by now. What it means for communications is showing that you share and support the priorities of your target audiences.

For example, when conversing with people in the finance department, talk about how your work affects the bot-



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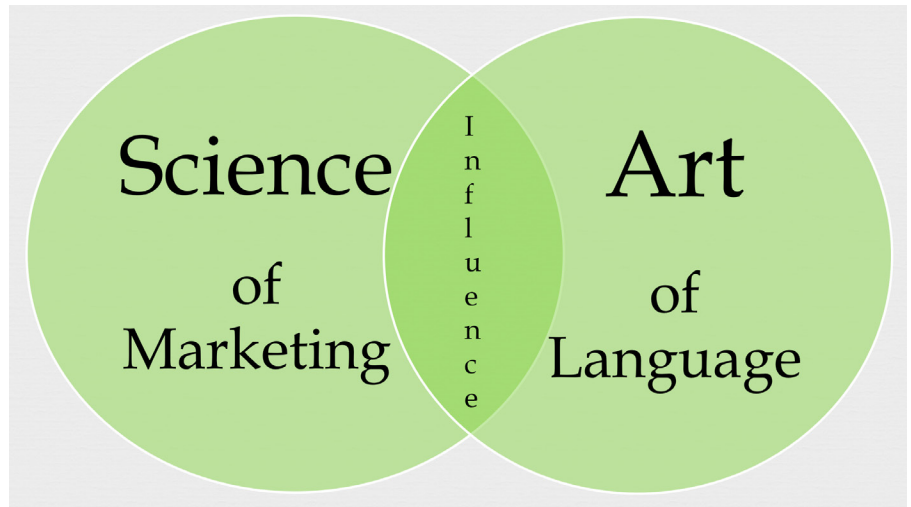
tom line: “Our research helped secure a patent for a product that will increase corporate earnings.” However, if you’re talking with someone in sales, say something about how your work supports their efforts: “Our research helped us obtain a patent before our competitors did, giving you the first chance to sell a product that the market has been waiting for.” Your mission didn’t change, but the slant of your message did.

2. Use powerful words, without library lingo. This tactic should apply to all of your external communications. If you want others to understand you, use *their* language, not yours. It’s important to understand that many of the words you use every day are actually library jargon—think *circulation* (books and blood), *reference* (answers to questions and end-of-paper citations), and *resources* (databases and water). To avoid confusing your audience, never say, “Our mission is to circulate as many resources as possible.”

Communicating successfully will necessitate learning the language of your target audience. Luckily for you, you’re the keeper of your audiences’ favorite resources. So, before you talk to the finance manager, leaf through some journals that financial professionals read. When preparing for a meeting with physicians, look at a medical database. When you’re researching any field or profession, take note of its language and remind yourself to use it when creating your deliverables.

Here’s a tip: Write out what you’d normally say, then go over the message and replace all library-specific terms with ones that your target audience uses. Consider creating a spreadsheet of the terms you delete and the terms you substitute for them for each different client group, so you can create messages more quickly and easily going forward.

3. Focus on benefits, not products. Much like the way we use the jargon of our profession, we also default to using product names of tools and resources. Many of these names, sad to say, don’t



Combining marketing tenets with carefully chosen words allows you to influence your listeners.

offer any clue as to their content. For instance, *LexisNexis* doesn’t tell anyone that it offers legal research or risk assessment information, and *ERIC* just sounds like a guy’s name, right? And whatintheheck is an *EBSCO*?

Clearly, you shouldn’t use many vendor or database names when trying to communicate the value of your work. And that’s OK, because one of the main tenets of marketing is that you shouldn’t talk about products anyway. What your audiences care most about are *results*. What can your library or info center do for them? What are the benefits of using it? Your messaging should answer the oft-unspoken question known as WIIFM: What’s in It for Me?

So, instead of telling your boss’s boss, “I used LexisNexis to find helpful data for the sales department,” say, “My report enabled the sales department to close a deal.” (This is not bragging; it’s building understanding.) Like it or not, you must realize that you’re the only one who cares about which product does what. Everyone else only cares about the benefits they reap in the end.

