Communications Workshop Resources

Crafting your message

Your Guide to Clear Writing (CDC)
https://www.cdc.gov/nceh/clearwriting/docs/clear-writing-guide-508.pdf

Message Mapping Worksheet (CDC)
https://www.atsdr.cdc.gov/communications-toolkit/documents/12_message-mapping-tool-final-111015_508.pdf

Elements of an effective story

Presentation Storytelling 101 (Duarte Consulting)
https://www.duarte.com/blog/presentation-storytelling-audience-is-hero/

Storytelling in Presentations: How does it work (Folienwerke)
https://www.empowersuite.com/en/blog/storytelling-in-presentations?srsltid=AfmBOoogrh-CjVRnPhm132mf4HXBQWhaNYe5V5amPPUirs6E0izyiqvm

Your brand identity

What is brand identity? And how to create a strong brand. (Canva)
https://www.canva.com/resources/brand-identity/

Brand Identity Toolkit (Studio Ostendo)
https://assets-global.website-files.com/627438ee9e8e3af2ae960bb3/63dae4cb74314c851fbf6591_The%20Branding%20Identity%20Toolkit%20%28Free%20Download%29.pdf

Social media tips and tricks

Social Media Marketing Strategy (Hootsuite)++
https://www.hootsuite.com/resources/social-media-strategy-guide?utm_campaign=all-alwayson-none-na-none-------&utm_source=gdn&utm_medium=display&utm_content=PMax_NA_Google_eComm_20937857273&gad_source=1&gad_campaignid=20937858677&gbraid=0AAAADmTdtXMRjLCY7DHdlH0j744WlkM6&gclid=EAIaIQobChMIltOxw6j9lAMVeUb_AR2GZzM5EAAYAiAAEgLBmfD_BwE

Marketing and Social Media for Health Center Executives (NACHC on-line course)++
https://share.articulate.com/ariBgyy7VpjOB2grSIL8Y

Working with the media

ABC Chapter Communications Guide (Associated Builders and Contractors)
https://nationalconnections.abc.org/Portals/10/ABC%20Chapter%20Communications%20Guide%202022%20FINAL.pdf

Georgetown University Center for Social Impact Communication
https://csic.georgetown.edu/magazine/media-relations-training-nonprofits-creating-moving-quotes-memorable-quips/

Pitching to Media for Nonprofits (CauseVox)++
https://www.causevox.com/blog/pitching-to-media/

Crisis communications

10 Media Training Tips for Crisis Communicators (Forbes)
https://www.forbes.com/councils/forbesagencycouncil/2023/04/12/10-media-training-tips-for-crisis-communicators/

Crisis communications: Best practices (Muck Rack)
https://muckrack.com/blog/2025/03/28/crisis-communication-best-practices/

Appropriate use of AI

Responsible AI in marketing
Copyright © 2026 International Chamber of Commerce (ICC)
https://iccwbo.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/3/2026/02/2026_ICC_Guidance_on_AI_and_Marketing_communications_EN_03.pdf

AI Will Shape the Future of Marketing (Harvard Division of Continuing Education) ++
https://professional.dce.harvard.edu/blog/ai-will-shape-the-future-of-marketing/#Meet-Our-Expert

++Digital-only resource

Your Guide to CLEAR WRITING

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services
Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry

Your Guide to Clear Writing

When you're creating educational materials about public health, **the most important thing you can do is to write clearly.** This helps make sure readers can understand your main message — and any related action steps you're asking them to take.

Keep in mind that clear writing is important for everyone — not just audiences that are likely to have limited literacy skills. The fact is that even highly literate readers may struggle to understand complex information if they're stressed or in a hurry. That's why the need for clear communication is universal — and it's your job as a public health professional to make sure you do your part.

This guide has resources to help you write clear public health materials at every stage of development — from tips for thinking through your material's strategy before you start to write all the way through the final review process. Use the tip sheets, checklists, and worksheets to create clear, effective materials that everyone can understand and use.

And for more tips and tools on clear writing, be sure to check out the rest of the resources on the NCEH/ATSDR Clear Writing Hub.

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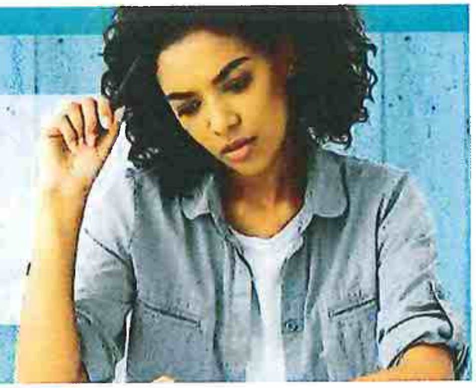
Link

To access Your Guide to Clear Writing online, visit:
https://www.cdc.gov/nceh/clearwriting/docs/clear-writing-guide-508.pdf

Before You Write

Use the tips below before you begin drafting your material. Just a little preparation will help you create a clear, effective product.



Answer 4 Key Questions

Before you begin writing, answer 4 important questions. You're not ready to start drafting content until you've written down clear answers to all 4 of these questions:

1. **Who is your target audience?**
2. **What do you know about their health literacy skills?**
3. **What is your communication objective?**
   What do you want your readers to do, think, or feel after they read your material?
4. **What is your main message?**
   What is the most important thing for your readers to remember? They may only remember 1 thing — what do you want that to be?

Sample Answers to 4 Key Questions

1. Parents of young children in Jonesville
2. Non-scientific audience with average to low health literacy skills
3. Get parents to take their children to the health department for blood lead testing
4. Some children in Jonesville have high levels of lead in their blood. This can cause learning and behavior problems. Children living near the study site need to get routine blood lead tests.

Use Your Answers

Be sure to use your answers from all 4 questions as you develop your material.

Target Audience

Clearly identify your target audience — and get specific. The more you think about who you're trying to reach, the more you can tailor your content to that audience. Remember to drill down — you want something like "parents of young children in Jonesville," not "the public."

Health Literacy Skills

Think through what you know about your audience's health literacy skills. Then use that information to guide your word choice, sentence length, and other plain language considerations. According to the National Assessment of Adult Literacy, almost 9 in 10 people struggle to understand health information. So keep it short, simple, and clear:

- ☑ **Short:** Write sentences that are 20 words or fewer. Limit paragraphs to 3 to 5 sentences. Cut out any words you don't need.
- ☑ **Simple:** Avoid jargon and complex technical terms. Define any scientific terms that you need to include in plain language.
- ☑ **Clear:** Be straightforward and direct — clearly tell your audience what they need to know. Always write in the active voice. Keep the subject and verb close together in your sentences.

> If you don't know anything about your audience's health literacy skills, it's best to assume they're average to low. And remember that a person's reading skills may drop 4 grade levels when they're stressed or reading about a stressful topic.

Communication Objective

Figure out what you want your audience to think, feel, or do after reading your material. Use your communication objective to guide decisions about what information to include in your material — and, more importantly, what to leave out. Remember, **the more you write, the less they'll read**. Only include content that helps you reach your communication objective.

Main Message

Write a short, clear main message and highlight it. Aim for 1 to 3 short sentences. This helps your readers quickly and easily understand the most important information in your material. It also gives readers context for how to interpret the material.

Place the main message at or near the top of your material. Make it stand out — use bold text, color blocking, or a larger font. Note that this material has a clearly visible main message at the top. Here's another example of an effective main message: ATSDR found that levels of chemicals currently in the air from the Baker Landfill aren't high enough to cause health problems.

Before You Write: Answer 4 Key Questions

1. Who is your target audience? Remember to get specific! Always write with this user in mind.

- **Example:** Parents of young children in Jonesville
- **Example:** Partners who can help us promote a National Health Observance

2. What do you know about your audience's health literacy skills?

Now take a few minutes to think through what you know about their health literacy skills. Do you have any point of reference for literacy and numeracy skills? Health-related concepts they might be familiar with? Topics they may have run into before? Jot down some notes.

- **Example:** Non-scientific audience with average to low health literacy skills
- **Example:** May be a little bit familiar with the topic — this is the second health assessment in their community
- **Example:** May struggle to understand how my data is relevant to them

3. What is your communication objective?

What do you want your audience to think, feel, or do after reading your material? This should be a **single statement** — if you think your material has multiple communication objectives, figure out which is the most important (1 of them will be!).

- **Example:** Get parents to take their children for blood lead testing
- **Example:** Get partners to share our content with their networks

4. What is your main message?

If your readers are going to remember 1 thing after reading your material, what do you want it to be? Remember, a main message can have a few sentences — but it should be focused on a single concept.

- **Example:** Some children in Jonesville have high levels of lead in their blood. This can cause learning and behavior problems. Children living near the study site need to get routine blood lead tests.
- **Example:** Everyone age 6 months and older needs to get a flu vaccine every season.

8 Tips for Clear & Effective Writing

Most readers hate excess words and meandering sentences in any form of writing. Most readers also hate the bureaucratic jargon we sometimes use in public health (think: "A comprehensive assessment was conducted prior to implementation of…").

Audiences respond well to logically organized, clearly written, and effectively designed information — regardless of their literacy level or ability to understand complex information. The fact is that PhD-level scientists appreciate clear writing as much as someone who struggles with reading comprehension. **Clear writing is for every audience and every material.**

Use the tips below to create clear, effective materials that your readers can understand and use.

1 Write for Your Reader

Identify a specific audience and write directly to that audience. Good writers always keep their readers in mind. Follow these tips:

- Keep asking yourself what your target audience needs to know (not what you want to say).
- If you have multiple audiences, consider writing multiple materials.
- Use "you" to connect with your reader.

2 Change Your Style

Public health writing is all about your audience. It's not about demonstrating your linguistic mastery. Don't write to impress your readers — write to reach them. Get right to the point and remove unnecessary content. And it's okay to be conversational. Remember to:

- Use contractions (write "aren't," not "are not").
- Use pronouns (like "you" and "we").
- Use simple words (write "use," not "utilize").
- Be direct (write "analyzed," not "conducted an analysis").

3 Spell Out the Main Message

An effective material has a clear main message. Don't put the burden on your reader to figure out the main message — spell it out. Put that clear, succinct main message near the top of the material. Bold it and highlight it. Stay focused on it. And don't include content that detracts from it.

Check out these examples of clear main messages:

- Everyone 6 months of age and older needs to get a flu vaccine every season.
- The soil has high levels of lead. This can cause health problems, especially for children. ATSDR recommends blood lead testing for children under age 6 who have come in contact with lead.

4 Be Brief

We're bombarded with thousands of messages a day, and this has changed the way we read. Readers tend to skim or scan materials now.

Include just the essential information. Remember, **the more you write, the less they'll read.**

Keep your materials short and to the point:

- Sentences — no more than 20 words
- Paragraphs — no more than 5 sentences

5 Get Back to Basics

The easiest structure to understand in English is subject ▯ verb ▯ object. Don't convolute writing with complicated grammatical patterns. Remember to:

- Write in active voice.
- Keep the subject and verb close together.
- Use a strong clear verb (when a sentence is unclear, the culprit is often a missing or unclear verb).

Check out these examples of clear structure:

✗ **Passive:** About 500 homes were left without water as a result of the chemical spill.

✓ **Active:** The chemical spill left about 500 homes without water.

✗ **Weak:** The *training* (subject), which was attended by 60 staff members and got over 95% approval ratings, *was* (weak verb) a huge success.

✓ **Better:** The training succeeded: 60 staff members attended and gave approval ratings of over 95%.

6 Carefully Craft Your Title and Subtitle

The first thing your readers see is your title. It draws them in. And a subtitle can serve as a primer for what comes next. Carefully craft a title and subtitle using the following guidelines:

- Title — no more than 8 words to grab attention
- Subtitle — no than 1 line to offer more context

Check out this example of an effective title and subtitle:

✗ **Instead of:** National Safety Month

✓ **Try this:** Spread the Word About National Safety Month! (*title*)
Learn 5 Ways You Can Make a Difference (*subtitle*)

7 Use Meaningful Headlines

"Chunk" content into short paragraphs and use lots of meaningful headings — 1 heading for every 1 to 3 paragraphs is a good rule of thumb.

Skip generic headings like "Overview" and "Background." If readers scan your material and just read the headings, what do they learn? Use headings to communicate messages (like short, bolded topic sentences for the text that follows).

Check out these examples of meaningful headings:

✗ **Weak:** Introduction

✓ **Better:** CDC Will Study Asthma Triggers in [City, State]

✗ **Weak:** Background

✓ **Better:** Emergency Room Visits Increase for Asthma Attacks

8 Pay Attention to Design

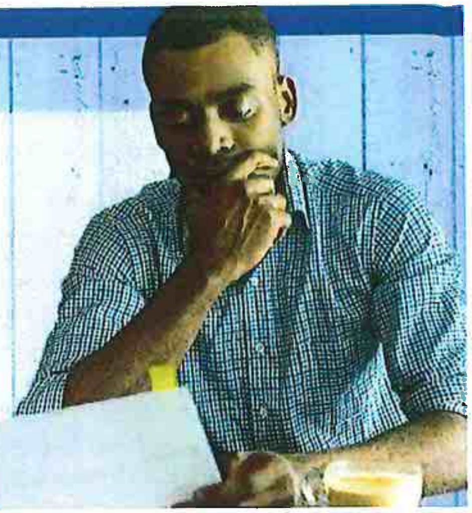
Design elements can help readers understand and remember your messages.
Remember to:

- Use images that reinforce your message. Never use an image that demonstrates something you don't want readers to do.
- Limit lists to no more than 7 bullets. And stay away from sub-bulleted lists.
- Use call-out boxes or bold for key messages, relevant related information, or content that helps spark interest.
- Make sure there's plenty of white space.

To access Your Guide to Clear Writing online, visit:
https://www.cdc.gov/nceh/clearwriting/docs/clear-writing-guide-508.pdf

Writing Models

Sometimes it's difficult to organize content into a clear, effective material. Writing models can help. Consider using one of the following models when you're working on your next writing task, and use the samples for each model to guide you. Check out the Health Communication Playbook for more ideas and samples.



Model 1: Storytelling

This is one clear, effective way to structure success stories or to deliver a message by presenting it as part of an engaging story. Try to keep stories short (about 800 words or fewer).

Structure of the Story

- **Title and Subtitle:** Write a short title (no more than 8 words) to grab your readers' attention. You can also choose to include a subtitle (no longer than 1 line) to offer more context.
- **Problem:** Write 1 to 2 short paragraphs. Start with the most dramatic moment. Explain the problem that you encountered in narrative form.
- **Intervention:** Write 1 to 2 short paragraphs. Describe what you did.
- **Outcome:** Write 1 to 2 short paragraphs. Discuss how your intervention helped.

Writing Tips for All Models

- Limit sentences to no more than 20 words.
- Limit paragraphs to no more than 5 sentences.
- Use a meaningful heading every 1 to 3 paragraphs.
- Keep your materials short — the more you write, the less they'll read!

Storytelling Sample

Disease Detectives in Ethiopia → **Title**

CDC Investigates Mystery Illness Spreading Across Northern Region → **Subtitle**

Disease Spreads to Remote Villages → **Problem**

In Northern Ethiopia, villagers developed stomach pain and swelling. Some even had trouble breathing. In a single household, 3 or 4 people would get sick — while others would not. In other families, everyone died from the sickness, but their neighbors did not. The symptoms were similar to liver disease. What was causing it?

CDC Investigates → **Intervention**

From 2005 through 2007, more than 1,200 people were diagnosed with this "unidentified liver disease," or ULD. Many of them died. In 2007, the Ethiopia Ministry of Health and Ethiopia Health and Nutrition Research Institute (EHNRI) asked CDC and other partners to help look into the outbreak.

A study ruled out infectious diseases as the cause and suggested the disease might be related to food. To find out more, scientists sometimes had to walk 4 hours each way to remote households. Investigators also tested grain samples grown in villages — and they found low levels of a plant-based toxin called pyrrolizidine alkaloids (PAs) in weeds harvested with the grain. Could that have anything to do with the outbreak?

Important Discovery about Separating Weeds → **Intervention continued...**

Following a recommendation from CDC, in 2009, EHNRI created a ULD surveillance system. CDC developed tools to take medical histories and collect physical and environmental samples. In 2011, CDC staff returned to Ethiopia and joined partners to:

- Visit villages
- Do physical examinations and ultrasounds
- Collect blood and urine samples
- Gather environmental samples for PA testing

Of the ULD patients sampled, 50% tested positive for PA. Testing showed that other family members and villagers had also come in contact with PA, but ULD patients had higher PA levels. Although households with and without ULD ate and drank the same foods and beverages, non-ULD households were more likely to separate the weeds from their crops before and after harvest.

Eradicating ULD → **Outcome**

The study helped researchers pinpoint the cause of ULD more accurately, but there's no cure — so getting rid of the source of PA was the only option. The health ministry began a "zero tolerance" policy for weeds, and EHNRI and health workers taught householders how to separate weeds from grain. They also encouraged villagers to check their livestock for ULD symptoms to protect themselves from contact with PA through milk or meat.

Thanks to the partners' skill, knowledge, and persistence, we know the cause of ULD. It's now called pyrrolizidine alkaloid-induced liver disease, or PAILD. More importantly, grain farmers in Ethiopia can now protect themselves and their families from this deadly disease.

Model 2: The Feature Article

This model, adapted from Wylie Communications, uses creative and engaging characteristics to help you deliver messages in an interesting way. Try to keep feature articles between 500 and 1000 words.

Structure of the Feature Article

- **Title and Subtitle:** Write a short title (no more than 8 words) to grab your readers' attention. You can also choose to include a subtitle (no longer than 1 line) to offer more context.
- **Lead:** Write 1 to 3 short sentences. This is the hook. Be creative — you want to provoke interest and questions.
- **Nutshell Paragraph:** Write 1 to 5 short sentences — include your key message.
- **Background:** If necessary, include 1 to 4 short sentences of background information.
- **Body:** Write 1 to 3 short paragraphs. Select and focus on just a few points that support your key message. And make sure you have a clear organizational pattern for this section — for example, put your points in hierarchical, chronological, or alphabetical order. Use engaging, meaningful headings for each main point — 1 heading every 1 to 3 paragraphs is a good rule of thumb.
- **Wrap-Up:** Restate your key message.

Feature Article Sample

Blue Wiener Dog Reveals Common Family Dilemma → Title

Learn How to Keep Your Kids Active and Healthy This Summer → Subtitle

As I kicked off my heels and headed toward the bedroom to change out of my office clothes, a faint smell of blueberries wafted toward me as Fritz, the family schnauzer, trotted my way. Once he reached me, he wiggled with that familiar wet-dog shake, spraying blueberry yogurt across the room and all over me. I looked down, and there stood my 7-year-old son, beaming with pride at his finger-painting experiment. → Lead

Before your kids figure out how to turn your kitchen into a slip-n-slide with butter — or blueberry yogurt — learn ways to keep them busy this summer. These tips will help keep your kids active and healthy. → Nutshell

An Hour a Day Keeps the Trouble Away (Maybe)

Help your kids be active for at least 1 hour a day. Include some activities that raise their heart rates and others that strengthen their muscles and bones. Find fun, safe, and active things you can do with your kids to help keep the whole family healthy. → Body

A Careful Eye Helps, Too
Monitor your kids' activities. Kids learn from family, friends, media, school, and more. Know who they spend time with, what they are doing, and whether their activities are age-appropriate. Try to avoid letting kids under age 2 watch TV — and limit TV viewing to no more than 2 hours per day for children age 2 and older. Learn how their schools promote health and safety.

Body

Remember the Pie Hole
Give your kids healthy meals and snacks. Eating right will help them get the nutrients needed to build strong bones and fight diseases. Help them choose healthy meals and snacks, too. Pay attention to what and how much they eat. This will help them stay on track — and may also uncover problems you didn't know about.

Body

Keep kids active. Monitor their activities. And provide healthy meals and snacks. These tips might not guarantee that the lactose-intolerant family pooch remains yogurt free, but it will help you raise safe and healthy kids.

Wrap-Up

Model 3: Tip Sheet

Offering tips (e.g., 5 Ways to Stay at a Healthy Weight) is a great way to reach your readers. This model is easy to read and encourages readers to engage with the content. Limit your material to 10 tips or fewer (fewer is better!). You might also hear tip sheets referred to as "listicles" — especially when they include photos, images, or graphic design. Here's a good example of a listicle.

Structure of the Tip Sheet

- **Title and Subtitle:** Write a short title (no more than 8 words) to grab your readers' attention. You can also choose to include a subtitle (no longer than 1 line) to offer more context.
- **Anecdote or Scenario:** Consider telling a very short story to show the need for these tips.
- **Transition:** Transition into the tips with a sentence like, "Here are 3 ways to…"
- **Tips:** State each tip clearly and succinctly (1 to 2 short sentences each). Bold the tips — and consider numbering them. You may also want to use a different color font or color blocking to emphasize the tips. Follow each tip with a brief explanation.
- **Wrap-Up:** Restate the need for the tips with a sentence like, "Use these tips to…".

Tip Sheet Sample

Help Save Your Patients' Lives in Just Minutes	Title
Teach your patients 3 easy tips to lower their risk for heart disease and stroke.	Subtitle
How many of your patients get too much sodium in their diet? More importantly, do they know that sodium raises blood pressure? And that high blood pressure is a major risk factor for heart disease and stroke? Heart disease and stroke are the nation's first and third leading causes of death. But you can teach your patients how to lower their risk for heart disease and stroke by eating less sodium (salt).	Scenario
Encourage them to follow these 3 easy tips.	Transition
1. **Cook low-sodium foods at home.** Encourage patients to make meals at home with fresh ingredients or low-sodium foods. Tell them to load up on foods that are naturally low in sodium, like vegetables, fruits, beans, and peas. Fresh, frozen, and dried options are all good choices. Teach them about healthy alternatives to salt when cooking – for example, fresh or dried herbs and spices or a squeeze of fresh lemon or lime juice.	Tip + Explanation
2. **Check food labels.** Teach patients how to check how much sodium is in the foods they buy. Don't forget to talk about serving size.	Tip + Explanation
3. **Plan ahead when eating out.** Suggest that patients check the website of their favorite restaurant for nutrition information. Encourage them to choose the meal with the lowest amount of sodium.	Tip + Explanation
Once a patient starts to lower their sodium intake, their blood pressure will begin to go down within weeks. Even patients who don't have high blood pressure will benefit – the lower a person's blood pressure, the lower the risk of heart disease and stroke. Help your patients reduce their sodium intake by teaching them these 3 easy tips. For more information, visit http://www.cdc.gov/salt.	Wrap-Up

Model 4: The Infographic

Infographics are visual displays of data, information, or knowledge – think of them as visual storytelling. They're a great tool for communicating complex information quickly, and they're easy (and fun!) to share – especially on social media. Infographics rely on visual representation of information to tell a story, so you want to limit written content as best you can.

Make sure an infographic is the right format for the job. If you have a lot of words that you simply can't cut, you may want to consider another format. You also want to think about your design capacity — if you don't have a designer, an infographic might not be the best choice for your content.

Here are some types of data that could lend themselves well to an infographic:

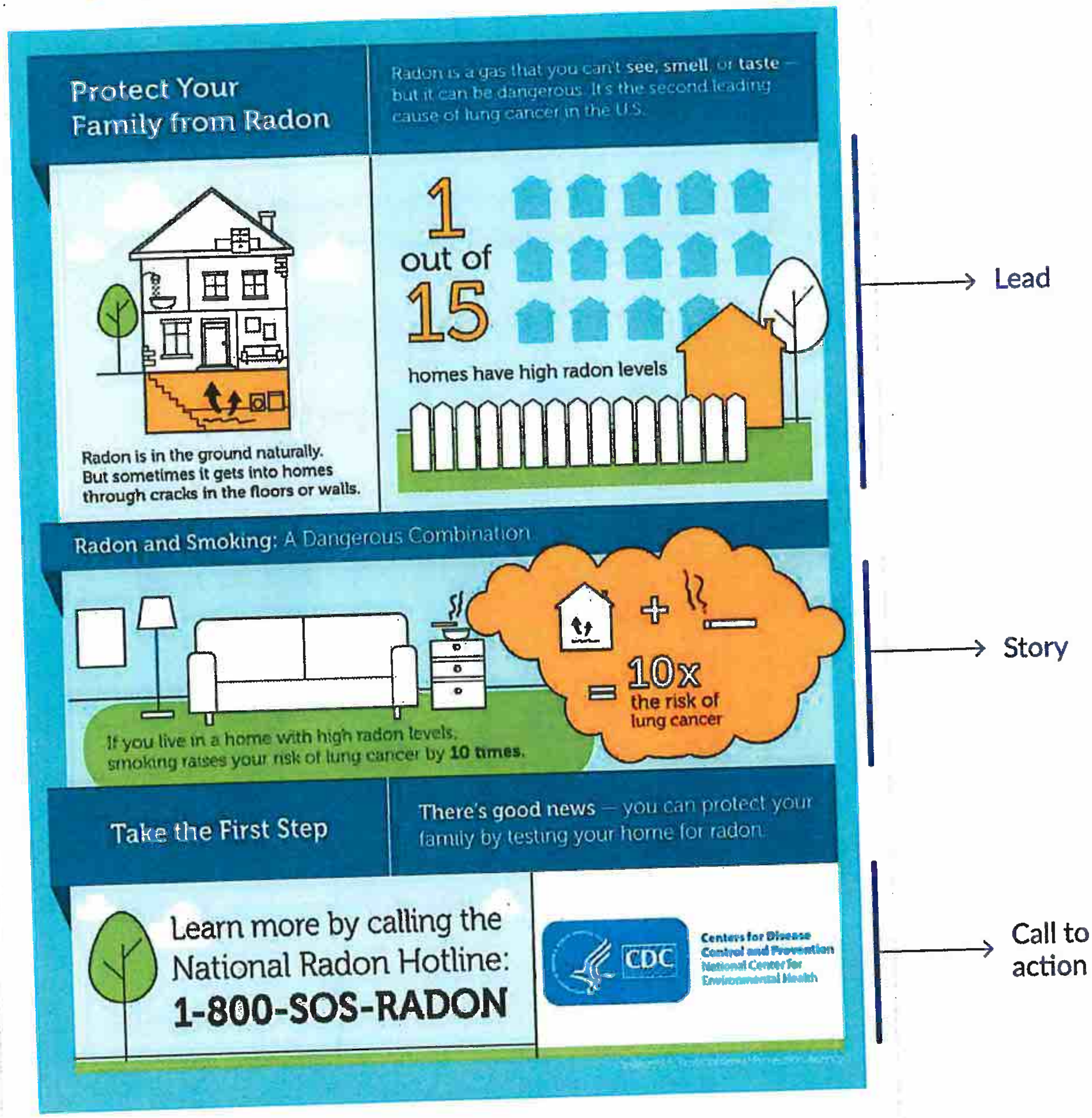
- Statistical data (e.g., how many children have asthma)
- How-to (e.g., how to clean lead dust safely)
- Timeline (e.g., history of the Chemical Weapons Elimination Program)
- Process (e.g., the steps of the Public Health Assessment process)
- Maps (e.g., states that record data on chemical incidents)
- Comparisons (e.g., air pollution in 1950 vs. 2015)

Structure of the Infographic

- **Title and Subtitle:** Grab your readers' attention with a short title (no more than 8 words). You may even be able to use your main message as the title. You can also choose to include a subtitle (no longer than 1 line) — but because subtitles are optional, you may want to skip them to limit written content.
- **Lead:** If possible, lead with a really compelling statistic — your "hero statistic" — to set the stage (e.g., 9 in 10 adults have trouble understanding complex health information). Use visuals to support the statistic.
- **Story:** Tell your story using meaningful data, supporting visuals, and minimal words. Keep in mind that infographics aren't a "dumping ground" for data — choose only the most relevant facts, and make sure that everything you include supports the narrative.
- **Solution and Call to Action:** Depending on the topic of your infographic, you may want to provide a solution or include a call to action.
- **Sources:** Cite sources of data.

Keep in mind that infographics are usually posted online and not printed. If you want to print your infographic, be sure to tell the design team in advance so they can plan accordingly. It's also important to note if you plan to share the infographic on social media — designers can help make sure it's in a format that's easy to share or create related supplemental content for social media.

Infographic Sample



Model 5: The Quiz

Want to make dry, boring content engaging? Consider using a quiz model to draw your readers in. Instead of simply giving them facts or tips, ask them questions to test their knowledge. And then take the opportunity to give them additional (but limited!) information that helps explain important public health messages.

Structure of the Quiz Model

- **Title and Subtitle:** Write a short title (no more than 8 words) to grab your readers' attention. You can also choose to include a subtitle (no longer than 1 line) to offer more context.
- **Anecdote or Scenario:** Consider telling a very short story or asking a provoking question to increase reader interest.
- **Transition:** Transition into the quiz with a sentence like, "Test your knowledge..." or "How much do you know about...".
- **Questions:** State each question clearly and succinctly (just 1 to 2 short sentences each). Number and bold the questions. You may also want to use a different color font or color blocking to emphasize the questions. Follow each question with a brief explanation.
- **Wrap-Up:** Restate the need for this information.

Quiz Sample

Do You Know What Kind of Noise Damages Your Hearing? → Title

Take our quiz to test your knowledge and learn how to prevent noise-related hearing loss. → Subtitle

Rock concerts, hockey games, firework shows — what do they have in common? They have large audiences and they're noisy! But are they loud enough to cause hearing loss? And how loud is too loud? → Scenario

Take this quiz to see how much you know about how noise can affect your hearing.

1. **Can loud music damage your hearing after 5 minutes?** → Question
   Yes. Listening to music turned up to full volume or at a loud venue can cause hearing loss in less than 5 minutes. In fact, 5 in 10 young people listen to their music too loudly. Turn down the volume on your headphones.

2. **Can a single loud sound near your ear, like a firecracker, damage your hearing?** → Question
   Yes. The louder the sound is, the less time it takes to cause hearing loss. Being around loud noises over time also causes hearing loss. Try to stay away from loud noises.

3. **Can wearing earplugs protect your ears from hearing loss?** → Question

Yes. Avoiding noisy situations is the best prevention for hearing loss. But if you can't avoid them, definitely use hearing protection, like earplugs or a pair of noise-blocking earmuffs.

4. **What are signs of possible hearing loss?** → Question

Here are some of the most common signs of hearing loss:

- You often ask others to repeat what they said.
- You often turn up the volume of the television or radio.
- You have problems understanding conversations in noisy places or over the phone.

If you have any signs of hearing loss, get your hearing tested.

Everyday sounds don't usually cause hearing loss. But some common activities may damage your hearing. Being around loud noise over the years affects how well you hear later in life and how quickly you develop hearing problems. But you can take steps to protect your hearing now. For example:

- Turn down the volume on your headphones.
- Try to stay away from loud noises.
- Use earplugs or noise-cancelling headphones when you're around loud noises.
- If you have signs of hearing loss, get your hearing tested.

→ Wrap-Up

Learn more at www.cdc.gov/nceh/hearing_loss

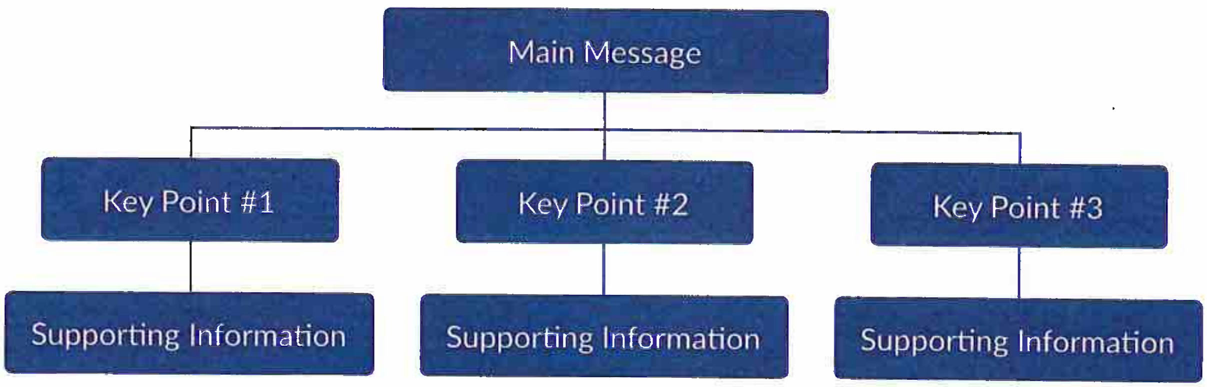
Model 6: Message Mapping

Message maps, developed for risk communication by Dr. Vincent Covello, can help you create a roadmap for how to respond to public health questions or concerns. These maps are most often used as a visual aid for professionals interacting with the media, concerned communities, and others. But you can also use a message map to identify and organize messages for a written material. The template below is for one of Dr. Covello's most practical models.

Structure of the Message Map

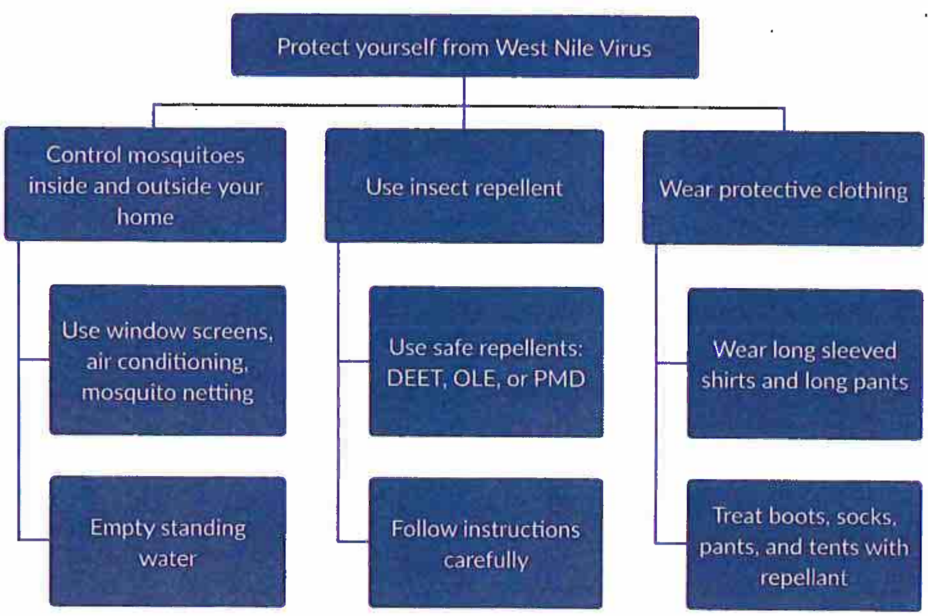
Identify the question or concern that you're addressing. Remember that people often have a difficult time hearing, understanding, and remembering information when they're worried about something. So, you want to develop:

- 1 clear, succinct message that directly addresses their concern
- A limited number of key points (1 to 3 is plenty) that provide more details or recommendations
- A limited amount of supporting information to reinforce those details or recommendations



Message Mapping Sample

First, put your content into a message-map format.



Then, convert the message map to prose.

Get Ready for Mosquito Season

No one likes mosquito bites! They're itchy and uncomfortable — and, even more importantly, mosquitoes can carry serious diseases like the West Nile virus. The good news is that you can protect yourself and your children from West Nile and other diseases spread by mosquitoes. Start by controlling mosquitoes inside and outside your home, using insect repellent, and wearing protective clothing.

Take steps to control mosquitoes inside and outside your home.

- Use screens on windows and doors. Repair holes in screens to keep mosquitoes outside.
- Use air conditioning when available. Sleep under a mosquito bed net if air conditioned or screened rooms are not available — or if you're sleeping outdoors.
- Once a week, check things near your home that hold water — for example, tires, buckets, planters, toys, pools, birdbaths, flowerpots, or trash containers. Empty and scrub, turn over, cover, or throw them out. Be sure to check inside and outside your home. This helps keep mosquitoes away because they lay eggs near standing water.

Use insect repellent.

- Use repellents with the active ingredients registered by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), like DEET. You can learn more from EPA.
- Follow instructions carefully. When used as directed, this repellent is safe for children over 2 months, as well as pregnant and breastfeeding women.

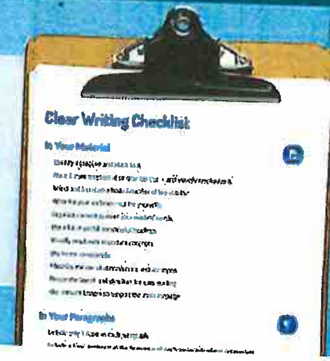
Wear protective clothing.

- Wear long sleeved shirts and long pants.
- Treat boots, socks, pants, and tents with permethrin.
- Dress your child in protective clothing and cover strollers and baby carriers with mosquito netting.

Learn more about preventing mosquito bites from CDC.

Clear Writing Checklist

Use the following checklist to create clear, organized, and effective materials. Details about each item follow the checklist.



In Your Material

- ☐ Identify a purpose and stick to it.
- ☐ Place 1 main message at or near the top — and visually emphasize it.
- ☐ Select and focus on a limited number of key points.
- ☐ Write for your audience (not for yourself!).
- ☐ Organize content to meet your readers' needs.
- ☐ Use a lot of useful, meaningful headings.
- ☐ Visually emphasize important concepts.
- ☐ Use terms consistently.
- ☐ Minimize the use of abbreviations and acronyms.
- ☐ Design the layout and structure for easy reading.
- ☐ Use relevant images to support the main message.

In Your Paragraphs

- ☐ Include only 1 topic in each paragraph.
- ☐ Include a topic sentence at the beginning of each paragraph where appropriate.
- ☐ Use transitions to get from 1 paragraph to the next.
- ☐ Write short paragraphs that vary in length.
- ☐ Use short bulleted and numbered lists to break up dense information and add white space.
- ☐ Use tables where appropriate to make complex material easier to understand.

In Your Sentences

- ☐ Make sure each sentence is about 1 thing or serves 1 purpose.
- ☐ Write short sentences.
- ☐ Use pronouns like "you" and "we" where appropriate to speak directly to readers.
- ☐ Write in the active voice.
- ☐ Make the action of each sentence clear.
- ☐ Use examples where appropriate.
- ☐ Use the simplest form of verbs.
- ☐ Avoid using hidden verbs.
- ☐ Use contractions where appropriate.
- ☐ Don't use jargon or unnecessary technical terms.
- ☐ Use short, simple words.
- ☐ Don't cluster a bunch of nouns together.
- ☐ Cut unnecessary words.
- ☐ Don't use slashes.
- ☐ Keep the subject, verb, and object close together.
- ☐ Put the main idea before exceptions and conditions.
- ☐ Place words carefully.

To access Your Guide to Clear Writing online, visit:
https://www.cdc.gov/nceh/clearwriting/docs/clear-writing-guide-508.pdf

Supporting Information for the Clear Writing Checklist

In Your Material

Identify a purpose and stick to it.

A clearly stated purpose helps create a focused material — all the separate pieces (pages, paragraphs, sections, images, etc.) work together to achieve a specific goal.

Place 1 main message at or near the top — and visually emphasize it.

What is the 1 thing you want your reader to remember? This is your main message — put it at or near the top of your material. Ideally, it should be 1 to 3 sentences long. Emphasize it by bolding it and making the font larger. You might even put it in a shaded text box.

Select and focus on a limited number of key points.

Short-term memory research shows that, generally, people can process limited bits of information at a time. Mapping methods, like message mapping, suggest selecting 1 main message and 1 to 3 points to support that message. This helps make sure that your reader will easily process, understand, and remember your message.

Write for your audience (not for yourself!).

Use language your audience knows and feels comfortable with. Take your audience's current level of knowledge into account. If you have separate audiences, address them separately. Remember to write for audience and purpose and not for author (yourself) and topic. Think: what does your audience need to know, not what do you want to say.

Organize content to meet your readers' needs.

Start by stating the material's purpose and bottom line. Put the most important information at the beginning and include background information (when necessary) toward the end. Get rid of filler and unnecessary content.

Use a lot of useful, meaningful headings.

Materials with lots of informative headings are easy to follow because the headings break up content into logical, easy-to-understand pieces. A good rule of thumb is to have 1 heading for every 1 to 3 paragraphs. Aim for headings that are no longer than 8 words.

Visually emphasize important concepts.

Use **bold text** to make important concepts stand out. For some audiences, *italics* can work, too — but slanted text can be tricky for users with limited literacy skills to read. **PUTTING EVERYTHING IN CAPITAL LETTERS IS NOT A GOOD EMPHASIS TECHNIQUE BECAUSE IT MAKES CONTENT HARDER TO READ (AND READERS MAY THINK YOU'RE SHOUTING).** **Similarly, underlining content draws attention to it, but also makes it harder to read** — and many people expect underlined text to be a link.

Use terms consistently.

You risk confusing your audience if you use different terms for the same concept. For example, if you use the term "older adults" to refer to a group, continue to use this term throughout your material. Don't substitute another term, like "senior citizens."

Minimize the use of abbreviations and acronyms.

Limit the number of abbreviations and acronyms you use in a material to no more than 5 when possible. Use these tips to help reduce acronyms and abbreviations:

- Use terms like "the committee" or "the report" in place of acronyms.
- If you only use the abbreviation or acronym a couple times, consider spelling it out instead.

Design the layout and structure for easy reading.

Here are a few brief guidelines for designing your material:

- Break text into manageable chunks with meaningful headings.
- Use text size, color, and placement to help readers focus on the main message.
- Group headings and related text together — so it's clear what goes with what.
- Use left-alignment instead of justifying your text.

Use relevant images to support the main message.

Carefully choose meaningful images that support or reinforce the main message or key points. Avoid using images to "decorate" your material, and never use an image that shows behavior you want your reader to avoid or change. For example, if you want your reader to stay away from contaminated water, don't choose an image that shows kids playing near water (even if the water in the image looks clean).

In Your Paragraphs

¶

Include only 1 topic in each paragraph.

Your readers are most likely to understand the point you want to make if you limit each paragraph to a single topic.

Include a topic sentence at the beginning of each paragraph where appropriate.

If you tell people what they're going to read about, they're more likely to understand your paragraph. Give your audience context before you provide them with details. We often write the way we think — we state our premise first, followed by a conclusion. That may be the natural way to develop thoughts — but if you write that way, you can wind up with the topic sentence at the end of the paragraph.

Let readers know where you're going by moving that topic sentence to the beginning of the paragraph. Don't make them hold a lot of information in their heads before they get to your point.

Use transitions to get from 1 paragraph to the next.

Think of your readers as driving cars. They need signs and directions to help them get where you want them to go. Make sure they get those directions by linking paragraphs together with transition words and sentences. A transition doesn't have to be long and tedious — it can be as short as starting a paragraph with "but" or "still."

Write short paragraphs that vary in length.

Long paragraphs that end up creating a "wall of words" can keep your audience from even trying to understand your material. Short paragraphs are easier to read and understand. Experts recommend limiting paragraphs to no more than 100 words or 5 sentences. Try to vary the lengths of your paragraphs to make them more interesting.

Use short bulleted and numbered lists to break up dense information and add white space.

Lists highlight a series of requirements or other information in a visually clear way. Use vertical lists to help your reader focus on important material. Vertical lists:

- Highlight levels of importance
- Help readers understand the order in which things happen
- Make it easy for readers to identify all necessary steps in a process
- Add white space for easy reading
- Are an ideal way to present items, conditions, and exceptions

Your lists will be easier to read if you use bullets. Also include a lead-in sentence to explain your lists. Keep lists short (no more than 7 bullets) and avoid sub-bulleted lists within lists.

Use tables where appropriate to make complex material easier to understand.

Tables can help your audience see relationships that may be hidden in dense text. Think about using a standard table or a more specific model, like an "if-then" table.

In Your Sentences

Make sure each sentence is about 1 thing or serves 1 purpose.

Focus each sentence on 1 thing. If you overload a sentence with multiple purposes, you interfere with your readers' comprehension. You're also asking them to interpret which is the more important message or purpose. They may focus on something different than what you wanted to emphasize.

Write short sentences.

Include only 1 idea in each sentence. Long, complicated sentences are often a sign that you're not really sure what you want to say. Don't write sentences with more than 20 words. Shorter sentences are also better for communicating complex information because they break information up into smaller, easy-to-process pieces.

Sentences loaded with dependent clauses and exceptions confuse readers by burying the main point. Break down your idea and make each part the subject of its own sentence. Vary your sentence length to make content more interesting to the reader. That's what Hemingway did – no reason you can't do the same.

Use pronouns like "you" and "we" where appropriate to speak directly to readers.

Your material may be relevant for thousands of people, but remember that you're speaking to the 1 person who's reading it. Address that person, not the thousands. Pronouns help readers "picture themselves" in content and relate better to your materials. Using "you" pulls readers into your materials and makes it relevant to them. Using "we" to refer to your organization makes you sound more approachable. It also makes your sentences shorter and your material easier to read.

Write in the active voice.

Active voice (e.g., "we recommend that") is clear, concise, and direct. Passive voice (e.g., "it is recommended that") can be wordy and awkward – it can also disguise who's doing what. Use active voice unless you have a specific reason not to (e.g., you don't know who the actor was or you want to emphasize the action or object).

Make the action of each sentence clear.

When a reader can't figure out a sentence, it may be because the action isn't clear. What exactly is happening in the sentence? Tell your readers by using a strong, clear verb.

Use examples where appropriate.

Examples help you clarify complex concepts. In spoken English, when you ask for clarification of something, people often respond by giving you an example. Good examples can substitute for long explanations. The more complex the concept you're writing about, the more you should consider using an example. And it's okay to write, "For example, ...".

Use the simplest form of verbs.

The simplest and strongest form of a verb is present tense. Using the present tense makes content more direct and forceful. Also, don't use a more complicated version of the verb when you don't have to. For example, write "use" instead of "utilize."

Avoid using hidden verbs.

A hidden verb is a verb that's turned into a noun. It often needs an extra verb to make sense, so you wind up writing a longer, less direct sentence. For example, write "Please **apply** for a personal loan" instead of "Please make an **application** for a personal loan."

Use contractions where appropriate.

Contractions help make your writing feel less stuffy and more natural. They can also make your writing more accessible – research shows that contractions improve readability. This makes sense as people use contractions when they talk. So it's okay to use contractions, **don't** you think?

Don't use jargon or unnecessary technical terms.

Don't use jargon or technical terms when everyday words work. For example, write "high blood pressure," not "hypertension." Use words and terms consistently throughout your material.

Use short, simple words.