4. Be articulate, brief, clear, decisive, and enthusiastic (A, B, C, D, and E). Once you’ve created a message that (1) aligns with your listeners’ needs and knowledge level, (2) uses language they understand, and (3) makes the benefits obvious to them, you still need to actu-

ally deliver that message. When you do, you’ll need to sound convincing, especially if you’re speaking face to face. Here’s a little alphabet-play to help you.

Obviously, being **A**rticulate is key. You need to sound smart and savvy.

Brevity is always appreciated, especially by busy management types (as if you’re not busy, too). Don’t worry about not giving them every detail—if your brief message piques their interest, they’ll ask for more, and then you’ll have their attention for a longer conversation.

Clarity is vital in all communications, especially when you’re talking about your mission and your worth to the organization. One way to ensure you’re being clear is to test your message on someone else. As professional editors understand, you know exactly what you meant to say, so that’s how you’ll read your own message. Your brain fills in most of what might be missing, so the errors don’t jump out at you.

It’s ideal, but not always possible, to test your message on a member of your target audience. Realistically, however, anyone who’s not you is more qualified than you are to assess the clarity and tone of your message. Make it a point to ask someone else to read and react to an important statement before you finalize it.

The last two words, **D**ecisive and **E**nthusiastic, go hand-in-hand. In most

situations, you'll want to come across as decisive, confident, and sure of what you're saying. But you don't want to seem pushy or boastful, so temper your confidence with enthusiasm. Try to add



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Aligning your messages with your target audience enables you to reach its members more effectively.

that touch of excitement to your voice to convey that you're passionate as well as knowledgeable. Of course, this tactic doesn't come naturally to most people, so ...

5. Prepare and practice so you can speak with confidence. Now that you've come this far, don't let shaky delivery ruin your opportunity to make an important point. It's going to sound odd when I urge you to stand in front of a mirror and say your message to yourself, aloud, repeatedly. But hear me out.

Have you ever tried to tell a great joke, but ruined it with bad delivery? When you're talking about the value and benefits that your library or infor-

mation center delivers, good delivery is critical. You need to enunciate, to speak slowly enough to be understood without sounding fake and rehearsed. Performers and politicians do this when working on lines, stump speeches, and soundbites. Practicing your delivery allows you to make your point with confidence and clarity when you finally get to deliver your message face to face.

Practice is vital, so make writing messages and practicing them aloud part of regular staff activities or meetings. Make videos of your practice runs and watch yourself to see how you come across. Try not to focus on your appearance—instead, concentrate on your message and your speaking voice, volume, and tone.

Preparation Is Key

Considering all of the time and effort you and your colleagues spend to develop your library's mission statement, tagline, brand, and/or value statement, it's also worth spending a little time to make sure your external messaging conveys it well. To ensure everyone understands your place within the larger organization, take some time to thoughtfully craft a few messages for your top target audiences. Be sure to customize your message for different target markets. Write a main message, then simply change some of the language to align with the interests and needs of different listeners.

Outlining a five-point strategy may seem too complex for the task at hand, but you can do this in 30 minutes or less. What's important is to be aware of each item—alignment, lingo, benefits, how you speak, and the way you come across—when you're preparing your message. Of course, you can't always obsess over every sentence, so reserve this exercise for your most vital messages: opening lines of speeches or reports, value or mission statements that will be shared across the enterprise, or soundbites that are being recorded or reported. If you can get your audience's attention by starting

strong, they'll be more apt to pay attention to the rest of what you're saying.

These tactics will help you deliver effective messages in many situations, from official meetings to informal hallway chats. The process works whether your message is delivered in print, in person, or online. The secret is preparing ahead of time. As in the classic elevator-speech scenario, you may only have one chance and one moment to make an impression on someone. If you follow this strategy, you'll be ready for any opportunity. **SLA**

FURTHER READING

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