Word choice is an important part of communicating clearly. Be expressive, but remember that most public health writing is no place for literary flair – it's not going to be someone's fireside reading. Pick the familiar or commonly used words over the unusual or obscure. As George Orwell said, "Never use a long word where a short one will do."

Don't cluster a bunch of nouns together.

Technical writing often uses too many noun strings, or groups of nouns "sandwiched" together (e.g., "disaster cleanup site database"). Readability suffers when you string together 3 or more words that are usually separate. Technically, clustering nouns turns all but the last noun into adjectives. But many readers will think they've found the noun when they're still reading adjectives — and that's confusing. Cut descriptive words that you don't need. Or use prepositions and articles to clarify the relationships between words.

Cut unnecessary words.

Don't confuse your readers by writing long, complex sentences with multiple phrases and clauses. Watch out for "of," "to," "on," and other prepositions. You can also get rid of redundant words and avoid doublets and triplets (i.e., when authors repeat the same concept by using different words that say the same thing — like, "knowledge and information"). If it's possible to cut a word out, do it.

Don't use slashes.

Apart from fractions (if you must use them), the slash is almost never necessary. "And/or" is a classic example. In some cases, writers mean *either* "or" *or* "and," but don't want to take the time to decide, so they push the job off on the reader. That makes for ambiguous writing. Remember, it's your job to decide what you mean.

In the few cases where you truly mean both, it's better to write out "either X, or Y, or both." Also be on the lookout for slashes that are mistakenly used to join equal or like terms — that's actually a job for the hyphen (e.g., write "faculty-student ratio," not "faculty/student ratio").

Keep the subject, verb, and object close together.

The natural word order of an English sentence is subject, verb, object. That's how you first learned to write sentences, and it's still the best way. When you put modifiers, phrases, or clauses between 2 or all 3 of these essential parts, you make it harder for your readers to understand your writing.

Put the main idea before exceptions and conditions.

Starting a sentence with an introductory phrase (or a word like "except") almost always forces people to reread the sentence. Think about it: you're stating an exception to a rule before you've stated the rule itself. Most of the time, this means the reader has to process the exception, process the rule, and then reread the sentence to grasp the relationship between the 2. Start with the main idea — then cover exceptions and conditions.

For example, write "Talk to a trusted adult if you're concerned about a friend" instead of "If you're concerned about a friend, talk to a trusted adult."

Place words carefully.

Sloppy word placement can make for vague content. To reduce ambiguity, put conditionals like "only" or "always" and other modifiers next to the words they modify. For example, write "you're required to provide only the following," not "you're only required to provide the following."

Tips for Communicating About Amount and Units of Measure

If you're trying to reach a consumer audience, writing about units of measure in environmental health materials isn't easy. After all, most people have no idea what "ng/m^3" or "µg/L" means. Sure, they're accurate — but if they don't *mean* anything to your reader, what's the point?

Of course, there are times when it's appropriate to use complex units of measure — for example, in reports like public health assessments that don't exclusively target consumers. But for consumer-targeted environmental health information, use these tips to keep it simple and clear.

Contextualize amounts in terms of what matters to your reader.

Measurements like "mg/m3" or "pCi/L" don't mean anything to consumers. And often, the number (numerical amount) doesn't matter much to them either. They want to know what the number means to them. Give your audience the information they're looking for:

- Use words like "level," "amount," and "range."
- Consider phrases like "too high," "unsafe," and "normal" when appropriate.

For example:

- The levels of perchlorate weren't high enough to cause health problems.
- We found that the amount of lead in the water means it's unsafe to drink.

Learn more about tailoring information for a specific audience.

"That's about the size of a..."

When writing about size or weight, give readers a point of reference in a familiar item. This can really help them understand different types of measurements. For example: The environmental department removed 450 tons of contaminated soil — that's 45 dump truck loads!

When you do use a number with a unit of measure, always clarify the meaning.

Sometimes, knowing a number will be important for the consumer. But that doesn't mean they're going to understand the unit of measure. Simplify the language and provide context:

- Your child's blood lead level was 11 micrograms per deciliter (μg/dL). That means she has an unsafe level of lead in her blood.
- EPA recommends fixing your home if your indoor levels of radon are 4 or more picocuries per liter of air (4 pCi/L).

Consider including ranges to further contextualize the number.

Specifying ranges can also be very helpful to consumers. It can be difficult to interpret a single number without knowing where it falls on the range of "normal."

For example:

- We found that the mercury level in the local soil was 80 ppb. Normal soil levels range from 20 to 625 ppb, so we aren't worried about that number.
- Levels of benzene in outdoor air generally range from less than 1 to 34 ppb. The level we found around the waste site was 46 ppb — higher than average.

Note: Sometimes you may need to include more information to explain what the reference range represents.

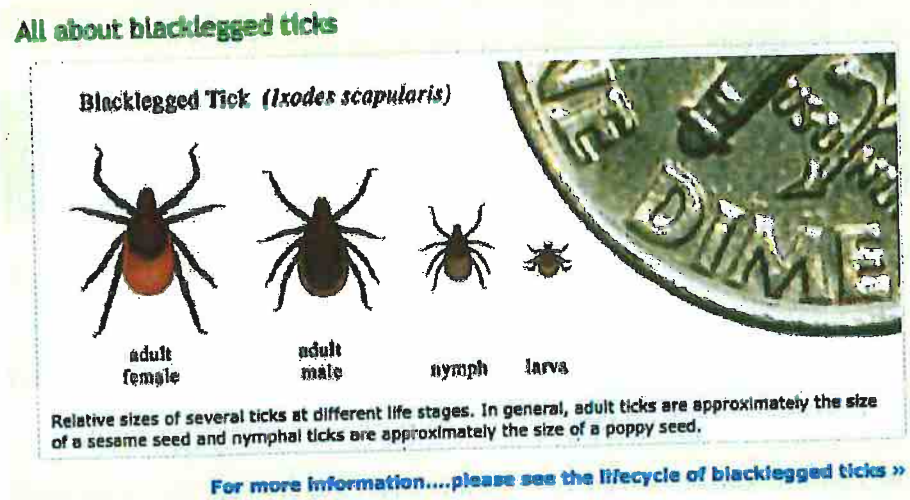
Explain complex units of measure to help your reader going forward.

Sometimes, it makes sense to teach your reader a term, especially if they're dealing with a specific issue and need to understand the details:

- If private well owners need to have their water checked for a certain contaminant, they may find it helpful to understand the unit of measure of the contaminant.
- If a parent needs to monitor their child's asthma using a peak flow meter, they may want to understand what they're measuring to help keep their child safe.

Use visuals to help.

You don't have to rely only on words to communicate about amount — images can make a big difference. Visuals can help you show the size of things in scale — use familiar objects to clearly communicate about size:

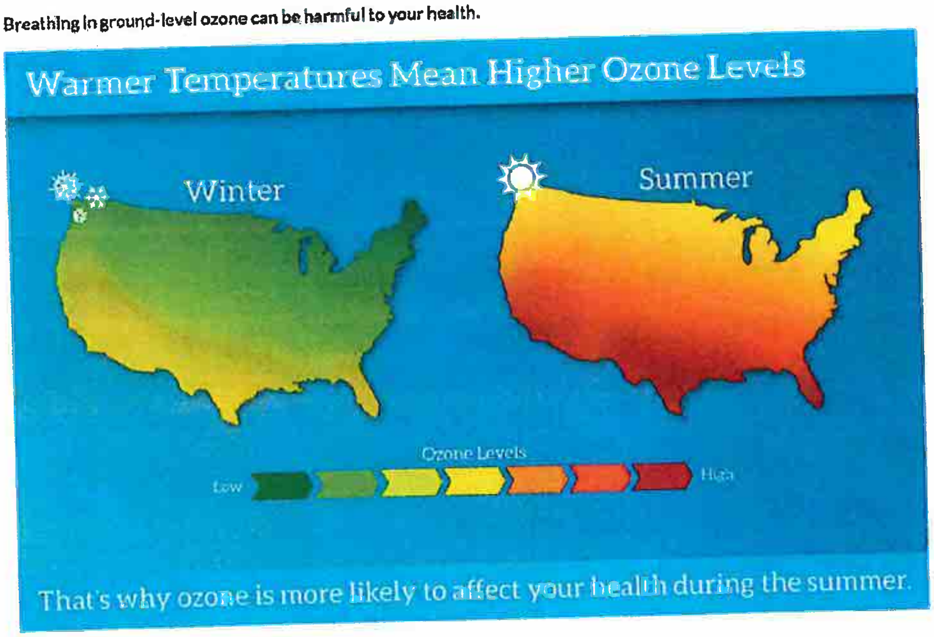


Can't see it? Don't try to show it.

If you're writing about something that's measured in very tiny units (like parts per billion), don't try to show it with visuals. After all, you can't see it in real life. Trying to use visuals shown in scale isn't helpful — and might be confusing. Use language instead: It's so small you need a microscope to see it.

Images can also help you communicate the concept of a range. This can be particularly helpful when writing about environmental health, since the most important information for consumers is often related to a range (low to high, safe to unsafe, below average to above average, etc.):

Breathing in ground-level ozone can be harmful to your health.



Visual cues integrated into your writing can also help communicate about levels and ranges. For example, consider the "stoplight" (red, yellow, green) color cues:

The Bottom Line	
🟢	The drinking water supply is safe, with the exception of a specific private well.
🟡	Some fish and shellfish may be contaminated with certain metals. It's important to follow fish advisories and fishing rules.
🔴	Some fish are contaminated with levels of mercury high enough to cause certain types of health problems.

A Few Tips on Numeracy in General

When using numbers in your material, ask yourself:

Do you use whole numbers whenever possible?

Most people struggle to understand percentages, decimals, and fractions. Meet your audience where they are and use whole numbers whenever you can:

- **Write:** About 4 out of every 10 community members has reported concern that the site is harming their health.
- **Not:** About 40% of community members have reported concern that the site is harming their health.

> **TIP:** You can also represent statistics like these visually to help your readers understand. Try this free tool to create visual displays of statistics.

Does the material always explain what the numbers mean?

Numbers can mean different things to different people – and that's why context is key. Is the number high or low for this type of health issue or higher or lower than expected? Let your reader know:

- **Write:** 3 out of 10 Americans have high blood pressure. That's a very high number.
- **Not:** 3 out of 10 Americans have high blood pressure.

Does your audience have to do any math to understand important information?

Always do the math for your reader. Research shows that even trained statisticians make mistakes doing calculations depending on the context, so don't leave room for error:

- **Write:** Cleanup will take about 115 hours. That's just under 3 weeks.
- **Not:** Cleanup will take about 115 hours.

For more information about numeracy, check out the guidance on numbers in the CDC Clear Communication Index.

To access Your Guide to Clear Writing online, visit:
https://www.cdc.gov/nceh/clearwriting/docs/clear-writing-guide-508.pdf

Plain Language Tip Sheet for Reviewers

Sometimes, you may be responsible for reviewing materials written by your colleagues. And though you may be comfortable reviewing materials for scientific accuracy, how can you help make sure the materials are useful and clear, too?

This tip sheet will help you figure out if materials meet the standards of the Plain Writing Act. It will also help you provide useful guidance to authors so they know how to make their materials clearer and easier to understand.

How to Review the Material

There are several questions you can ask to make sure a material follows plain language best practices. These questions generally fall under the categories of **content**, **layout**, and **literacy**.

Plain language is not "dumbing down!"

Sometimes, it's hard to shake the feeling that plain language is about oversimplifying, but that's not the case. Plain language is using best practices of clear communication to make sure your target audience understands your content the first time they read it.

Content

When you're reviewing content, think about the goal of the material — what it's trying to do and the audience it's trying to reach. Ask yourself:

- Is the target audience clear?
- Does the material have a clear main message?
- Does the most important information come first?

Layout

How content looks to readers may be more important than you think. If it appears dense, overwhelming, or inaccessible, it's likely that readers will skip it altogether. Ask yourself:

- Is there enough white space so that the material doesn't look overwhelming?
- Does the material have clear, descriptive, and meaningful headings?
- Is content broken up into manageable "chunks," or does it look like a wall of words? Remember that long and sub-bulleted lists can wind up looking like a wall of words, too.
- Is the font easy to read and consistent throughout the material?

Literacy

Reviewing a material for literacy means considering if the target audience will find the content easy to read and understand. Ask yourself:

- Are most sentences short and simple?
- Does the material use simple, clear language that's appropriate for the target audience?
- If the material needs to include jargon, is it defined in plain language?

How to Respond to Authors

Use these 3 easy steps and sample email to give the author clear guidance on what to do next.

1. **Remember that you don't need to edit the material yourself.**
   You aren't responsible for rewriting the material in plain language. Of course it's normal to want to edit language that you don't think meets your organization's standards, but try to resist the urge to wordsmith!

   Instead, think of your review as an opportunity to train the author in plain language — your responsibility is to call out the areas that need improvement, and the author's job is to fix them. In other words, you're assessing the material using the principles of plain language, not editing it for plain language.

2. **Use the checklist to call out problem areas.**
   The checklist that follows this tip sheet will help you identify what the author needs to work on to make sure the material uses plain language best practices. Whenever you can, give the author concrete examples of the kind of fixes they need to make. (The checklist has spaces to fill out a few, but feel free to offer more!)

3. **Identify sources of additional support.**
   Encourage authors to get help making their revisions — professional assistance will build their plain language skills. Tell them about easily accessible and free resources.

The sample message below lists some contact information and specific resources.

Sample Email for Authors

Along with my edits for scientific accuracy, I've included a checklist of plain language best practices to help you make sure the material meets the standards of the Plain Writing Act. Please see the items called out in the checklist below and make revisions to your material.

You may also want to check out the Health Communication Playbook — and the other resources on the Clear Writing Hub.

Plain Language Revision Checklist

Use the following checklist to keep you on track as you review the material.

Content

☐ Make sure your target audience is clear. The main message, the type of information you're communicating, and the way it's communicated all need to make sense for your target audience.

> **TIP:** If you're trying to write for multiple distinct audiences, consider creating separate materials.

☐ Check that your material has a clear main message. What are you trying to communicate? What do you want your audience to do? If you aren't clear on these points, your audience won't be either. Identify 1 clear message that informs the rest of your content.

> **TIP:** Check out the Clear Communication Index for an examples of a clear main message.

☐ Put the most important information first. The main message of your material needs to be clear to readers right away. Lead with what your readers need to know — then follow with what's nice to know.

> **TIP:** Imagine that you're looking at your material for the first time. Would you know what the main message is from reading the title and first few lines?

Layout

☐ Include more white space so the material doesn't look overwhelming. Many readers are easily intimidated by dense, content-heavy material.

> **TIP:** Use shorter paragraphs, tables, and lists to add more white space.

☐ Use more headings (aim for 1 heading every 1 to 3 paragraphs), and make sure they are clear, descriptive, and meaningful. For example, instead of ____________, use a heading like ____________.

☐ Break content up into manageable "chunks" of information. Limit paragraphs to no longer than 5 sentences — or about 100 words.

> **TIP:** Try not to cover more than 1 topic per paragraph. Focusing on 1 thing in each paragraph will keep them short and clear.

☐ Use a font that's easy to read — and use it consistently throughout the material. It's okay to have a different font for your headings, but that's the only exception.

Literacy

☐ Make sentences shorter and easier to read. Sentences shouldn't be more than about 20 words long. Also, use active voice (not passive voice). Learn about active and passive voice.

☐ Make sure that the language is simple, clear, and audience appropriate. Keep in mind that words that are appropriate for 1 audience may be completely inappropriate for another.

☐ Remove unnecessary jargon. If you need to include jargon, define it in plain language. For example, instead of__________, try a simpler term like __________. Or if you need to include a technical term like __________, also give a plain language definition like ____________. Find everyday alternatives to public health terms using CDC's resource.

Testing Your Materials

Remember to test your materials! Testing helps make sure that your final product will be useful for your readers. And you don't need a lot of money or time — or even people! — to test. Below are a few easy recommendations for informal user testing.

Why do I need to test my material?

When it comes to understanding your material, your readers are the experts. Testing your material with the target audience can improve your readers' satisfaction and increase their trust in your material.

What type of testing is right for me?

There are lots of options to test your material with your audience, and each method of testing has its pros and cons.

An important note on testing: Testing messages from people is a type of information collection. The Paperwork Reduction Act (PRA) aims to reduce the burden placed on the public when the government collects information. The Act generally requires a federal agency to get approval when using identical questions with 10 or more people in a 12-month period. The Office of Management and Budget (OMB) gives this approval. Learn more about PRA at usability.gov.

If you work for a federal agency, check with your PRA point of contact before you do any testing. If a federal agency is funding your program, check with your agency project officer before doing any testing. The project officer can refer you to the agency's point of contact, who can tell if you'll need PRA clearance before you begin message testing.

Focus groups: You can get a lot of valuable feedback in a short amount of time when you're talking to a group of people. Focus groups can help at any point during the development process — use them early on to help inform your material or later to get feedback on a draft. The more people you test with, the more clear your findings will be — testing with at least 3 small groups is a good rule of thumb.

But keep in mind that you'll need OMB approval to test with more than 9 people total. (Note this requirement does **not** apply to government staff — test with as many federal employees as you like!).

One-on-one interviews: Getting individual feedback from your target audience is also useful at any stage of the process. Use findings from **one-on-one interviews** to inform or evaluate your materials. This type of testing can also be useful if you're having trouble recruiting people to participate in a focus group. Try testing your material with 3 to 8 people from your target audience.

Surveys: Consider doing a survey if focus groups or interviews aren't an option. Surveys are a quick and affordable way to get feedback for your material, and they're well suited for quantitative data.

TIP: Platforms like SurveyMonkey have free account options.*

When do I test?

As noted above, you can do user testing at different points in the process (and ideally, at multiple points in the process!). Testing early on can help you make sure you're on the right track *before* you put time, effort, and resources into developing materials — and testing later in the process can help you find out if your material is effective.

At the very beginning: Talk to people in your target audience to get a sense of what they already know about your topic, how they feel about it, and what might motivate them to change their behavior.

When you have key messages: Show participants your draft key messages (in bullets) and get their reactions. This can help you figure out which words or phrases they find compelling or relatable and whether or not the messages are clear and actionable.

Once you've developed draft materials: At this point you want to confirm that the material is easy to read and use. To accomplish this, use a mix of open-ended questions and specific tasks. For example:

- As you review please underline the words and phrases that are most helpful to you. Circle anything that's confusing.
- After seeing this, what would you be saying to yourself?
- Where would you expect to see a [product] like this?
- How would you use this chart to figure out which vaccines your 4-year-old child needs?

For digital products: Ask your participants to "think out loud" as they go — and pay attention to what they **do** with the material, not just what they say. One-on-one usability testing is typically the best method at this stage. Check out Health Literacy Online for more guidance on developing user-friendly websites or tools and testing them with users.

Who do I test with?

It's best to test with people who are as similar to your target audience as possible, but keep in mind any testing is better than none. Try to find participants who aren't familiar with your material or subject matter — like a colleague who works in a different department or a friend or family member.

*Use of commercial sources is for identification only and does not imply endorsement by NCEH/ATSDR, CDC, or the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

Aim for 3 to 8 participants when you're testing your material. But keep in mind that testing with even 1 or 2 people can give you plenty of useful information — and help you create a better final product.

Here are some tips for cost-effective ways to find participants:

- Take advantage of partners and grantees.
- Partner with local organizations.
- Reach out to participants who care about your topic.
- Ask colleagues and other professionals to participate — they may even participate for free!

Where do I test?

Once you find your participants, find a convenient testing location that's free or low cost, like a local library or a community health center. To get the best results, conduct testing with participants in person when possible. If you can't test in person, you can test materials by telephone or web-based platforms that include screen-sharing, like Skype.*

How can I get started?

Check out the worksheet on the next page to make a plan for testing.

The CDC Clear Communication Index

The CDC Clear Communication Index (Index) is a free, easy-to-use tool to assess fact sheets, web content, and similar materials. It helps identify the most important factors to increase clarity and aid understanding of your public health messages. Ask a colleague to score your material since you may be a bit biased when scoring your own materials.

Here's how it works:

1. **Answer the questions on page 1 of the Index Score Sheet.**
2. **Email the PDF (with completed cover sheet) to your colleague.**
3. **Ask your colleague to answer the remaining questions and send the PDF back to you.**

The PDF automatically calculates your score based on your colleague's answers. If your material scores less than 90, **review all the questions and answers to see precisely what you need to improve.**

*Use of commercial sources is for identification only and does not imply endorsement by NCEH/ATSDR, CDC, or the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

Informal User Testing: Make a Plan

1. Identify your goals.

You can also use the Clear Communication Index cover sheet for this step.

Target audience:____________________

Main message:____________________

Communication objective:____________________

2. Decide which testing method best meets your needs.

Are you going to do focus groups? Hold interviews? Send out a survey? And what are you testing? A draft fact sheet? Key messages? How many people do you want to participate in your testing? (Remember that PRA regulations apply to federal agencies when collecting info from 10 or more people.)

Testing method:____________________

Stimulus material:____________________

Number of participants:____________________

3. Check with your organization's PRA point of contact to make sure you're following any federal regulations that apply to your testing.

Regulations I need to follow for this testing include...

- **Example:** Can't have more than 9 participants

____

____

4. Write your research questions.

These aren't the questions you'll ask your participants — rather, they're the questions that you're hoping to answer through testing.

- **Example:** What are participants' current attitudes, experiences, and beliefs about the subject?
- **Example:** How clear are the key messages?
- **Example:** How easy to use is the tool?
- **Example:** What are participants' perceptions of the design and layout of the material?

____

____

5. Decide how you'll find participants.

You'll find participants by...

- **Example:** Going to the local senior center and asking for volunteers
- **Example:** Reach out to local grantees

6. Figure out what to ask your participants.

This is your "protocol" — the questions you'll ask your participants. These will depend on what you're testing, but be sure to choose questions that will make sense to the participants and help you answer your research questions:

- **Example:** What is the first thing that comes to mind when you see this?
- **Example:** Tell me in your own words what is the most important message on this page.
- **Example:** How does this explanation compare to your own experiences?
- **Example:** What words or phrases caught your attention?

7. Keep yourself organized.

Where are you thinking of testing and when? What do you need to bring with you to the testing site? Use this section to keep track of logistics

- **Example:** Sent survey out via MailChimp on 4/8
- **Example:** Check with testing venue to make sure there's a solid internet connection

Preparing and Writing a Scientific Journal Article

Working on a scientific article that you'd like to get published? This resource has tips to help you write a publication-ready journal article. This isn't the only way to write a scientific journal article — it's simply an approach that may make the process easier.

12 Steps to Publish a Scientific Journal Article

1. Get concept clearance from your supervisor before you invest time in the work.
2. Do a literature review to identify a gap in knowledge or limitations of previous studies.
3. Do the study and analyze the data that you'll present in your article.
4. Summarize your results and develop some key messages.
5. Get feedback from coauthors and colleagues to find out if your key messages are clear, concise, and compelling. This is the prep work that will help you write a strong first draft.
6. Identify the best journal for your article so you can write with the journal's requirements in mind.
7. Write the abstract. (Note that some authors prefer to write the abstract after drafting the full article. Figure out what works best for you!)
8. Write the first draft of your article. You'll want to include the following sections: introduction, methods, results, and discussion sections. (Details about these sections follow.)
9. Think of a direct and concise title.
10. Double-check your in-text citations and edit your reference section.
11. Submit your article for scientific clearance.
12. Submit your article to the journal and work with them to respond to their feedback.

Notice that half of the steps listed above happen **before** you even begin to write the article. This kind of systematic preparation will help you write a clear, publication-quality article.

How to Write a Scientific Journal Article

Abstract

Your abstract highlights key points from the major sections of your article. It's also an opportunity to emphasize what's new and useful about your study. Write a 4-paragraph abstract using the guide below.

TIP: Remember that journal editors are interested in new information that's useful to their readers. Be sure to discuss how your article is new and useful in the abstract, introduction, and discussion sections.

Paragraph 1	In 3 to 5 sentences, state the main purpose of your study.
Paragraph 2	In 3 to 5 sentences, summarize the methods of your study.
Paragraph 3	In 3 to 5 sentences, summarize the results of your study.
Paragraph 4	In 3 to 5 sentence, summarize the conclusions of your study.

Note: Some authors prefer to write the abstract last — after they've drafted the full article.

Introduction

Your introduction convinces readers that this study shows something new and useful. Write a 3- or 4-paragraph introduction.

Paragraph 1	In 3 to 5 sentences, address the current gaps in the literature — provide background on previous research and its limitations.
Paragraph 2	In 4 to 6 sentences, state the purpose of your article. Be sure to emphasize what's new and useful about your work.
Paragraphs 3 and 4	Use 2 paragraphs (3 to 5 sentences in each paragraph) to explain how your article fills the current gaps or addresses the limitations of previous studies. You may want to end with a sentence about the results of your study.

Methods

This is the place to describe your study methods. It's where you'll include information like study population, lab methods or epi investigation, and statistical analysis. Write about 3 paragraphs for this section.

TIP: Get feedback before writing the next sections in your article. Ask your colleagues to point out phrases, sentences, or paragraphs that confuse them.

Paragraph 1	In 3 to 5 sentences, define your steps. Explain in chronological order how you collected, organized, and analyzed data.

Paragraphs 2 and 3	Use 2 paragraphs (with 3 to 5 sentences in each paragraph) to define all your research variables. Remember to focus on **how** you did your work, not what you found.

Results

In this section, describe the results of your data analysis that are relevant to the purpose of the study. Write about 2 to 4 paragraphs to present your results.

Paragraph 1	In 3 to 5 sentences, describe the results of your analysis. Provide clear explanations of what you found (e.g., "We found several factors that affect...")
Paragraphs 2 thru 4	Use figures or charts to support your content. Explain your tables, charts, or figures in 2 or 3 paragraphs (with 3 to 5 sentences in each paragraph). Use tables to highlight individual values, and use figures to highlight trends or relationships.

Discussion

Use the discussion section to interpret your results and justify your interpretation. Present your discussion in 4 paragraphs.

Paragraph 1	In 3 to 5 sentences, restate the main result of your study and explain your conclusion. Be clear about why the results support your conclusion.
Paragraph 2	In 3 to 5 sentences, compare your study with existing, related studies. Highlight the strengths of your study, and emphasize what's new and useful about it.
Paragraph 3	In 3 to 5 sentences, state any limitations or caveats about your study.
Paragraph 4	In 3 to 5 sentences, make recommendations for next steps. This may include changes in policies or suggestions for future research. If you recommend future research, be specific (e.g., study method).

Title

Now that you've finished your first draft, think of a direct and concise title for your article. Include your research topic and a key component of your work (e.g., methods, results, conclusions, or study name) — like "Food Worker Handwashing Practices: An Observational Study."

References

You've got one more critical step — making sure your references are in good shape. Most journals include their preferred format on the requirements page of their website. Make sure you've used their preferred format for references and proofread them carefully.

Make Clear Writing a Priority

The goal of clear writing is simple: your intended audience should be able to understand it the first time they read it. Even though they may be familiar with highly technical concepts, they still expect your writing to be clear. Use these tips to help make your writing clear.

- ☑ **Use active voice.**
  Make the subject of your sentence perform the action (e.g., "The Director issued the memo" not "The memo was issued" [by who?]).
- ☑ **Use short sentences and short paragraphs.**
  Shorter sentences (20 words max) break up complex ideas into smaller pieces, which are easier to understand, even for scientific audiences. Short paragraphs (no more than 5 sentences) encourage readers to read and understand more.
- ☑ **Keep subjects and verbs close together.**
  Start your sentences with the subject and follow it with a strong, clear verb.

A Note About Active Voice

In the 19th and early 20th centuries, scientists wrote in active voice. But around 1920, scientists started adopting passive voice, possibly because it seemed more objective and impersonal.

Scientific journals have swung back to active voice, especially because all major publication manuals (AMA, APA, Chicago) recommend it. After all, **active voice is clear, concise, and direct.**

In fact, it's difficult to find any journals that actually advocate for the use of passive voice. And prestigious journals such as the ***British Medical Journal*** and ***Science*** specifically instruct authors to use active voice.

Use active voice as much as possible in your article. Use passive only when the actor is unknown or is of less importance. For example, you may use some passive voice in parts of the methods section of your article.

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Visit the NCEH/ATSR Clear Writing Hub for more tools and resources.

To access Your Guide to Clear Writing online, visit:
https://www.cdc.gov/nceh/clearwriting/docs/clear-writing-guide-508.pdf

Message Mapping Template, Worksheet, and Checklist

A message map is a useful tool for developing messages about key questions before meeting with community stakeholders. It can help you to respond to potential questions accurately and articulately.

Experts in message mapping recommend developing three main messages and three supporting messages for each of those main messages. Following the message map template are a worksheet and checklist that you can use to ensure that your messages incorporate risk communication principles and are as clear as they can be.

Message Map Template

Communications Scenario or Issue:	
Stakeholders (Interested or Affected Individuals or Groups):	
Question or Concern:	
Key Message 1:	
Supporting Information 1:	
Supporting Information 2:	
Supporting Information 3:	
Key Message 2:	
Supporting Information 1:	
Supporting Information 2:	
Supporting Information 3:	
Key Message 3:	
Supporting Information 1:	
Supporting Information 2:	

Last updated February 2015

Supporting Information 3:	

Message Review Worksheet and Checklist

When you need to develop new messages or evaluate existing ones, work through the following steps to ensure that messages are well crafted and effective.

Step 1: What is the overall topic/situation/question that you want to address (consider who, what, when, where, and how)?

____

____

Step 2: Consider the following general factors:

1. **Who is the target audience(s) (e.g., general public, people living and working in the area of contamination)? What is the lowest literacy level of your target audience?**

____

____

2. **What is the purpose of the messages (e.g., talking points for a community meeting, a fact sheet, social media messaging, media session)?**

____

____

3. **What is the anticipated method of delivery (e.g., public meeting, document, one-on-one)?**

____

____

Step 3: Consider what you are asking the target audience to do. Is there a specific action you are asking the target audience to perform? What is it?

____

____

Step 4: Check your messages for the following and revise them if you check "no" in any of the boxes below.

❑ Yes ❑ No	Is the message clear (i.e., easy to understand and free from undefined jargon or acronyms)?
❑ Yes ❑ No	Is the message focused (i.e., covers only important points and avoids extraneous information, clauses, and caveats)?
❑ Yes ❑ No	Is the message responsive to audience concerns (i.e., information is relevant and important)?
❑ Yes ❑ No	Are the sentences short (i.e., be no longer than 10–12 words on average)?
❑ Yes ❑ No	Does the message map provide the most important information first and last (i.e., Primacy/Recency effects: people are more likely to accurately remember information that is presented at the beginning and end)?
❑ Yes ❑ No	Is a negative statement or a piece of bad news balanced with at least three positive, solution-oriented, or constructive statements (1N = 3P rule: One negative equals three positives)?

Sample Message Map Worksheet

Communications Scenario or Issue:	Is the soil in our neighborhood harmful to me and my family?
Stakeholders (Interested or Affected Individuals or Groups):	Public/media
Question or Concern:	Human health, trust in government
Key Message 1:	ATSDR is concerned about the soil in which you and your loved ones live, work, and play.
Supporting Information 1:	We are working closely with public health authorities and others to minimize any potential harm.
Supporting Information 2:	We are collecting samples and testing the soil from several places in the area for the presence of {insert chemical name, such as arsenic, lead, etc.}
Supporting Information 3:	Our scientists will determine whether touching or breathing the soil could be harmful to human health.
Key Message 2:	ATSDR will let you know what it finds and advise you on how you can stay safe.
Supporting Information 1:	People should call {insert phone number} or go to {insert Web site} for information and updates.
Supporting Information 2:	People should stay tuned to local television, the newspaper, or {name of social media channel}.
Supporting Information 3:	Until we know more, people in the impacted area {insert area} should limit their direct contact with the soil and not allow children to play in it.
Key Message 3:	You can limit your direct contact and exposure to the soil now through some simple behavior changes.
Supporting Information 1:	Wash your hands after touching soil and before preparing food, smoking, eating, or drinking.
Supporting Information 2:	Try to reduce soil dust in the house by leaving your shoes at the door so less soil and sediment enters your home.
Supporting Information 3:	Reduce outside activities that stir up dust such as digging or moving soil.

Resources / Blog /

Presentation storytelling 101: Your audience is the hero

July 15, 2024

Written by
Phoebe Perelman

Imagine you're sitting in an auditorium, listening to a keynote speaker deliver a presentation at a **huge software conference**. Which scenario is more likely to give you goosebumps?

a. The speaker talks about who they are, what they do, all their accolades, and how game-changing their product is.

b. The speaker tells a story about how they relate to the pressure you face in your role and then details the positive change you could make at a professional and personal level by adopting certain practices, resources, and mindsets.

We'd argue that the latter sounds more appealing. That type of audience-centric content is what mic-drop moments are made of. And that's the power of making **your audience the hero**.

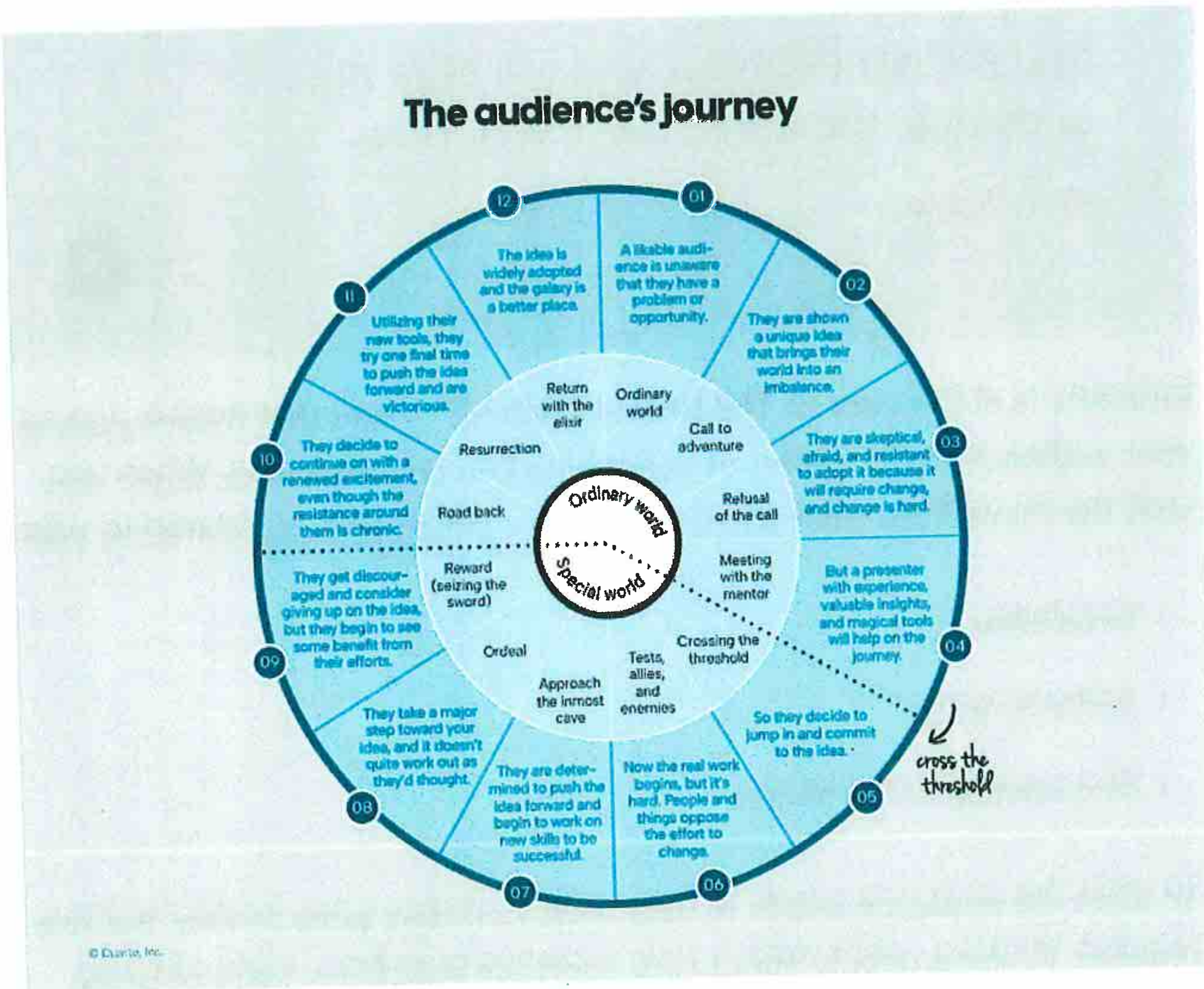
Storytelling basics: Heroes in stories

Stories are one of the most powerful presentation tools. Full stop. And they're available to *everyone*, right now. **We are all innate storytellers ↗**, whether we believe it or not. But what makes a story compelling? Well, a few different things. But today, we're going to cover a solid hero and villain.

A hero's journey

At the heart of every traditional narrative is a hero's journey. *Star Wars*, *The Wizard of Oz*, and *Harry Potter* are all structured around a classic hero's journey. Heroes in stories typically have in common:

- The main character, our hero, who starts in an ordinary world or state
- Our hero then encounters a challenge or opportunity
- Our hero then faces trials and roadblocks, but receives some help along the way
- And finally, our hero emerges in a new reality as a changed person



Contrary to popular belief, the hero's journey is not reserved for fairy tales and movie screens; it can play a pivotal role in ensuring your presentation, pitch, or keynote is engaging, relatable, and impactful. Why? Because your audience is the hero. Not you, your company, or your product.

The audience as the hero

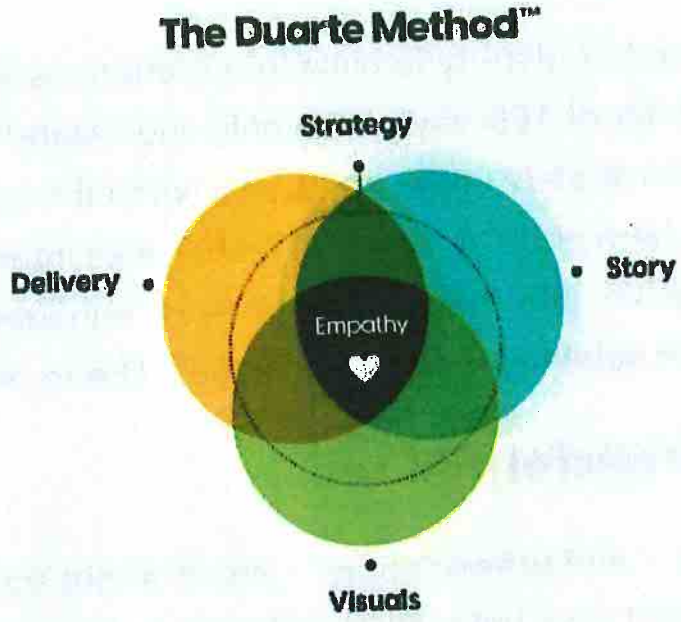
In the world of presentations and storytelling, Duarte's philosophy has become commonplace: the audience is the hero, and the speaker is the mentor.

> You are not the hero who will save the audience; the audience is your hero.
>
> Nancy Duarte

Empathy is at the core of **The Duarte Method™** – and that means putting your audience at the center of everything you communicate. When you shift the focus from what you want to say – which is often related to your:

- Credibility;
- Achievements;
- And exciting new offerings.

To what the audience needs to hear, your message goes further. But this requires thinking deeply about your audience members' state of being. You can use a series of questions found in our **Audience Needs Map™** to help put yourself in the shoes of your audience members. This will help you make them the hero of your presentation.



Why your audience is the hero

Employing heroes in stories will help your presentation really stick and standout. But most business presentations start with "me-ness." Companies often make the mistake of starting with an "About us" slide, or information about the company, or why they are better than their competitors. Yes, it is important that the audience know something about you and your company, but there are other ways to communicate this information (like a handout) so you can focus on making your presentation about your audience, which in turn, helps you connect with them.

1. Audience empowerment

Talking to the audience as if they are the main characters of the story empowers them to see their potential and capabilities. It makes them feel like *you* see their potential and capabilities. By making the audience feel seen, capable, understood, and empowered, you instill self-confidence, inspire action, and foster authentic connections.

2. Audience engagement

Our brains are wired to identify familiar information. As Richard Saul Wurman, the founder of TED says, "You only understand information relative to what you already understand." So, when the audience is positioned as the hero and can envision themselves intertwined with your presentation narrative, they are more likely to be engaged and invested. Here's more on the **science of stories ↗** if you'd like to read up.

3. Audience transformation

The hero's journey – and presentations – are all about transformation. As a presenter, you want your hero-filled audience to transform in some way by the end of your talk. You want to move them from feeling, believing, doing, or thinking one thing, to feeling, believing, doing, or thinking something else. Hence, the reason for your presentation in the first place.

Okay, we've covered the importance of heroes in stories. And we've positioned the audience as the hero. But this is only the first step in helping them transform. Now, you must take on the role of the mentor.

The speaker as the mentor

Behind every great hero is a great mentor. Luke Skywalker had a Yoda, Harry Potter had a Professor Dumbledor, and Dorothy had a Glinda. So, if heroes in stories have mentors, your presentation needs one, too.

It's the mentor's job to guide, support, and equip the hero with the knowledge and tools they need to navigate their journey successfully. In Duarte's model, the speaker assumes the role of the mentor. The mentor:

- Offers valuable information;
- Practical advice;

- And strategies that the audience can apply.

A good mentor understands what the hero is dealing with and makes a point to empathize with them. Instead of glazing over the challenges the hero faces or the resistance to change they have, the mentor acknowledges their hardships and validates their feelings.

After empathizing, the mentor also supports the hero by helping them overcome their fears and doubts by offering expertise, resources, and encouragement that will help guide them forward. This support is crucial for motivating the audience to embrace what's possible.

It may feel like we're talking about myths and folklore, but this applies when it comes to making great presentations, too. (We wrote a whole book on it called **Resonate®** if you were curious.) Coming from a place of empathy and mentorship will make your message resonate on a deep, authentic level.

A final word of mentorship caution: It's easy to believe that as the mentor, it's your job to solve the hero's problem. But you aren't there to solve the problem, you're there to help *them* solve the problem (with your product or service).

Now that we've covered who the hero is and who the mentor is, there's another story component we can't forget.

The importance of the antagonist

A hero and a mentor make a powerful pair. But like any good story, your presentation can't be all sunshine and rainbows: You need some conflict (also known as an antagonist or an antagonistic force).

Every movie, book, or play has a protagonist (a hero) and an antagonist (a villain). In business presentations there may not be an evil lord vying for control of the universe, but there are other barriers the hero faces. The antagonist could be:

- An ineffective process;
- Declining revenue;
- A rising competitor;
- Employee burnout;
- Or some other rut that the audience is struggling to get out of.

The protagonist's journey (and thus, the mentor's presentation) is defined by the effort to overcome the challenge. This conflict is central to the plot, clarifying what is at stake and underscoring the importance of the solution or insight that the mentor presents. Channeling this challenge is the key to motivating others to change.

Some of you may think that addressing challenges in presentations is depressing and unnecessary. We get it, we do … but we respectfully disagree. Addressing an issue the audience faces not only helps them relate to you, but this sense of conflict also keeps them engaged as they become invested in how to overcome the challenge.

Not to mention, that if there wasn't an opposing force making the hero's life difficult, the hero wouldn't need a mentor in the first place! Although antagonists are often thought of as evil villains in the movies or unavoidable evils in life, they're a big part of what makes a story worth listening to. After all, without challenge, there would be no need for change. It may feel counterintuitive, but a little bit of conflict is essential for a compelling story and an effective presentation.

By recognizing these roles and incorporating them into presentations, speakers can craft narratives that are not only engaging but also deeply resonant and persuasive.

The moral of the story

Keeping the audience at the heart of your presentation or speech is the key to making your message relevant, impactful, and memorable.

Remember, the antagonist (the challenges) and the protagonist (the audience) are vital elements that drive the story forward. The mentor (or speaker) is incredibly important, but not the star of the show. By empathizing with your audience and offering support, you can draw them in, win them over, and ultimately, help solve their problems.

In every presentation, aim to empower your audience as the hero by acknowledging their challenges and providing the guidance they need to transform their reality for the better.

To hear more about The Duarte Method™ and the power of storytelling in business, check out Nancy Duarte featured on an episode of **Lenny's Podcast ↗** talking about how to craft compelling presentations and tell a story that sticks.

If you want to put foundational storytelling principles into practice and analyze the heroes and antagonists in your next presentation, check out **Resonate®**, a live online (or in-person) workshop based on Nancy's **best-selling book**.

In Resonate®, you'll learn the secrets to persuasive communication that help you:

- Analyze your audience so you can deliver value, even when they resist
- Clarify the core of your idea
- Create supporting content with the story structure used by history's greatest communicators
- Distill and communicate complex ideas with clarity

> Our workshop was fantastic! I learned impactful new tactics and ways to organize and prepare a structured presentation. I would absolutely recommend this to a friend!
>
> **Cortney Holloway**
> **Manager, Talent Acquisition, Glassdoor | Resonate® learner**

Or, if you're past the point of learning about story principles and want to recruit a few experts to help handle your next high-stakes communication engagement, **contact our agency** about communication strategizing, writing, designing, and coaching. We'll build everything your next presentation needs while keeping your audience the hero for you!

Brand storytelling Communication strategy Presentation structure

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Storytelling in presentations: How does it work?

by a Geueke 6 min read December 21, 2023

Good stories evoke emotions and are an effective way to connect dry facts with emotions in the business world. Storytelling makes them tangible and understandable. The facts form the basis of a business story, whether in marketing, public relations, sales or other areas. The story itself serves as a vehicle.

- Preparation
- Beginning
- End
- Middle part
- Design
- About Folienwerke

In terms of story structure, it doesn't matter whether you're marketing a product, a company's assets, or an idea. The basic ingredients of a compelling business story are essentially the same:

Goal: What do you want to get out of telling this story?

Main character: It is the focus of the audience's attention. It must be easy for the audience to relate to. Possible main characters are products, employees, customers, founders/CEOs, or investors.

Conflict: Life is full of drama – and so is the story. The main character must resolve conflicts, make mistakes, and learn from them in the end.

End: The main character uses what he or she has learned to make a positive difference in his or her life and in the world around him or her.

But how do you use storytelling in presentations? How do you create an exciting beginning, a connecting middle and a motivating end? Ellen Riesterer, CEO of Folienwerke, sheds light on this topic. The presentation expert has some valuable tips and tricks up her sleeve.

Preparation

Analyzing your audience is one of the first steps in creating a powerful presentation. It does not have to be a doctoral dissertation. Three simple questions that can be answered in a few key words are enough.

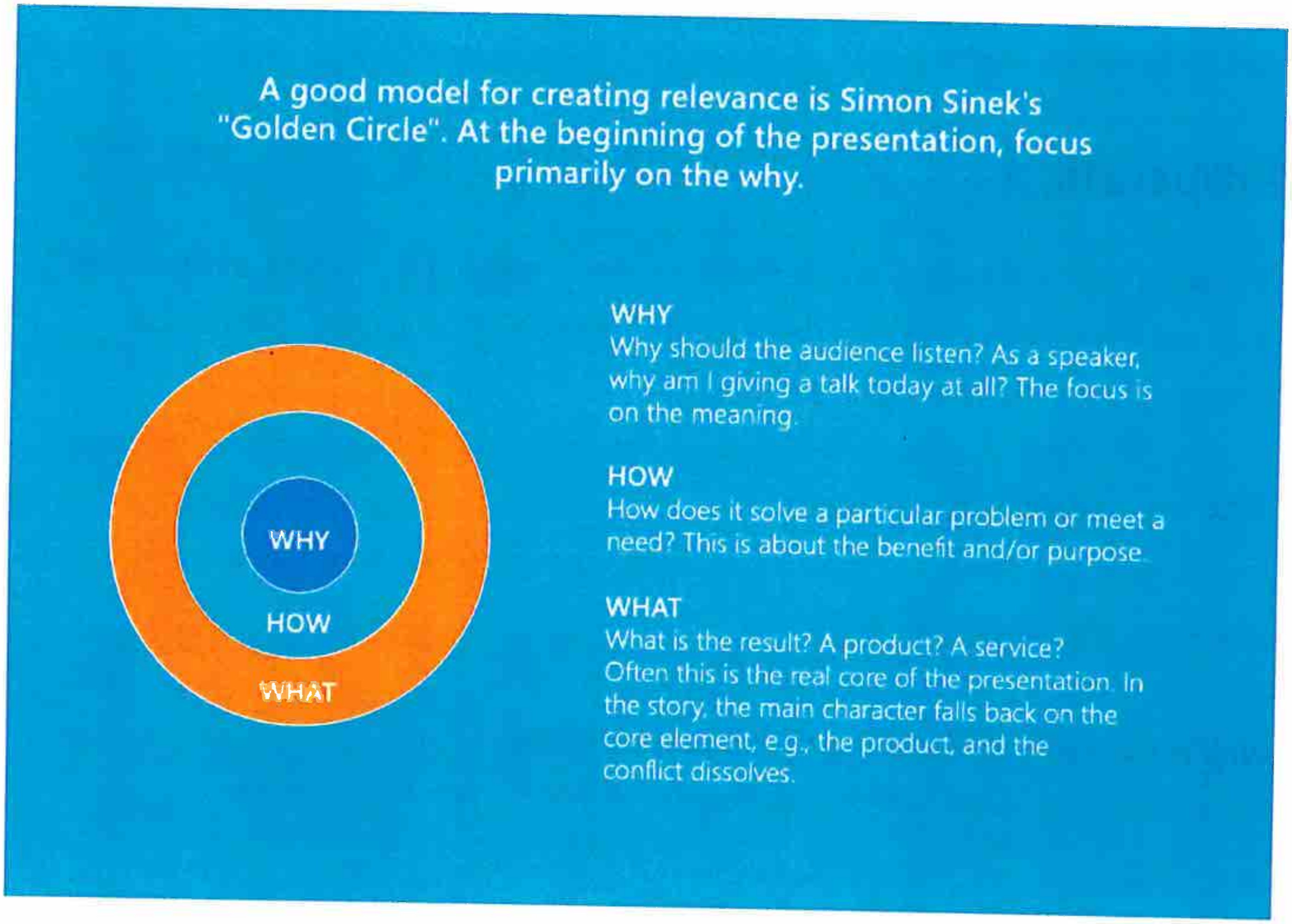
Who is the audience?
A brief collection of facts about each audience group's profession, age, living situation, education, etc. is sufficient here.

Why is the audience listening to the presentation?
It is important to determine the audience's motivation, needs, and goals.

What resistance does the audience have?
What prejudices, doubts, reservations, or fears might the audience have about the topic?

Beginning

The first few seconds determine the interest and attention of your audience. A successful introduction should make it clear that the presentation is worth listening to. What will the presentation change for the audience? What problem will be solved? The point is to create a foundation where the audience feels understood and engaged. Establish a context that allows for a personal connection to the main character of the story. Even with inherently exciting topics or important presentations, a boring introduction can have a negative impact on the audience's motivation and attention, sending them scurrying for their smartphones.



Offer proximity, benefit, or novelty, and you are sure to get attention. Practically speaking, this can be done as follows:

- Illustrate the problem with a real-life situation that the audience can relate to. Ideally, the story is based on, or at least inspired by, real-life experiences of the audience.
- Share a personal anecdote about the topic. Maybe a story where things did not go smoothly? This will make you seem more relatable and authentic. At best, the anecdote will illustrate why you, of all people, are on stage as a speaker.
- Get attention with provocative or unexpected questions. Let the audience answer or answer the question yourself.

- Provide interesting and current facts or statements. The more current the information, the more interesting it will be to the audience.
- Use a physical object as a lead-in to create a break from the digital media and stay in mind, e.g.: "Do you know what I am holding here and how this object relate to today's topic?"
- Or why not start with the end of the story? And in the form of a review.

End

What is the ultimate goal of your presentation? This should be made clear at the end. In addition to the solution or goal of the story, there should be a clear closing message or call to action. The ending determines what happens after the presentation. What do you want to achieve and what action should be taken? For example, give a clear call to action on how to reach the target situation.

Remember, a presentation has no purpose unless it creates change for the audience.

Ideas for closing your presentation:

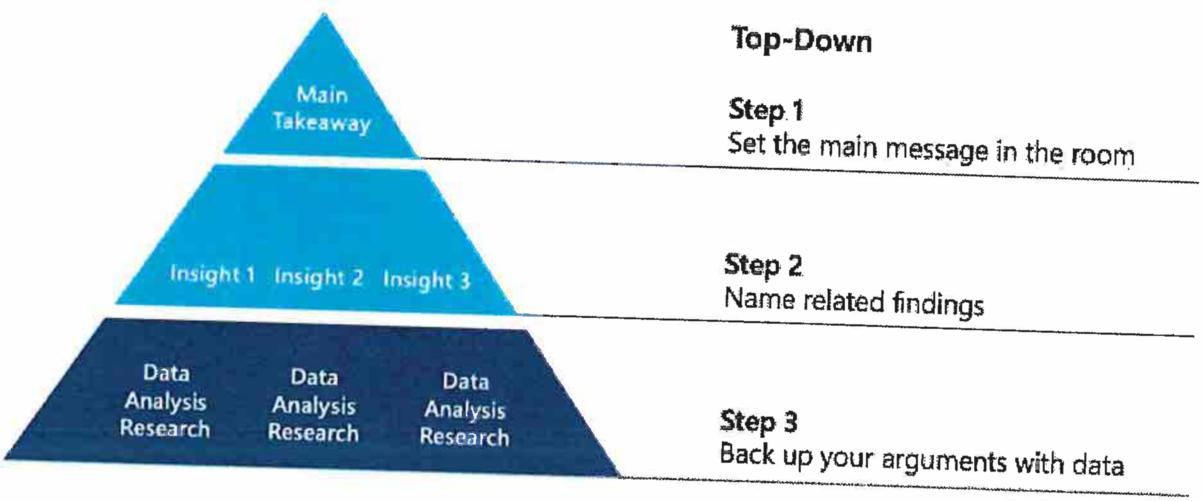
- A pertinent, evocative closing statement
- A direct question to the audience, such as: "What will you do differently in the future?"
- A clear invitation to the next step
- A small task at the end so the audience can immediately apply what they have learned

Middle part

Onc_ the beginning and end have been determined, you can start drafting the middle section. Here, the focus is on the conflict or hurdle that the main character must overcome. This means it's about the didactic structure of information, arguments, etc.

Start by brainstorming all relevant content. Cluster, filter, and prioritize all the ideas and make the connections to the beginning and end. This will create a common thread.

It is important to make clear statements that provide a direct path from beginning to end without detours. Avoid digressions! Omit the unimportant, especially if the time allotted for the presentation is short. Barbara Minto's pyramid principle can help: Start with the key message, followed by the rationale, and then, if at all, the underlying data and analysis.



Design

Once the story, including the beginning, end, and middle, has been established, it "only" needs to be put on paper. Storytelling in presentations primarily involves the use of visual elements that accompany and emotionalize the didactic structure of the presentation. Some examples:

Analogies/metaphors: Analogies and metaphors are very effective stylistic devices for presenting facts in a vivid way. The use of metaphors creates a memorable image of the message in the audience's mind that is easy to remember. In this way, your messages can be conveyed more effectively. You can also visualize metaphors, such as using a lock to represent data security or a piggy bank to represent cost savings.

Graphical elements: Even simple graphic elements serve a purpose. Give your main character a graphic element. This could be a Superman icon that symbolizes your clientele or an **appropriate icon** for your product. Storytelling gives these elements a deeper meaning and visually guides them through the presentation by reappearing and placing them in the right places.

Animations: Animations are also interesting because they can create additional meaning and support statements through the movement of elements. However, less is more. Use animations with care.

The morph effect is particularly effective. This is where two elements are superimposed, and the distortion creates an impressively realistic transition from the source image to the target image. This effect can be achieved with numbers, letters, images, and shapes.

Presenting numbers: If you look closely, there are often stories behind numbers that provide exciting points of entry. Connect abstract numbers and make them tangible.

A fictional but powerful example: A drug company's mission is to rid the world of cancer. Financial resources also play a role. With just two numbers, the company tells almost the whole story: The manufacturer has calculated that with NASA's budget, 5 effective anti-cancer drugs can be developed in 10 years.

Numbers can also be presented in exciting visual ways. PowerPoint charts that use symbols or filled shapes look more infographical and entertaining than traditional column or bar charts. Stay within the story and consider what motif lends itself to data visualization. Maybe filled in people for socio-demographic data, or stacks of shoe boxes of different heights to visualize sales of the new bestseller.

The basic rule: The basic rule is that slides presented to an audience should not distract from the presenter and his or her presentation. In plain English: little text, clear statements, visual elements. Slides used as handouts or documentation, on the other hand, must be self-explanatory and often require more text and explanation.

About Folienwerke

With **Folienwerke**, a consulting and design agency for presentations in Switzerland, Michael Bäuerle (founder) and Ellen Riesterer (CEO) have one goal: to enable communication between people in a given time frame with maximum results. To this end, Folienwerke offers individual consulting and training. With a focus on storytelling, presentation and rhetoric, speakers are guided to more successful presentations, inspired and encouraged to be authentic.

"*Storytelling has the power to engage people. Concise stories take your audience on a journey they will never forget.*" - Ellen Riesterer

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Brand Identity Toolkit

Use this free resource to design a beautiful brand identity that tells your story, blows the competition away, and customers love.

STUDIO δSTENDO

Kaleb Dean

Studio Ostendo, Co.
kaleb@studioostendo.com

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Welcome to the Brand Identity Toolkit

Unleash your brand potential with this comprehensive brand identity toolkit, featuring templates, exercises, and checklists for creating a stunning and effective brand that stands out from the crowd, resonates with your audience, and accurately reflects your values.

To ensure success, take a moment to read our guide on constructing a brand identity, which provides in-depth, step-by-step guidance on utilizing these tools and building your brand in the right way.

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Brand Audit Template

Use this free resource to design a beautiful brand identity that tells your story, blows the competition away, and customers love.

Core Identity

This details the foundational elements of your brand.

Business Name

What You Do
Briefly describe your business

Brand Core
Write down your purpose, vision, mission and values.

Audience
Who are your target personas?

Competition
Write down your top 3-5 competitors.

Key Differentiators
What makes you different/better than your competition?

Brand Personality
How would you describe your brand?

Verbal Identity

This is how you speak and write about your brand.

Tagline
Sum up what you do in a single sentence.

Value Proposition
What unique value do customers get from purchasing your product/service?

Key Messaging
List your main selling points or messaging pillars.

Voice
How do you speak in your content?

Visual Identity

If you already have a visual identity, audit your existing identity and document what does or doesn't work about each element.

Logo

Color Palette
List the details of your colors and how to use them.

Typography
List your fonts and outline the typographic hierarchy.

Other
Describe your photographic style, illustration type, and other visual identity details.

Describe how your current visual identity...

Reflects your brand personality

Aligns with and communicate your brand values

Differentiates your brand

What are your biggest opportunities to improve?

Identify the things you would like your new visual identity to communicate.

Competitor Brand Audit Template

Use this template to audit your competitors' brand identities and identify opportunities to differentiate your own identity.

Main Competitors

Conduct a brand identity audit on your top 3-5 competitors by reviewing each competitor individually and documenting findings as you go. To understand each brand's identity, take a look at their website, social media profiles, etc.

Competitors in your market doing what you want to do.	Competitor 1	Competitor 2	Competitor 3
Logo What shapes/imagery do they use? Do they use a word mark, logo mark or both?			
Typography What kind of typefaces du they use? What are the qualities? What's the hierarchy?			
Color Palette What is their primary color? What about supporting colors? How do they use them?			
Photography Are they using stock or custom photography? What is the style? The content?			
Illustration What style do they use in illustrations? Do they feature people? What is represented?			
Brand Story What is their personality, positioning, and mission as a company?			
Copy What's the tone of their writing? What perspective is it from?			

Auxillary Competitors

Conduct a brand identity audit on your top 3-5 inspirations brands by reviewing each one individually and documenting findings as you go. To understand each brand's identity, take a look at their website, social media profiles, etc.

Competitors outside your market that you admire.	Competitor 4	Competitor 5	Competitor 6
Logo What shapes/imagery do they use? Do they use a word mark, logo mark or both?			
Typography What kind of typefaces du they use? What are the qualities? What's the hierarchy?			
Color Palette What is their primary color? What about supporting colors? How do they use them?			
Photography Are they using stock or custom photography? What is the style? The content?			
Illustration What style do they use in illustrations? Do they feature people? What is represented?			
Brand Story What is their personality, positioning, and mission as a company?			
Copy What's the tone of their writing? What perspective is it from?			

Key Takeaways

Based on your audit, document insights that will help you design a strong and unique brand identity in order to compete.

What common visual themes did you observe?

What are your biggest opportunities to differentiate?

Brand Attributes Spectrum Exercise

Use this exercise to identify the core attributes you want your brand identity to communicate.

1 Gather Your Team

It's best to do this with everyone in the same room (virtually or in person).

2 Use this template or copy this chart onto a white board or shared document.

Have each participant add a dot (●) where they think your brand falls on each spectrum below.

★Note: It's best to have everyone fill out thier own sheet first, then put that onto one aggregate document to avoid group think.

Our brand is...

Exclusive	○	○	○	○	◉	○	○	○	○	Accessible
Traditional	○	○	○	○	◉	○	○	○	○	Progressive
Corporate	○	○	○	○	◉	○	○	○	○	Friendly
Serious	○	○	○	○	◉	○	○	○	○	Fun, Playful
Understated	○	○	○	○	◉	○	○	○	○	Bold
Simple	○	○	○	○	◉	○	○	○	○	Complex
City, Urban	○	○	○	○	◉	○	○	○	○	Natural, Rural
Familiar	○	○	○	○	◉	○	○	○	○	Disruptive
Steady, Stable	○	○	○	○	◉	○	○	○	○	Dynamic
Realistic	○	○	○	○	◉	○	○	○	○	Idealistic

3 Distill Your Insights

Talk through each spectrum, then choose 3-5 attributes that all of your stakeholders are strongly aligned with.

If you don't like the exact words listed on the chart, choose the ones that best describe your brand. These will be the words you'll use to build your visual identity.

Attribute 1

Attribute 2

Attribute 3

Attribute 4

Attribute 5

Branding Brief Template

Use this branding brief to communicate the key information your team needs to design a beautiful brand identity.

Branding Brief

Business Name

Project Name

Project Overview
Give a summary of why you're writing this brief and what you hope to get out of the project.

Goals
Give a summary of why you're writing this brief and what you hope to get out of the project.

Success Metrics
List the metrics you'd like to hit that would make the project worth the investment.

Deliverables

Key Stakeholders

Target Audience

Key attributes to convey in your identity.

Key Messages

Budget

Timeline

Specs

Additional Considerations

Brand Identity Checklist

Use this checklist to ensure you've designed a complete and cohesive identity.

Brand Identity Checklist

Logo
Design logo that reflects your brand personality.

- ○ A great logo works in only black and white.
- ○ Ensure the logo design works in print and online.
- ○ Test the logo at large and small scales.

Color Palette
Curate a simple yet flexible color palette.

- ○ Choose one (1) primary color.
- ○ Choose up to two (2) secondary colors.
- ○ Choose 3–5 complementary colors.
- ○ Add two (2) neutral/complimentary colors.

Typography
Select a typeface that works as an extension of your logo.

- ○ Select a primary typeface and font weight.
- ○ Consider a secondary typeface.
- ○ Consider pairing a serif and sans serif font.
- ○ Test for readability in print and online.

Photography
Use consistent, cohesive visual styles.

- ○ Ensure images are high quality and resolution
- ○ Be mindful of inclusive representation
- ○ Develop art direction for consistent image styles

Illustration
Focus on creating cohesive visual styles with illustrations.

- ○ Choose a single illustration style.
- ○ Keep images relevant to the subjects.

Iconography
Focus on clarity and simplicity.

- ○ Select one type of icon and stick to it (filled, outlined, etc.)
- ○ Make sure icons render clearly at small sizes.
- ○ Ensure icons are relevant to the subject.

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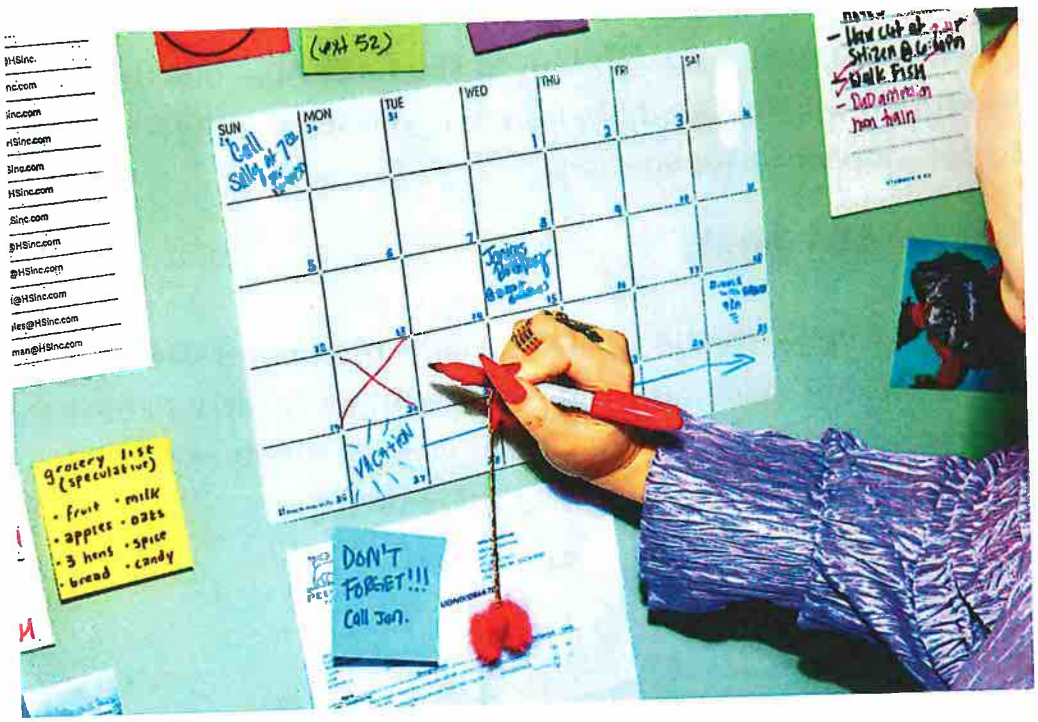
Social Media Marketing Strategy

Eight easy steps to develop your social media presence



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Step 2: Learn everything you can about your audience
Step 3: Research the competition
Step 4: Conduct a social media audit
Step 5: Set up accounts and improve existing profiles
Step 6: Find inspiration
Step 7: Create a social media content calendar
Step 8: Test, evaluate, and adjust your strategy

Step 1: Set social media marketing goals that align to business objectives

The more specific your strategy is, the more effective the execution will be. Set SMART goals and track the right metrics to set yourself up for success.

Set SMART goals

The first step to creating a social media marketing strategy is to establish your objectives and goals. Without goals, you have no way to measure your success or your social media return on investment (ROI).Each of your goals should be:

- Specific
- Measurable
- Attainable
- Relevant
- Time-bound

An example of a SMART goal for your business might be "Grow our Instagram audience by 50 new followers per week."With SMART goals, you'll make sure your goals actually lead to real business results, rather than just lofty ideals.

Track meaningful metrics

While vanity metrics like retweets and likes can be fun to share and easy to track, it's hard to prove their real value for your business. Instead, focus on targets such as leads generated, web referrals, and conversion rate.You may want to track different goals for different channels, or even different uses of each channel. For example, you can use paid campaigns to increase brand awareness, but measure acquisition and engagement for organic social posts.Make sure to align your social media goals with your overall marketing strategy. This will make it easier for you to show the value of your work and get executive buy-in and investment.Start developing your social media marketing plan by writing down at least three social media goals.

RELATED RESOURCE

The Social Media Metrics that Really Matter — and How to Track Them

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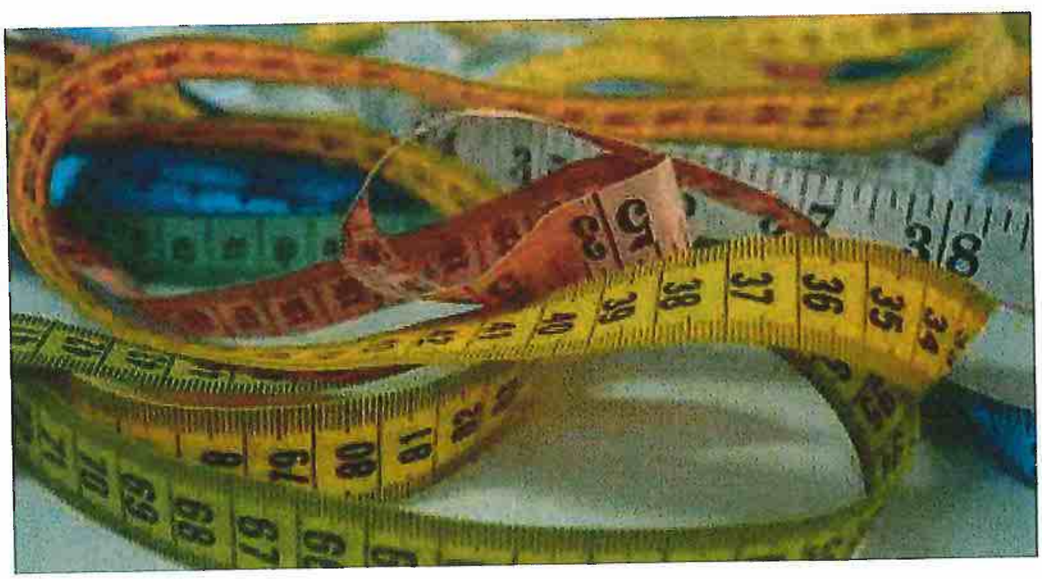


Step 2: Learn everything you can about your audience

if you're not engaged in social media listening, you're creating your business strategy with blinders on—and you're missing out on mountains of actionable insights from real people who are actively talking about you or your industry online.

Here's how to start listening and building your understanding of your audience and their needs.

Create audience personas

Knowing who your audience is and what they want to see on social is key to creating content that they will like, comment on, and share. This knowledge also critical for planning how to develop your social media fans into customers for your business.

Try creating audience personas. For example, a retail brand might create different personas based on demographics, buying motivations, common buying objections, and the emotional needs of each type of customer.

Personas sharpen your marketing tactics. Luxury buyers, for example, might not respond to Facebook ads with sales. But they might respond to Facebook ads with exclusive in-store events to be the first to see a new line of clothing. With personas, you'll have the customer insights you need to create campaigns that speak to the real desires and motivations of your buyers.

Gather real-world data

Don't make assumptions. Social media analytics can also provide a ton of valuable information about who your followers are, where they live, which languages they speak, and how they interact with your brand on social. These insights allow you to refine your strategy and better target your social ads.

Jugnoo, an Uber-like service for auto-rickshaws in India, used Facebook Analytics to learn that 90 percent of their users who referred other customers were between 18 and 34 years old, and that 65 percent of that group was using Android. They used this information to target their ads, resulting in a 40 percent lower cost per referral.

RELATED RESOURCE

How to build audience personas

Read now

Step 3: Research the competition

Odds are, your competitors are already using social media—and that means you can learn from what they're already doing.

Conduct a competitive analysis

A competitive analysis allows you to understand who the competition is and what they're doing well (and not so well). You'll get a good sense of what's expected in your industry, which will help you set some social media targets of your own.This analysis will also help you spot opportunities. For example, maybe one of your competitors dominates on Facebook, but has put little effort into Twitter or Instagram. You might want to focus on the networks where your audience is underserved, rather than trying to win fans away from a dominant player.

Engage in social listening

Social listening is another way to keep track of the competition.As you track your competitors' accounts and relevant industry keywords, you may notice strategic shifts in the way competitors use their social accounts. Or you might spot a specific post or campaign that really hits the mark—or one that bombs.Keep an eye on this information and use to it evaluate your own goals and plans.

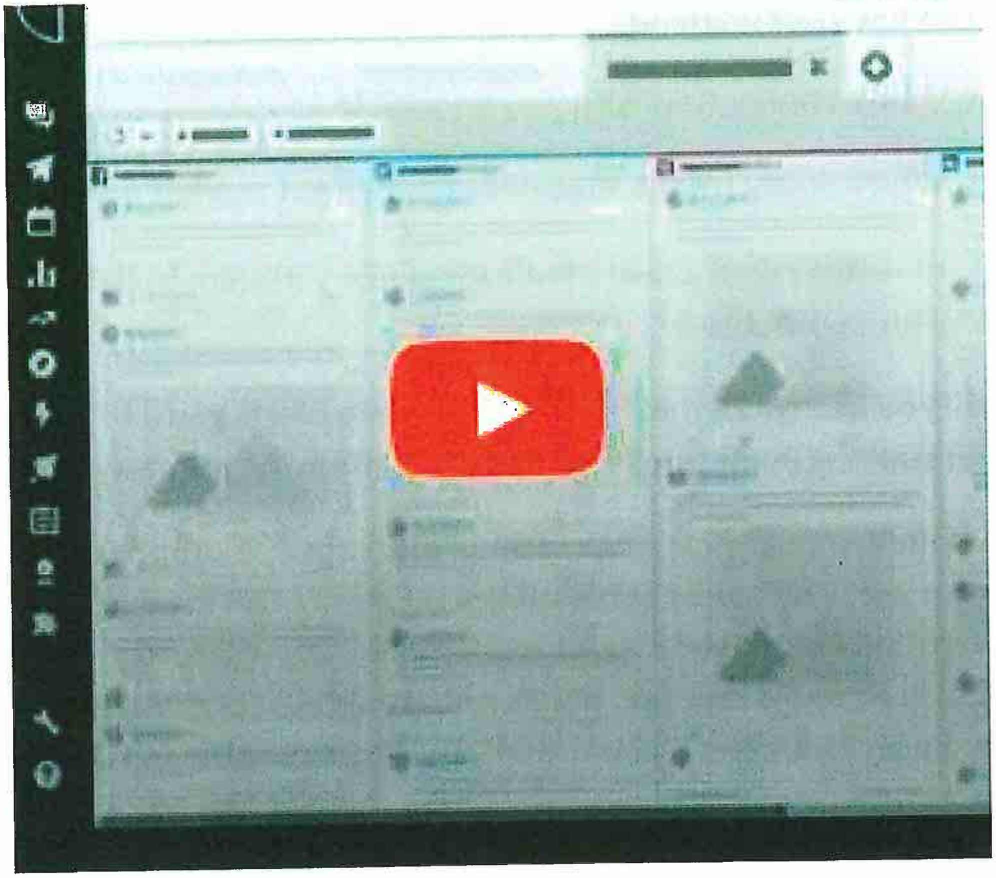
Related resources

How to conduct a competitor audit

Read now

Getting started with social listening

Read now



Watch: Social Listening with Hootsuite Streams

[Watch now]

Step 4: Conduct a social media audit

Conducting a social media audit helps you assess how well your current social media use works for you.

Evaluate your current efforts

If you're already using social media tools, you need to take a step back and look at what you've already accomplished. Ask yourself the following questions:

- What's working?

- What's not working?
- Who's connecting with you on social?
- Which social media sites does your target market use?
- How does your social media presence compare to that of your competitors?

Once you gather all this information in one place, you'll have a good starting point for planning how to improve your results.

Your audit should give you a clear picture of what purpose each of your social accounts serves. If the purpose of an account isn't clear, think about whether it's worth keeping. It may be a valuable account that just needs a strategic redirection, or it may be an outdated account that's no longer worth your while.

To help you decide, ask yourself the following questions:

1. Is my audience here?
2. If so, how are they using this platform?
3. Can I use this account to help achieve meaningful business goals?

Asking these tough questions now will help keep your social media strategy on track as you grow your social presence.

Look for impostor accounts

During your audit process, you may discover fraudulent accounts using your business name or the names of your products—that is, accounts that you and your business don't own.

These imposter accounts can be harmful to your brand (never mind capturing followers that should be yours), so be sure to report them. You may want to get your social accounts verified to ensure your fans and followers know they are dealing with the real you.

RELATED RESOURCE

Hootsuite's social media audit template

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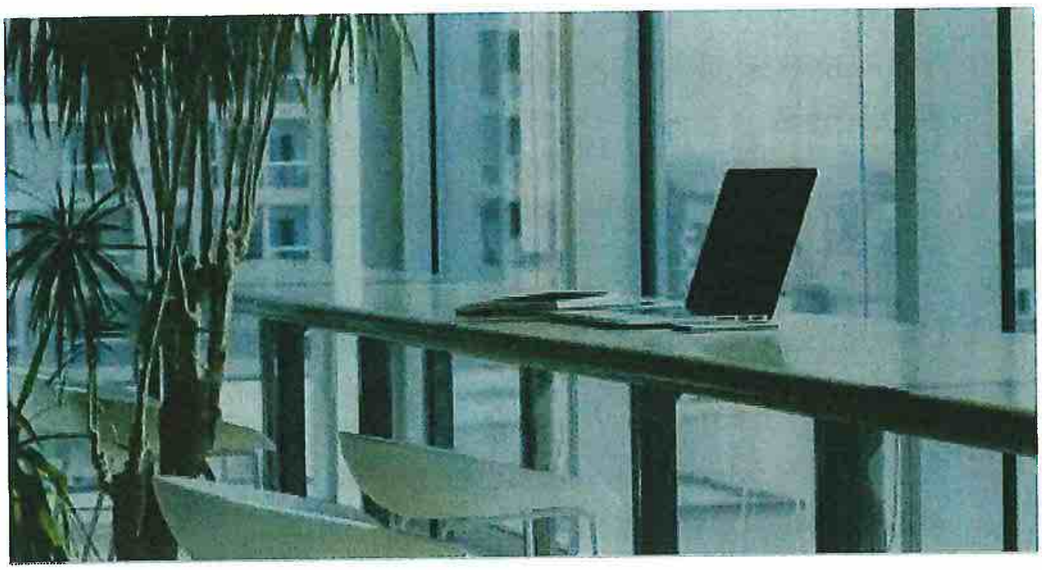


Step 5: Set up accounts and improve existing profiles

Decide which networks you'll focus on, and then set up and optimize your accounts.

Determine which networks to use (and how to use them)

As you decide which social channels to use, you'll also need to define your strategy for each network. For example, you might decide to use Twitter for customer service, Facebook for customer acquisition, and Instagram for engaging existing customers.

It's a good exercise to create mission statements for each network. These one-sentence declarations will help you focus on a very specific goal for each account on each social network.

For example, you could decide that:

- Facebook is best for acquiring new customers via paid advertising.
- Instagram is where you build brand affinity with existing customers.
- Twitter is where you engage press and industry influencers.
- LinkedIn is where you engage existing employees and attract new talent.
- YouTube is where you support existing customers with education and video help content.
- Snapchat is where you distribute content with the goal of building brand awareness with younger consumers.

If you can't create a solid mission statement for a particular social network, you may want to reconsider whether that network is worth it.

Set up (and optimize) your accounts

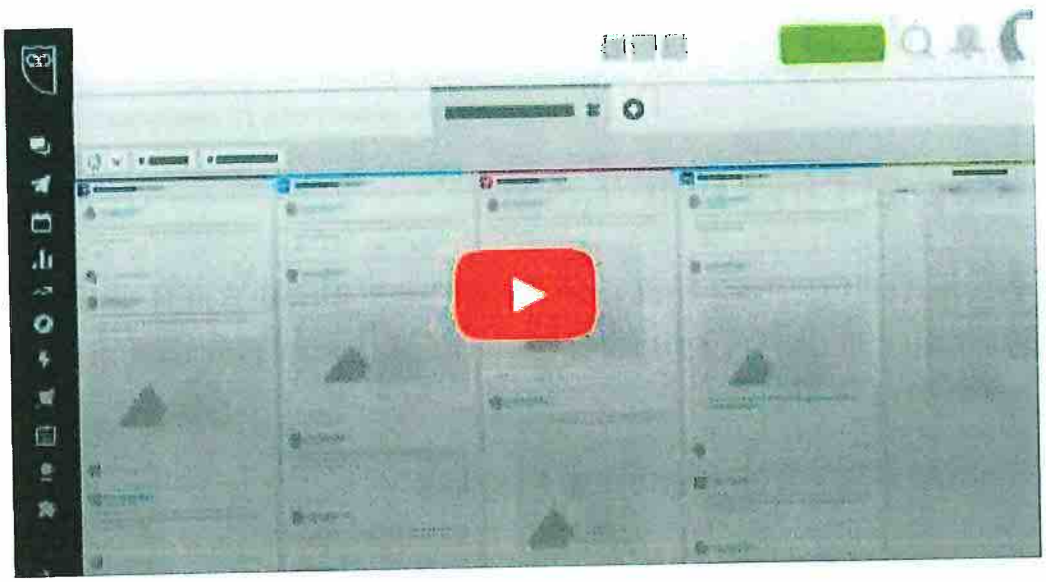
Once you've decided which networks to focus on, it's time to create your profiles—or improve existing profiles so they align with your strategic plan.

In general, make sure you fill out all profile fields, use keywords people will use to search for your business, and use images that are correctly sized for each network.

RELATED RESOURCE

Watch: How to optimize your social profiles

Watch now



We've also got step-by-step guides for each network to walk you through the process:

Create a Facebook business page
Create an Instagram business account
Create a Twitter business account
Create a Snapchat account
Create a LinkedIn Company Page
Create a Pinterest business account
Create a YouTube channel
Create a WeChat business account

Don't let this list overwhelm you. Remember, it's better to use fewer channels well than to stretch yourself thin trying to maintain a presence on every social network.

Finally, here's a quick reference guide for image sizes for every network.

Step 6: Find inspiration

While it's important that your brand be distinctive and unique, you can still draw inspiration from other businesses that are great on social.

Social network success stories

All of the social networks feature success stories that highlight how brands are using their tools effectively. You can usually find these on the business section of the social network's website. (For example, take a look at the Facebook business success stories.) These case studies offer valuable insights you can apply to your own goals for each social network.

Award-winning accounts and campaigns

For examples of brands that are at the top of their social media game, check out the winners of **The Facebook Awards** or **The Shorty Awards**.

Step 7: Create a social media content calendar

Sharing great content is essential, of course, but it's equally important to have a plan in place for when you'll share content to get the maximum impact.

Your social media content calendar also needs to account for the time you'll spend interacting with your audience (although you need to allow for some spontaneous engagement as well).

Create a posting schedule

Your social media content calendar lists the dates and times at which you will publish types of content on each channel. It's the perfect place to plan all of your social media activities—from images and link sharing to blog posts and videos.

Your calendar ensures your posts are spaced out appropriately and published at the optimal times. It should include both your day-to-day posts and your content for social media campaigns.

Plot your content mix

Make sure your calendar reflects the mission statement you've assigned to each social profile, so that everything you post is working to support your business goals. For example, you might decide that:

- 50 percent of content will drive traffic back to your blog

- 25 percent of content will be curated from other sources
- 20 percent of content will support enterprise goals (selling, lead generation, and so on)
- 5 percent of content will be about your employees and company culture

Placing these different post types in your content calendar will help ensure you maintain the ratio you've planned. If you're starting from scratch and you're simply not sure what types of content to post, try the 80-20 rule:

- 80 percent of your posts should inform, educate, or entertain your audience
- 20 percent can directly promote your brand

You could also try the social media rule of thirds:

- One-third of your social content promotes your business, converts readers, and generates profit
- One-third of your social content shares ideas and stories from thought leaders in your industry or like-minded businesses
- One-third of your social content involves personal interactions with your audience

Once you have your calendar set, use scheduling tools or bulk scheduling to prepare your posting in advance rather than updating constantly throughout the day. This allows you to focus on crafting the language and format of your posts, rather than writing them on the fly whenever you have time.

Related resources

How to create a social media content calendar

[Read now](#)

Watch: How to save time with bulk scheduling

[Watch now](#)

Step 8: Test, evaluate, and adjust your strategy

Your social media strategy is a hugely important document for your business, and you can't assume you'll get it exactly right on the first try.

As you start to implement your plan and track your results, you may find that some strategies don't work as well as you'd anticipated, while others are working even better than expected.

Track your data

In addition to using the analytics tools available within each social network, use UTM parameters to track visitors as they move through your website, so you can see exactly which social posts drive the most traffic to your website.

Re-evaluate, test, and do it all again

When data starts coming in, use it to reevaluate your strategy regularly. You can also use this information to test different posts, campaigns, and strategies against one another. Constant testing allows you to understand what works and what doesn't, so you can refine your strategy in real time.

Surveys can also be a great way to find out how well your strategy is working. Ask your social media followers, email list, and website visitors whether you're meeting their needs and expectations on social media. You can even ask them what they'd like to see more of—and then make sure to deliver on what they tell you.

Things change fast on social media. New networks emerge, while others go through significant demographic shifts. Your business will go through periods of change as well. All this means that your social media strategy should be a living document that you look at regularly and adjust as needed. Refer to it often to keep you on track, but don't be afraid to make changes so that it better reflects new goals, tools, or plans.

When you update your social strategy, make sure to let everyone on your social team know, so they can all work together to help your business make the most of your social media accounts.

Bonus: Download our social media strategy template

Does this all feel a little overwhelming? The truth is that building your social media strategy is a substantial job. It should be, since it's such an important document for your business. But it doesn't have to be complicated.

We've created a template to guide you through the whole process of creating your social media marketing plan. **Visit our blog** to download it (plus six other social media templates that can save you hours of work).

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ABC CHAPTER COMMUNICATIONS GUIDE

Version 2.0
April 2022

Media Relations, Public Relations And Strategic Communications Planning

Associated Builders and Contractors

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Overview

How do you attract attention and more business, strengthen your credibility, establish yourself as a thought leader, increase your brand and engage stakeholders? How do you build on that momentum to achieve your goals?

The purpose of this guide is to provide you with information and insight into the development and implementation of effective communications—from writing news releases and opinion editorials to delivering speeches, using social media channels, developing advertising pieces and creating dynamic strategic communications action plans.

This guide supports both internal and external communications based on the following fundamentals:

- Who is your audience?
- What is your message?
- What is your goal?
- What do you want your audience to do once it has received your message?

Every communication has an impact on ABC and the merit shop construction industry's image and effectiveness—from the appearance of your office to your virtual background, the hashtags you use, the way staff answers the telephone, the quality of your emails and print publications and the timeliness of responding to inquiries.

It is valuable to take the time to review every communication your chapter distributes. Does each communication project the best possible image of ABC in terms of both form (design) and substance (content)?

ABC Public Affairs and Chapter Services are here to help as you work to develop and implement your communications strategy. Please feel free to email us.

- Sandy Lynch, Vice President, Public Affairs and Member Services, lynch@abc.org
- Donna Reichle, Senior Director of Public Affairs, reichle@abc.org
- Francis Lowe, Director of Digital Communications, lowe@abc.org
- Erika Walter, Director of Media Relations, ewalter@abc.org
- Grace Austin, Senior Writer/Editor, austin@abc.org
- Rebecca Gale, Communications Manager, gale@abc.org
- Doug Curtis, Vice President, Chapter Services, curtis@abc.org
- Danielle Woodall, Director of Membership, Communications and Resources, woodall@abc.org

Strategic Communications Planning

Think Strategically

A strategic approach to reaching your communications goals will help you realize your short-term and long-range results faster and more efficiently.

The key to a strategic media strategy is understanding where you are, where you want to go, what resources you'll need and what you'll need to do to accomplish your campaign objectives.

What does your chapter want to accomplish? What do you want to communicate and why? What do you want the media and your target audience to think, say, do and feel in response to your communications initiatives? Identify these answers, then build a strategic plan to accomplish your objectives.

Know Your Goal

As with any project, a clear goal is critical. What do you hope to accomplish with your public relations initiative? Are you working to establish a strong relationship with a specific media or reporter? Are you trying to educate an outlet on how the construction industry affects the local community? Are you trying to get meaningful media coverage of your ABC chapter events and issues? Are you working to raise the notoriety of your ABC chapter leaders and/or association? Or are you trying to do all of the above?

Write a Specific, Measurable, Action-Oriented, Realistic, Time-Sensitive (SMART) goal. Ensure that your appropriate committees and those who may be interviewed—everyone who has a part in your communications effort—understands and is working toward this goal.

You'll also want to define specific goals around specific chapter events and organizational activities (Safety Month, Excellence in Construction® Awards, election efforts, etc.)

Identify Your Audience

Determine which target audiences you want to reach. Which audiences do you believe are most important to reach in your efforts to effectively advance your goal(s)? You may have both primary and secondary audiences for any particular communications initiative. For example, you may want to reach your members with a message on where their membership dollars are being invested and making a difference. Meanwhile, you may also want to reach new high school graduates with a message about opportunities in the construction industry.

Try It!

Who are your primary target audiences?

Who are your secondary target audiences?

Determine How To Best Motivate Your Target Audiences

Once you have narrowly defined your target audience, decide how you can best influence that audience.

What is important to each audience? Students are more likely to respond to career messages, ideas for making money, opportunities for training and ways to have fun when they are not working. Meanwhile, your chapter members are looking for ways to win new business and find opportunities for building their business, resources for new business and reliable, skilled employees. The general public (audiences for local television, radio and newspapers) is interested in how your events and issues affect the community and the families within that community.

Develop a Message

Each communication plan should be centered around an ABC core message.

What do you want to communicate about ABC?

Be sure your message is consistent with ABC's core philosophy.

You'll need examples, data, testimonials and resources to support your message. Reach out to Erika Walter at ABC National at ewalter@abc.org for data you can use in your interviews.

Be sure to focus on a local angle. How does this affect your local area, local projects, local students and other community members? The more you affect the local area, the more local media attention you'll attract.

Now, take that core philosophy and use your event or issue as support for that philosophy.

Examples:

- "Come to the Craft Skills Competition (chapter event) and see the opportunities for you or your son/daughter for a career in construction (ABC value proposition)."
- "The proposed legislation will discourage your friends and neighbors from bidding on government projects (issue). Join ABC and your local construction community to fight this unfair legislation by calling your local representative (ABC value proposition)."

Be sure to prepare anyone in your local chapter who may be called on for interviews.

Try It!

Why should your target audience care about your event or issue?

What is at stake for them?

What keeps your audience up at night—and how can your issue or event help them solve that issue?

How can you best craft your message to ensure the desired response?

How does your solution meet their needs?

Which communication vehicles are best to reach your targeted audiences?

Choosing The Right Public Relations Tactic For The Job

What media outlets and other public relations tactics will best help you reach your target audiences and your goals?

- Media relations
- Advertising (print, radio, television, social media)
- Billboards
- Direct mail (letters, emails, postcards)
- News releases
- Media advisories
- Media tours
- News conferences
- Public service announcements
- Editorial board meetings
- Letters to the editor
- Op-eds
- Phone calls
- Visits
- Meetings/speeches (chambers of commerce, schools, local government, civic groups, etc.)
- Events
- Email
- Blogs
- Podcasts
- Social media
- Testimonials
- Newsletters
- Videos
- Print collateral (brochures, posters)

To create an effective communications plan, consider the following:

Cost

- How much money will you need for this initiative?
- How much money has your chapter allocated?
- How much could you raise from member firms if they were presented with a clear, outcome-focused communications plan?

Research

Conducting market research may help you strengthen your message, give it a local angle (which most media prefer) and target your message most effectively.

ABC National can provide insight on market research options that fit your budget.

What Tactics Will Have an Impact on Key Target Audiences?

Is social media the key to reaching your target audience? If so, Facebook? LinkedIn? Instagram? TikTok? Where is your target market looking?

Could local radio or newspapers be your best bet for delivering your message?

Maybe it's time to host an event that you are confident local media will attend. The local media rarely miss the "Firefighter Appreciation Day" where the local kids can ride in a fire truck. Can you put together an event that's sure to draw the local media?

Paid advertising in a regional construction trade publication or billboards may be more effective.

A strategically worded email to your target markets may be the most effective.

What is the return on investment of each option?

All options should be considered.

Remember, television and social media coverage need action and visuals that bring the story to life. The local craft competition's skills day is much more likely to get meaningful coverage than the day where contestants are taking the written test.

Television reporters are looking for exciting footage to make the story more interesting for their viewers. Social media is trending toward video, not static photos. The old fashioned "grip-and-grin" (shaking hands with a lineup of winners) is tired, old and not interesting. Instead, be prepared with ideas for compelling video:

- Tour a construction site (placing priority on safety and innovative construction techniques).
- Invite a reporter to join a member to walk around the latest stage of a local school, hospital or other construction project. Again, safety is critical.
- Demonstrate a safety technical skill. (Think: The burning Christmas tree safety video you see every year, crash test dummies, etc.)
- Invite a reporter to attend one of your apprenticeship training sessions. Be sure to identify a student to talk about the benefits of apprenticeship programs for the apprentices. Don't forget to bring a member to talk about how the apprenticeship programs benefit business owners as well. You may have someone in your community to talk about the benefits of using local labor if your target market is local.

Sample Communications Strategy

Strategy

The ABC chapter will communicate its outstanding craft training program for the employees of member firms to increase ABC craft education program participation and to increase chapter membership.

Tactics

- Utilize testimonials, compelling video and reliable data to support ABC's local and statewide training efforts to attract and generate positive attention from target audiences (chapter member firms; nonmember firms in chapter area; print, radio and television outlets; social media; blogs; websites; podcasts; newsletters, e-newsletters, websites; government officials).
- Book speaking engagements featuring ABC leaders and members with target audiences.
- Partner with associate members to highlight ABC education efforts and the benefits to their members and social media followers.

Primary Audiences

Chapter member firms:

- CEOs and training managers

Nonmember firms within the chapter's region:

- Primary: licensed trades, like electrical, HVAC and sheet metal
- Secondary: carpentry

Media:

- Print, radio and television reporters who cover education, construction/real estate and/or workforce/labor issues
- Feature writers
- Letters to the editor
- Local business and trade publications
- Social media: Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn, TikTok

Blogs:

- Explore blog opportunities on construction, real estate, workforce/labor issues, entrepreneurship, local news.
- Reach out to associate members and others to garner coverage via their blogs.

Website and Newsletters/E-newsletters:

- Does your local school, vocational tech program, community college, chamber of commerce, Lions Club or other civic group have a website, a newsletter or an e-newsletter that would be interested in apprenticeship programs?
- Reach out to associate members to garner coverage on their websites, newsletters and e-newsletters.

Podcasts:

- Is there a podcast your members listen to? How can you make your apprenticeship message fit their needs?
- Do your associate members host audio and/or video podcasts where your message would be relevant?

Secondary Audience

Government officials:

- Inform local government officials how the long-term success of local construction companies and employees is based on workforce development, safety and continuing education. Be sure to highlight ABC's high-quality, cost-effective leadership in the area. State government officials will want to know about the return on investment of construction education programs across the state and how this attracts workers and construction companies to the state and supports economic prosperity. Be sure to highlight the financial benefit to the state as well.

Goals

One month:

- At least five new member firms will begin utilizing ABC chapter education for employees.

Three months:

- Firms currently utilizing ABC education programs will reach out to at least one additional firm to utilize these programs.

Six months:

- Twelve new member firms will begin utilizing ABC education programs.
- ABC chapter membership will increase by 10%.
- Chapter will develop solid relationships with reporters who cover education and workforce development issues.
- ABC will have been named in positive stories in key business journals, trade magazines, local newspaper(s), radio programs and television news.
- ABC leaders and members will have appeared in at least two blogs and/ or podcasts discussing the importance of education in the construction industry.
- ABC education efforts will be mentioned in at least 25% of associate members' newsletters, e-newsletters and/or websites.

One year:

- Targeted government officials will know of ABC's craft education programs and understand the unique advantages of merit-based craft training and its impact on the community and state.
- Targeted legislation germane to construction education will be supported by key local and state government officials.
- Government officials have been educated through lawmaker visits, media coverage, a direct mail brochure, radio advertisements, billboards and blogs.

Sample Chapter Public Relations Plan

Strategy	Ongoing	March	April	May	June	July	August	September
Engage members through a newsworthy event, campaign or initiative	Maintain a local media list and post news on social media.	Announce the initiative at a chapter event and on association websites, in newsletters, etc.	Contact associate members to create campaign partnerships.	Identify targeted blogs/podcasts.	Secure media coverage, podcast interviews and blog mentions.	Kick off billboard ad/s and post banner ad/s on websites, social media, etc.	Plan compelling video and photos for use on social media and websites, in newsletters and for future campaigns.	Evaluate campaign effectiveness. Report results and ROI to board and members. Share victories with ABC National staff.
	Track media, blog, podcast and social media mentions, likes, views, etc.	Prepare and distribute a media advisory and/or news releases. Follow up with targeted media to confirm interview dates, logistics.	Design local billboard ad/s and social media banner/s.	Introduce key spokespersons to targeted media. Include angles and ideas.	Announce upcoming articles and appearances on social media and in member emails.	Announce billboards to members and media.	Follow up to determine additional opportunities for news stories and podcast interviews.	
Recruit new craft professionals	Identify and train member apprenticeship spokespersons.	Identify opportunities to engage and persuade students, career seekers, reentering citizens, etc.	Update your website with current training and employment opportunities and the benefits of a career in construction.	Reach out to prospects about opportunities through social media and earned media.	Schedule training facility tours with Q&A opportunities with current students and member spokespersons.	Track successful strategies and apprentice success stories.	Share apprentice success stories on your social platforms and through #ABCMeritShopProud.	
Recruit new members	Equip member leaders to deliver the ABC value proposition to prospective members.	Create fact sheets, brochures, website content and social posts on your chapter's value proposition. Create prospective member packets with print collateral from your chapter and ABC National.	Identify member champions for targeting potential new members needing training and apprenticeship opportunities.	Assign prospective new members to a member champion to answer questions, extend personal invitations to chapter events, etc.	Secure meetings between members and prospective members.	Invite prospective members to attend a training session, safety event, networking opportunity, etc.	Follow up with prospective members to close the deal.	
Advocate for merit shop priorities with lawmakers	Create fact sheets and other materials to highlight merit shop priorities and member contributions to the community and the economy.	Identify key local and state government officials to target with campaign.	Recruit and train members to contact and educate government officials.	Secure presentations with civic organizations.	Engage with and secure meetings with government officials.	Secure media interviews around advocacy priorities and share placements with stakeholders.	Document your successes.	

Evaluation

- Measure, report and celebrate what was accomplished as part of this effort.
- Announce articles, interviews, features, highlights, etc., in your social media and in industry communications.
- Be sure to report the campaign results to your committee, chapter board and members. Show them the campaign return on investment and efforts.
- Be willing to do a post-campaign assessment that identifies what could be done more effectively with each target audience and message next time. This will give you insight for your next campaign initiative.
- Consider using surveys, content analysis from targeted media and member/nonmember questionnaires to evaluate your campaign's reach. Ask how new members learned of ABC and why they decided to join.
- Different communications initiatives may require different methods of evaluation to give you the most reliable and valid feedback. Focus groups, polls and other methods may be useful in some cases. In others, you may rely solely on the number of mentions, "likes," views or other quantifiable data.

Understanding the Media

Media and reporters come in a variety of styles. By gaining a bit of understanding and respect for what they do, you'll be able to make a meaningful connection with media who can reach your target audience.

Some reporters are journalists who are professionally trained to provide a balanced view of issues, events, organizations, industries and people. Other reporters provide commentary and opinion to their readers and viewers. You'll want to get to know reporters and their work, so that you can best meet their needs—and those of your chapter. The media's responsibility is not to tell your story.

> **Journalists are not adversaries.**
>
> Their job is to find the most important, interesting and pertinent news for their readers, viewers and listeners.

Television, radio, online and print media often work on tight deadlines. They are reporting on sometimes complicated issues with increasingly short segments, multiple platforms and limited word counts.

It is your responsibility to provide newsworthy information that highlights your chapter as an open, honest, credible and reliable source for industry information on issues that affect your area. You cannot just be good at what you do; you have to be good at delivering your message.

Establishing a reputation as a highly informed, reputable source for media will help ensure fair and timely coverage on important industry and ABC issues.

Pro Tip

Local conservative columnists, bloggers and broadcasters can be advocates for the ABC free enterprise message and many ABC-friendly issues.

What's Your Objective?

The first step toward developing an effective media relations strategy is to determine what you want from the media.

Are you looking for an opportunity to build your chapter's reputation as a credible source?

Are you working to gain recognition for the chapter or its members' accomplishments?

Maybe you want to educate the masses to gain their support on an ABC issue such as the value of apprenticeship programs, passing important legislation or fighting unnecessary regulations.

Apply It!

Topic:

Objectives:

Target markets:

Which media will be interested in this topic or event?

Building a Media List

Once you have an objective, it's time to develop a comprehensive and continuously updated media contact list.

- Reach out to the ABC National Public Affairs team, who can build you a custom press list.
- Follow key reporters or the communication handles for major outlets on Twitter. Add these individuals to your lists.
- Be sure to use software, such as Meltwater or Cision, which allows you to gather media details so that you can create customized lists by industry, geographic area, broadcast vs. print and more:
    - Titles
    - Names
    - Addresses
    - Phone numbers
    - Email addresses
    - Social media info
    - Websites
- You may also want to keep notes about each entry to indicate what topics they cover, whether their coverage is favorable to your chapter, what stories you've discussed and other details.
- If a member of the media proactively reaches out to you for a story that will positively influence your brand or communicate ABC's key messages, add them to your media lists.

Pro Tip

Newspapers prefer to send photographers to events with strong visuals (e.g., craft competitions, jobsites, gatherings, etc.). You can also submit photos with press releases or link to an album of photos via Dropbox or Flickr.

Identify the Appropriate Media Outlets

You'll want to include all media who may be interested in your issues, industry, events and leaders. Be sure to branch out of your local community and include media covering your region and state.

Identify both print and online versions of:

- Daily newspapers in the state
- Trade and industry publications
- Local and regional business journals
- Weekly newspapers
- Locally published government or construction trade publications
- Locally produced radio and television shows that feature news, business, political and public affairs issues
- State and local blogs covering construction, small business issues and politics
- Bloggers who cover industry issues
- Podcasts featuring construction, business and political issues

Of note: In most cases, it's a good rule of thumb to steer clear of watchdog and investigative reporters. It's almost never a good idea to proactively pitch to them.

...And the Right People

Include any media who may be interested in ABC and its issues.

Here are some titles to include on your list:

- Editor
- Program producer
- Radio station manager
- Host
- Blogger
- Reporter
- Business desk
- City desk/metro section
- Features desk
- Columnist
- Editorial
- Photo desk

Pro Tip

Reporters and other media change often. Put a quarterly reminder in your calendar to update your list.

Track Media Interactions

Think of it as a media relationship management effort. Much as you would track customer contacts, you'll want to track your media interactions. Maintain a monthly record of all media interactions and coverage, so you can track story ideas pitched, coverage, pros or cons and other information that will help your media efforts. Include any information on the nature of the contact. This list can prove to be an invaluable resource when you are trying to promote media coverage in the future. You can track these interactions in Excel, Word or by keeping the email threads in a folder in your inbox.

Extend Your Reach

Don't limit your media outreach efforts. Instead, extend your list to include reporters on each of these beats:

- Business
- Labor
- Construction
- Industrial
- Politics
- Local
- State
- Regional
- Real estate
- Education
- Environment
- Regulatory
- Features
- Health care

Apply It!

Create a media list with a customer relationship management system or spreadsheet program. Include any values you may find useful when identifying or tracking media interactions. You can also ask ABC National to pull a custom press list for you.

Media Outlet	Website	Address	Phone	Email	Social media	Name	Title	Notable coverage	Other notes

Pro Tip

Be sure to review your notes before reaching out to a reporter. You'll want to know who you're dealing with as you strategize your approach.

Media List Resources

- There are media services that will electronically distribute your news releases and announcements to media outlets.
- Other resources will track coverage in broadcast, print and online outlets, such as Meltwater and Cision.
- Sign up for Google Alerts and track social media to be alerted to any internet mentions.
- Follow relevant reporters and bookers on social media to follow what they are covering and the type of sources they are looking for.
- Contact Erika Walter with ABC National at ewalter@abc.org for assistance developing a media list.

Pro Tip **Reporters are less interested in what you're doing—and more interested in what their audiences can learn or do with that information.**

Earned Media

Earned media is coverage the media believes you've "earned"; it's not paid advertising. It's media coverage that reporters and producers deem "newsworthy." This coverage is something you will have to work for but you do not have to pay for.

Here are some examples:

- A reporter may attend a conference where a celebrity or high-level politician is the featured speaker.
- Another reporter may want to interview the main contractor on a major building project in the community.
- During graduation season, a reporter may be interested in interviewing a student who opts for a craft professional career.
- The media may want to write an article about a fourth-generation skilled worker or business owner.
- A local radio broadcaster may want to talk to one of your members about a current legislative issue.

Earned media happens when you reach out to reporters with newsworthy association activities, positions, statements, events or other information. The goal is to have media report information for the benefit of your chapter or to educate the media's target markets about an industry-related issue.

Pro Tip **The key to winning earned media coverage is understanding what the media is looking for and providing your information in a way that fits their needs.**

Crafting Your Message

Crafting your message demands that you consider the information from two perspectives: your needs and the needs of the media.

You want to communicate to select target markets what the association and its members are doing—and how well you are doing it. But the media is looking for information that informs, entertains, updates and educates audiences.

There are some topics that are inherently of interest to the media and audiences:

- Tragedy
- Technology
- Money
- Health
- Food
- Celebrity
- Weather
- Family
- Religion

If you have anything that fits into these categories, be sure to notify the media.

You will notice that your annual convention, your membership growth and how hard ABC members work do not fall into any of these categories. Most of the time, the media is not interested in covering those topics.

Instead, a significant portion of your positive coverage will be earned by strategically crafting your message to fit one of three structures:

- How-to
- Trends
- How your narrative fits in to the broader conversation

For example:

- “Five ways to get an education without going into six-figure debt”
- “Three career choices that will get your student debt paid within the first two years”
- “Four things the local hospital builder is doing to ensure better treatment for patients”
- “More high school graduates opting for skill building vs. four-year degrees”
- “The first minority-owned construction firm to win ABC Contractor of the Year”
- “Increased budgets for construction projects in Spink County”

Craft your message to fit one of these topics or structures to help ensure you gain positive media coverage.

Apply It!

What is your event, topic or idea?

Into which news topic area does this fit?

Brainstorm three or four approaches to make this idea fit this into a how-to or trend story.

Media Relations

Getting media coverage is, in great part, a proactive relationship-building process. It takes time, organization, effort, personal contact, skill, persistence and being in the right place at the right time. Think of it as a customer relationship effort where the media is the customer. The goal is not only to get positive media, but also to ensure that reporters will provide fair coverage in times of crisis or tragedy.

Designate a Chapter Spokesperson

Each chapter should have one person, who can be a chapter president, staff communication professional or a member, who serves as the main point of contact for the media. This individual must make building media relationships a priority. This should be the point person for all media contacts. At times, the best source may be another staff member, expert or chapter member. Assigning one staff person to traffic these interviews will make it easier and more reliable. It will also help to ensure chapter sources stay on message and meet media deadlines.

Apply It!

Who is your chapter spokesperson?

Who is your chapter member spokesperson?

Which other experts need to be prepared to be resources for the media?

Name	Expertise	Contact Info

Introduce Yourself and Your Association Member Leaders

Reporters call the people they know. So, introducing yourself and your chapter leaders is the first step in getting media coverage.

Prepare a media kit that includes:

- Source contact information
- Biographies
- Calendar of ABC-related events
- Coverage ideas

Now, get on the phone, introduce yourself and ask for a short face-to-face meeting to establish yourself and your leaders as sources. Meeting at the office, a jobsite or over coffee, breakfast or lunch are all great options. Reporters want news and sources, and you have expert information and sources. This is an opportunity for both parties.

Immediately after your election of chapter officers is a good time to do this. Notify the media of the election of new chapter leadership through a news release. Incorporate ABC's philosophy and goals into the story, along with the newly elected officers' key accomplishments and officer responsibilities.

Become a Valuable Source

Get to know a variety of editors, producers and reporters who cover business, real estate, politics, labor, construction, the environment, education and health care in your region.

Sometimes you will find that they are working on stories for which you can provide ABC's perspective. Be sure to keep in mind the reporter's deadline and the audience's interest.

Have a list of members, partners and subject-matter experts on hand that you can connect with quickly in the event that you need to get up to speed on an issue. Create a group text or email thread when response time is of the essence.

Pro Tip **Once reporters get to know and trust you as a reliable source, they will likely begin to rely on you for industry information.**

Develop Solid Relationships

The reporter will call the source they know, respect and trust. Creating a solid professional relationship with local media means they will turn to ABC for reliable, credible information. There is no substitute for letting a reporter know they can always reach out to you for credible, accurate and valuable information.

Respond Promptly

Reporters are typically on a tight deadline. So, when they reach out, the first one to respond is commonly the source who gets quoted. If you don't have the answers the reporter needs immediately, take down their contact information, gather information on the story and get back to them before their deadline. Be clear that you'd like to help them and explain that you need to check details to ensure you're sharing accurate information. You may want to know who else the reporter is interviewing. Follow up even if you do not have the answer.

Volunteer Newsworthy Information

Don't wait for the media to reach out to you. Instead, actively approach reporters with quality information and ideas. Before long, these same reporters will reach out to your spokespeople as experts.

Here are a few newsworthy opportunities you will want to take advantage of for media coverage.

Local impact of construction industry issues.

Let the media know about the local impact of union/merit shop construction issues, such as project labor agreements and the PRO Act. It is best to provide specific stories and examples of how proposed policies impact the state, local economy or individual companies and their employees. Also, be sure to differentiate between the way things are and the way things would be. It helps the audience better understand the issue—and the media likes a good story.

Alert the media to chapter and member workforce development initiatives.

Your chapter's workforce development initiative, combined with trends and statistics on skilled craft professional shortages on the national level, are newsworthy. Can you relate a specific story that highlights the need your workforce education initiative is fulfilling? Is there a unique circumstance or individual that has had notable success or that reinforces the need for your training programs? These are the types of pieces a local newspaper, magazine, radio or television reporter will be interested in covering.

Invite the media to local craft skills competitions.

Local television stations are particularly interested in visual events, and they are not alone. Local radio stations have websites. Local newspapers and magazines are always looking for photo opportunities. Events such as your local craft skills competitions are a good opportunity to gain positive attention for the chapter and the industry. Before the event, consider sending a video from last year's competition to give them an idea of what the competition is all about. Issue a media advisory, then call to formally invite them to the event. Be sure to follow up and offer to escort them around the event to help them get a big-picture view of the event and offer to introduce them to a specific source, as they will want to interview an individual or two.

Let the media know about any interesting or unique construction projects in your area.

It is critical to stay in touch with journalists regularly. Notifying the media about unique projects or interesting people, companies, etc., is a great way to be useful to the media and nurture a strong relationship. Keep abreast of building projects in your jurisdiction. Work with your members to identify which projects have interesting stories surrounding them. Is there a new green technique being used? Is there a three-generation team working together on a project? Is there a mother-daughter team? Maybe one of the projects will have a significant impact on the community? Is there a unique relationship between the builder and the owner—or the community? Find an interesting angle that you would like to read about in the local paper, then pitch it to the media.

Write letters to the editor and/or opinion pieces.

Writing letters to the editor and/or op-eds can be highly effective. Consider topics that may be misunderstood or need another perspective: career opportunities in the construction industry, fair and open competition, the merit shop philosophy, PLAs, safety, green building, workforce development and legislative issues. Write a piece that highlights two or three arguments and share your chapter's position. Reference a specific story the outlet ran previously to increase your chances it will be picked up. Be sure to abide by any word count limits specific to each media outlet; in general, 250 words for a letter to the editor and 800 words for an op-ed.

Highlight member jobsite safety commendations.

Highlight member jobsite safety commendations to the media. Be sure to frame the message as newsworthy. For example, "Company A celebrates its STEP Platinum achievement." Avoid negative words such as "accidents" and "fatalities."

Survey local owners and report findings.

Survey local owners on their construction needs for the upcoming year and release this information to the media. Be sure to highlight how the results reflect or affect the reader/viewer/listeners. Example: "Construction companies say local talent is becoming a top consideration in choosing a contractor for community projects."

Comment on local analysis of national surveys.

ABC National regularly shares analyses of national surveys, economic reports, trends, etc. Localize these for your area media. Rework news releases to reflect regional details and write original news releases on interesting trends. Be sure to include your chapter's perspective.

Issue news releases on state and local political issues.

Your local media will be interested in your chapter perspective on legislative issues as they affect the community. When appropriate, issue a chapter statement with supporting examples and relevant facts. Also, issue statements after significant rulings and decisions on major industry court cases and legislative battles. Include a quote on how the action affects the community and those working in the industry.

Announce chapter awards with photographs.

Send information to the media on any awards and recognitions you present to ABC members in your chapter (e.g., the designation of a member as an ABC Accredited Quality Contractor). Include photographs of the individuals receiving these honors. Photos can often help sell your story idea.

Prepare news releases on any members that win construction awards.

Announce the results of chapter leadership elections.

Many local business journals have space dedicated to community leaders. Take advantage of the opportunity to announce your newly elected officers and incorporate ABC's philosophy and goals into the article.

10 ways to repurpose positive coverage

1. Order extra copies of magazine or newspaper articles for your member recruitment efforts.
2. Post a link to the article/video on your website.
3. Post a "check this out" on social media.
4. Reprint copies of the article with the cover of the publication for new member meetings.
5. Put reprints of the article on tables at upcoming chapter trainings, PAC meetings and other events.
6. Distribute copies of the article and publication cover to influential policy makers and elected officials.
7. Highlight the article in PAC solicitations. Be sure to include a link.
8. Post a link with a short summary on your chapter's PAC page.
9. Frame a copy for your office or lobby area.
10. Frame a copy to present to the member who did the interview.

Track Contacts and Coverage

As you grow your media relations, you'll want to track your contacts and your coverage. Make notes of topics you've pitched to select media—and their responses.

Also, track any coverage. This can be done through free, automated internet news search services such as Google or Yahoo. Be sure to do your own searches as well. Sometimes the free services miss coverage.

In addition, commercial clipping services can track news stories of interest in your region. Similar services exist for tracking radio or television programming. Check in with ABC National to tap the tracking resources used by PR agencies.

You can also follow and engage with journalists on social media platforms, even if they write a piece that does not cover construction. Send them a quick note of applause or kudos for a quality piece of journalism.

In addition, subscribe to and follow key industry, business and local news publications as a courtesy. Watch these publications for any chapter or member coverage.

Crafting a News Release That Gets Results

A news release is a summary of something newsworthy. It's a quick report of the five W's and two H's about the news.

Keep in mind that editors, producers and bloggers receive hundreds of news releases each day. To get coverage, your news release will need to make an impact.

Once you and your chapter develop a reputation as a newsworthy source, you can expect your news releases to rise to the top of the proverbial pile.

Here are some tactics that will increase your odds of getting results with your news releases:

Do

- Craft a newsworthy subject line. Make your audience want to open your email!
- Tailor your message to be of interest to a large demographic. Explain how your position, event or announcement affects the reading, listening or viewing audience—not just the ABC or construction audience.
- Consider mentioning other organizations or groups that have formally supported ABC's position on the issue.
- Use a consistent, professional news release format.
- Include the Who, What, Where, When, Why, How and How Much in the opening paragraph.
- Mention Associated Builders and Contractors in the opening paragraph.
- Mention your chapter in the opening paragraph if relevant.
- Limit the release to one page. Remember, this is a summary, not the entire story.
- Use AP style so that the media can use your release without major edits. A summary of topical style points is available in the ABC Brand Center Style Guide, and you can subscribe to the AP Stylebook Online for less than $25/year.
- Proofread and double-check dates, grammar, spelling and punctuation.
- Spell check.
- Double-check data.
- Include supporting facts.
- Use friendly URLs to avoid overloading your release with hyperlinks that the media may view as a cybersecurity risk.

- Use quotes to state opinions.
- Quote ABC spokespeople to bring the message to life.
- Start a new paragraph when beginning a quote.
- Keep quotes relevant.
- Keep quotes interesting. Make them sound like a headline or sound bite.
- Try to answer the most obvious questions a reporter will have (Who, What, Where, When, Why, How, How Much), so they do not have to edit or rewrite your news release.
- Make yourself available to answer additional questions about the topic. Be sure the contact on your release is not on an airplane or otherwise unavailable to respond promptly to inquiries.

Don't

- Do not make claims without supporting data.
- Do not write news releases for everything. Stick to newsworthy items.
- Do not expect reporters to print your news release verbatim. They might, but they may not.
- Do not distribute PDFs of news releases or email attachments. The easiest way for a reporter to use your words is to use plain or formatted text embedded in an email. Limit hyperlinks to 3-4 key supporting documents.
- Do not direct reporters to find your answers in the news release. Their job is to get more information, more quotes, more details. Their job is not to print your news release verbatim.
- Do not expect reporters to correct or rewrite your news release. Instead, keep it error-free, easy to understand and targeted toward their readers/ listeners/viewers.

Components of a Professional News Release

- Date: Top left
- Contact name, phone number and email
- Release time: FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE or EMBARGOED UNTIL... Headline: Keep it short and informational, catchy and active (who or what did what)
- Include a call to action.

  Follow ABC [CHAPTER NAME] at [SOCIAL MEDIA] or Visit abc.org... to learn more about association news affecting the construction industry and community.

- Include three hashmarks at the end of the release to indicate the end. # # #

Pro Tip

Include a photo of events, awards, logos, people, etc., with your news releases. Action shots are better than grip-and-grins.

News Release

ASSOCIATED BUILDERS AND CONTRACTORS OPENS NEW APPRENTICESHIP TRAINING CENTER FOR LOCAL STUDENTS

For Immediate Release
PERMALINK
Contact:

Name, ABC | (XXX) XXX-XXXX | Email

ANY TOWN, STATE, Date—Associated Builders and Contractors Your Chapter today held a ribbon-cutting ceremony for the grand opening of its new construction craft apprenticeship training center. The state-of-the-art facility will offer apprenticeship education for carpenters, electricians, heating/ventilation/air conditioning mechanics, pipefitters and plumbers. Classes will begin on [date] and more than [number] individuals have applied for training.

"We are thrilled to have a new facility to train the next generation of construction craft professionals," said ABC Chapter Spox. "The students will have a place to participate in formal classroom instruction, along with hands-on training."

"Our state needs highly trained craft professionals to build our schools and hospitals," said State Labor Official. "The training center will attract students from all over the state to start their careers in the construction industry."

"This new training center will make a big difference for our community," said the Town Mayor. "It will allow our young people the opportunity to follow a career path that leads to a bright future."

The ABC [Your chapter] apprenticeship program, with the oversight of its industry advisory committee, utilizes the NCCER curriculum. This curriculum is nationally recognized, standardized and portable. In addition, apprenticeship instructors are required to complete formal certification in order to ensure uniform and consistent delivery of the curriculum.

The new apprenticeship training facility is located at 1000 Main St., in Anytown, State.

For more information about the center or to apply, contact [person at center] at [phone number] or [email address].

Insert your chapter boilerplate here. (see ABC National boilerplate below for an example)

Associated Builders and Contractors is a national construction industry trade association established in 1950 that represents more than 21,000 members. Founded on the merit shop philosophy, ABC and its 69 chapters help members develop people, win work and deliver that work safely, ethically and profitably for the betterment of the communities in which ABC and its members work. Visit us at abc.org.

# # #

Writing a Media Advisory

A media advisory is a one-page description of a future event notifying the media and inviting them to cover the event.

You should distribute the media advisory well in advance of the event so the media can get it on their calendars.

Be sure to reissue the media advisory one week in advance and the day before the event as a reminder.

A media advisory should include:

An attention-grabbing headline

- ABC Wins Battle on School Construction Contract
- ABC Celebrates Construction Safety Award Winners
- ABC Members Rally in Support of Merit Shop Project

Critical information

- Who?
- What?
- Where?
- When?
- Why?
- How?
- How Much?
- Registration Links

Contact information

- Name
- Phone
- Email

ABC Associated Builders and Contractors

MEDIA ADVISORY

ASSOCIATED BUILDERS AND CONTRACTORS TO OPEN NEW APPRENTICESHIP TRAINING CENTER FOR LOCAL STUDENTS

ANY TOWN, STATE, Date—Associated Builders and Contractors [Chapter] will host a grand opening celebration and ribbon cutting for its new state-of-the-art construction apprenticeship training center.

WHEN: July 1, 2022, 9-11 a.m. Remarks at 10:15 a.m.

WHO: ABC [Chapter] President [Name]
State Labor Official [Name]
[Town] Mayor [Name]

WHAT: Brief remarks by distinguished guests
Ribbon-cutting ceremony
Open house
Guided tour

The ABC [Chapter] Apprenticeship Training Center will offer education for carpenters, electricians, heating/ventilation/air conditioning mechanics, pipefitters and plumbers.

The ABC [Chapter] apprenticeship program utilizes the NCCER curriculum. This curriculum is nationally recognized, standardized and portable. It incorporates both formal classroom instruction and hands-on training.

For media credentials, please contact: [Name] [phone] [email]

ABC [Chapter] represents the [###] merit shop construction and construction-related firms in [state or region]. Follow us at [social media] for the latest association and industry news.

# # #

Hosting a News Conference

When you have urgent breaking news that calls for face-to-face interaction with the media, you might choose to host a news conference.

Consider connecting any media who cannot attend via conference call, Skype or online streaming.

Consider these criteria to determine if a news conference is the most appropriate choice:

- **Relevance:** Is this newsworthy of the time and effort for the media to attend?
- **Attendees:** Will the attendees increase media turnout?
- **Exclusivity:** News conferences should be reserved for situations where attendance is the only way to cover the news appropriately. For example, featuring a statement from the new governor at the opening of a new apprenticeship training facility is a good news conference opportunity—especially if that governor spoke out in favor of job training during a recent election.
- **Legitimate news:** News conferences should not be publicity stunts. Don't risk losing your credibility with the media.
- **Complexity:** News conferences can be a good option when the topic or experience is too complex to be addressed through a news release.

Once you decide a news conference is the best strategic option to release your news, prepare to get the best attendance and the best coverage:

Before

- **Scheduling:** Check schedules to ensure you're not competing with other important news. You won't be able to predict breaking news but avoid conflicting events when possible. For example, avoid holidays, national events, local celebrations, etc., unless they are directly related to your news.
- **Time of day:** The ideal time to hold a news conference is between 10 a.m. and 12 p.m. This allows reporters to get the story and meet their deadlines.
- **Location:** You'll want to hold the news conference at a location easily accessed by the media.
- **Amenities:** Make sure the area is well lit with plenty of electrical outlets (have power strips and extension cords available). Secure Wi-Fi and have a password available for media and visitors. Consider the challenges of outdoor locations. You may want a tented area in case of inclement weather.
- **Staging:** Your presenters and the media will want a podium with a place for them to mount their microphones. If you expect a large group of broadcast journalists, consider contracting with a sound engineer who will provide mixers for the media to plug into. Consider reserved seating for print reporters and a news crew parking area for equipment trucks.
- **Room:** Think "standing room only." A full room creates the perception of an important topic worthy of coverage by many media. So, a small room that can accommodate the expected number of journalists is better than a large room with too much empty space.
- **Signage:** Prominently feature your ABC chapter logo on the front of the podium or with a curtain behind the speakers. Consider having some of your member company representatives or board members stand behind the presenters. Be sure the staging doesn't detract from your message.

- **Look again to guarantee all safety precautions are taken:** Under no circumstances should you put the media in a situation where they can observe safety violations of any type, even perceived violations. Should your speakers be wearing hard hats? Steel-toed boots? Are cables secured? Is appropriate caution signage, etc., in place? Follow the safety guidelines on the ABC Brand Center.
- **Promotion:** Be sure to give journalists as much notice as possible before your news conference. Alert the media wire services in your area. Send out a media advisory. Follow up by phone to invite key journalists. You may ask journalists to RSVP. (Don't make an RSVP a requirement and don't turn away journalists who did not RSVP.)
- **Pre-event materials:** Provide a media advisory, news release quoting dignitaries, location, time or other new conference logistics. Include biographies, issue fact sheets, related photos, etc., to help media prepare for the event.
- **Spokesperson preparation:** Prepare the spokesperson to make a statement with key talking points. You'll want to help your spokesperson practice to ensure the most professional and effective message delivery. Prepare the spokesperson and other sources to answer media questions following the prepared remarks.
    - Brainstorm questions you expect to get, those you hope to get and those you hope not to get. Now, prepare appropriate answers.

During

- **Greeter:** Position someone at the entrance to welcome the media, identify which media is represented and ensure they have what they need, including interviews and on-site materials.
- **On-site materials:** Provide handouts and a friendly URL for digital files including a news release quoting the people who will be speaking. If the speaker will use prepared remarks, make those remarks available to journalists. Suitable photographs, biographies and issue fact sheets are also helpful for the media. Again, be sure to have print and electronic versions available.
- **Emcee:** The emcee has five roles:
    - Introduce each speaker with prepared remarks.

      Be sure to include the speaker's name, title, organization and a brief description of what that speaker will address in their remarks. For example, "Jane Smith is president of XYZ Construction and is the 2022 chair of the ABC [chapter name]. She's going to explain ABC's position on this issue and what it means to construction companies and taxpayers in this area."

      "Next up is Bob Brown, manager of safety at LMNOP Construction. He's going to share some of the safety and employment statistics for the months leading up to this announcement."
    - Invite media to ask questions at the appropriate time.

      "After their remarks, you'll have an opportunity to ask questions."
    - Oversee the question-and-answer period.

      "The speakers have about 10 minutes for questions after their opening remarks."
    - Bring the session to a close announcing time for "just two more questions."
    - Thank the media and invite them to reach out with more questions.

After

- Follow up with any details promised to journalists.
- Follow up with all journalists to see if they have additional questions.
- Monitor media coverage based on which media attended.
- Distribute coverage to your staff, board and member companies using internal and social media.

Optional:

Consider having water, coffee, snacks, etc., available during news conferences.

Never serve alcohol at a news conference.

Editorial Board Meetings

Note: Meeting with the editorial board of your local paper is a BIG win.

The editorial section of a newspaper—in print and online—is where editors weigh in on a wide range of issues affecting the community, region or country. These written columns represent the official viewpoint of the publication and sometimes are cited by the proponents, and opponents, of a particular issue.

Arguably the most influential pages of a print publication, it can be beneficial to get an editor to weigh in on ABC's side of a controversial issue.

A larger newspaper makes decisions on what to print on the editorial page through its editorial board, which usually consists of five to 10 writers or editors who work for the publication. The group's responsibility is to determine the paper's position on issues and political candidates, then publish the editorial.

Contact the editor of the editorial page of your local newspapers to request an editorial board meeting. Be prepared to present your side of the issue. You'll need data, the local impact, the history of the issue, recommendations and examples. Prepare a spokesperson (ideally one of your chapter's executives or elected leaders).

If the publication is committed to a position that differs from ABC's position, offer to submit an opinion editorial.

If the paper has not committed to an editorial position and seems open to hearing ABC's position, try to set up a meeting with the newspaper's editorial board and the chapter's chair and/or chief staff officer.

Call to Action

Ask if the newspaper will write an editorial supporting ABC's position on the issue.

If questions arise that require follow-up information, be sure to provide that information to the editorial board as soon as possible.

Prepare Thoroughly

Share data and trends. The more local, the better.

Be prepared to summarize the history of the situation concisely.

Share the impact to the local community, economy, contractors and employees.

Be prepared with recommendations for solutions.

Assign a role to each ABC representative who will attend.

Prioritize main points and ideas.

Familiarize yourself with the staff you'll be meeting with—their type of writing, positions, past experience with the industry, reputation, etc.

Prepare a media kit with fact sheets, data, biographies, ABC information, issue information and contacts.

How to Write a Letter to the Editor

The philosophy behind various newspapers' letters to the editor pages can differ dramatically, and you can make each work to your advantage with the right approach.

Some editors see their letters to the editor section as a community bulletin board where readers will find any and all sorts of opinions. You might see a letter from a reader complaining about a recent article next to a letter complaining about the city's holiday decorations. This unrestricted policy is typically found at smaller papers, where editors may find it challenging to fill space. You can take advantage of this situation by preparing a brief, well-written, well-reasoned letter explaining ABC's position on an issue and its impact on the community.

A more common approach taken by most mid-sized and large newspapers, which receive many potential letters to the editor each day, is to consider the letter's relevance to a recent article. They only print letters to the editor that offer feedback, criticism or praise for articles and opinion columns that have recently appeared in the paper.

Here are additional guidelines for writing letters to the editor:

Cite facts, figures, data and trends. Document your assertions.

Watch your tone. A reasoned and respectful tone is best. You can be direct and critical without being unprofessional. You may need this publication or journalist to be open to your messages in the future. Confront the content; respect the journalist.

Word count. Word count is an important yardstick in publishing. Be sure you're clear on word count requirements rather than risk having a good letter rejected because it's too long or too short. Cite the story you are responding to at the beginning of your letter. In the opening paragraph, refer to the columnist, headline title and date of the article.

Write and rewrite. The best-written and most succinct pieces often are selected. As with any communication leaving your office, have several people review your letter for grammatical errors, typos, punctuation errors and redundancies. If you're not sure about punctuation, capitalization, abbreviations or other styles, consult the ABC Style Guide on brandcenter.abc.org.

Meet deadlines. Respect deadlines. Most media do not have flexibility on deadlines. If you want to have your letter or op-ed printed, meet the deadline.

Meet submission requirements. Some publications may prefer your piece be submitted as a Word document, through an online submission form or in the body of the email. Make it a practice to not submit your LTE as a PDF, but instead a Word document or in the body of an email so that the editor can easily copy and paste the content. The editor may also edit your submission for space or style considerations and ask you to approve final copy.

Follow up. It is important to follow up to ensure the editorial desk received your letter. A quick phone call or email may also help solidify a relationship with the publication and help ensure future coverage of important ABC issues.

Provide contact information. Most media will follow up with the author directly to verify the letter's author and home address before running it. Include a daytime phone number, a cell number and your email with your letter. If you haven't heard anything on your letter after a few days, give the editor a call and inquire politely.

Persevere. Don't be discouraged if you don't get published immediately. Continue to send letters on a variety of topics that affect ABC, your community and merit shop construction. Eventually your persistence is likely to pay off.

ABC National develops a number of template letters to the editor throughout the year for chapter use. Reach out to the ABC Public Affairs team or visit nationalconnections.org/communication to see what is available or suggest a new resource.

3 Ways to Watch Your Tone

Check your language. Word choice can quickly change a benign statement to an aggressive statement. "The decision to support the effort needs to be carefully reconsidered." Not "Supporting this decision would be stupid, lazy and irresponsible."

Simply making two sentences into one can soften the message and make your message more informational and less confrontational. "It's over. Don't bring it up again." This statement comes off aggressive. "It's over, so it won't be brought up again," is less aggressive.

Watch the way you emphasize words. All caps read as shouting, which is commonly seen as inflexible and less reasonable. Instead, opt for appropriate standard use of capitalization.

How to Write an Opinion Editorial

Opinion editorials, or guest essays, express the opinion of an individual or a group but are not necessarily written in response to a news story.

It is more challenging to get an op-ed into a newspaper than a letter to the editor. The goal of the editorial page of a newspaper is to give readers an opportunity to voice their opinions on matters of community, national or public interest. You cannot just send it to the newspaper and hope it is published. You must make a pitch directly to the staff journalist or editor.

Editorials most likely to be carried are filled with factual data supporting an argument, so be sure to link to documentation of statistics, survey data, etc. They are written like a good news story, with an interesting lead at the beginning, the body of supporting evidence in the middle and a strong conclusion encouraging readers to take a particular course of action at the end.

Start by finding submission information on the websites of media outlets. Contact the individual responsible for overseeing the editorial page and offer the idea of an opinion editorial on a particular topic from the chapter chairperson or chapter president. Be sure to find out the newspaper's exact parameters for opinion editorials, as well as how the piece should be submitted.

Pro Tip **Expect the publication to contact the author of an editorial to authenticate it. If you ghostwrite a piece for your chair or another member, be sure that member has a copy and is familiarized with it.**

Pro Tip **Reading op-eds and letters to the editor in the publication you're targeting is the single best indicator of acceptable style for those publications. Read five of their op-eds and letters to identify standards, styles and approaches that are used successfully.**

Public Relations *Building Your Public Image With Public Relations*

ABC chapter public relations professionals have two primary goals:

- Provide information to members and prospective members about the chapter's latest programs, products, services and activities on behalf of its members.
- Successfully build the chapter and member brand and communicate merit shop construction's impact on the industry and the economy with key audiences, including the general public, media, opinion leaders and elected officials.

In this section, you will find tools you can use to effectively communicate with your members, media contacts and the local community. When using these tools, remind yourself of the universal foundation for communicators:

- Tailor your message to your audience.
- Carefully define your purpose: Are you informing? Inspiring? Demonstrating? Persuading? All of the above?
- Craft your message to get the specific response you need. What do you want your audience to think, say, do or feel as a result of your efforts?

Be creative. Be succinct. Experiment with new approaches. Every market, every industry sector and every chapter has its nuances. There are many effective ways to make your chapter's voice heard; you must find tactics that work for your chapter.

Websites

Websites are a valuable resource for members, prospective members, craft students, like-minded organizations, sponsors, the public and the media. It is an official resource for your chapter's announcements, background, contact information, services, activities and statements. It is the digital version of brochures, position papers, annual reports, trends, biographies, announcements and more.

Website tips:

- Keep your website current by frequently adding new content to drive traffic. Your website is your calling card for your organization. Direct members, media, sponsors, new prospects and others to the site via your social media, appearances, courses, events and more.
- Set a goal of "error-free" for your website. Edit and proofread everything. Assign responsibility to your communication manager or other staff to catch and correct any errors, typos and needs for updates. Your reputation is, in part, created by the accuracy and interest of your website. Errors can detract from the overall message and undermine your credibility.
- Ensure your images are visible and your links are active.
- Make sure your website is consistent. Use the same design and color palette throughout the website and follow the ABC Brand Guidelines. It should look like one cohesive document as opposed to separate pieces.
- Put important information and links at the top of each page.

Pro Tip

Readers absorb computer screens across the top, then from top right to top left, then down the page, with a quick scan across the center of the page, then down. It's an f-shaped pattern. Experts suggest you have only 20 seconds to gain their attention before they turn to something more interesting.

Do's and Don'ts for Writing for the Web

Do

Rearrange your writing so the most important information appears in the first paragraph. That way, if visitors only read the beginning, they still know what you wanted them to know.

Call attention to important pieces of text by making them bold.

Link important facts, figures, trends and other information to additional sites—including pages on your chapter website. Linking to government, university or other trustworthy non-ABC sites increases your credibility.

Write less. Use half the word count (or less) of conventional writing.

Break up a daunting wall of text by using bullets, short sentences and short paragraphs. Express only one thought per paragraph—even if that means you have a single-sentence paragraph.

Put the most important information of every paragraph at the top of that paragraph.

Use headlines and subheads. If your reader looks at your page for only a few seconds, what do they get? Using headlines and subheads helps ensure they will get what you want them to get.

Don't

Don't bury information. Online users have no patience for digging through paragraphs of information to find the most important nuggets.

Don't overuse bold, italic, underlining or all caps. Overuse will dilute your message and irritate readers.

Don't convince yourself it is acceptable to have long paragraphs and pages of text for even the most complicated issues. They will not read it, and you will lose the interest of people who otherwise might absorb your message. Instead, opt for more short stories and links.

Don't ignore broken links on the website. It frustrates those who are most interested. Make sure the information is relevant and nonrepetitive and users know what to expect.

Pro Tip

Most cameras are set to take photos at 300 dpi resolution. But website standard is a resolution of 72. Downsizing your resolution to 72 will make your page look good without slowing down the load time.

Using Images/Infographics on Your Website

Images are a great way to spice up your website and add visual interest to your pages. Every website should contain images. Be judicious with advertising, banners and other images that look like advertisements. Readers tend to be wary of anything that does not provide valuable information. Find guidelines for photo and video safety and copyright compliance on the ABC Brand Center.

Newsletters

Newsletters can be a valuable way to communicate with your members, potential members, craft students, lawmakers, like-minded organizations and the media. An attractive, professional, easy-to-read newsletter can be a vital tool to engage members to help maintain their interest, participation and engagement with the association.

While a strong newsletter can help you develop a relationship with your readers through interesting, helpful articles in a quick-to-read format, a newsletter can be labor-intensive. If the newsletter gets passed over for other more pressing emails, your return on the time and energy invested will be meager.

ABC National has teamed up with Constant Contact to provide easy-to-use, professional email marketing templates and tools to create their own newsletters and emails and help chapters and National collaborate effectively, frequently and safely with member companies across the country. New and existing accounts with Constant Contact receive a 30% monthly discount through the partnership. Please contact a member of the Public Affairs team to learn more.

Planning Your Newsletter

Content: Decide what topics you are going to cover. Chapter activities, industry issues, guest columns on the economy, policy and upcoming programs should be included. Further, your newsletter could contain articles that educate your members on important industry news, best practices, honors and awards and accomplishments. To get the best results from your newsletter, focus on the reader and the results the reader gets from ABC efforts. Articles highlighting important, high-impact, interesting activities after the fact help encourage attendance at the next chapter event. For example, interview a participant in a leadership program about how they will use their new skills; highlight a new apprentice on the job; talk to a state senator about why they supported an ABC issue. This post-event coverage creates the FOMO (fear of missing out) to pull members to future events.

Writers: Credible and able writers are available if you know where to look. Many successful chapter newsletters feature regular columns from expert contributors. Your chapter attorney, for example, might be happy to write a column covering legal issues or recent court decisions that affect contractors. Ask your safety trainer or representative to submit content regularly on health and safety issues. Your leadership program trainers will also appreciate the opportunity to write a piece. Maybe a regular column from your government affairs professional, chapter president or committee chairs would be informative. Similarly, many suppliers of construction services are willing to provide you with good material on technical innovations and new project management techniques.

Newsletter Website: As opposed to using your newsletter as an email, create a newsletter website or webpage/blog on your chapter website. With each new issue, you can send an email with newsletter highlights and links to the specific articles on the newsletter website. This will allow you to tempt readers with a variety of articles without publishing an especially long email.

Design: To get ideas, look at newsletters and magazines you find attractive, interesting and appealing. Preloaded email design templates are available for Constant Contact users.

The name of the newsletter and any corresponding artwork at the top of the page sets the tone for the publication and should look appealing and professional.

Building Relationships With a Newsletter

- Send it out consistently (weekly, monthly, etc.)
- Present a professional and polished product.
- Feature relevant, valuable content.
- Keep articles accurate, concise and interesting.
- Stay focused on the reader—not just the chapter.
- Entertain and educate.

Promoting Your Newsletter

- Announce new editions on your social media platforms.
- Tag members, guest authors and lawmakers featured in your social media posts.
- Post a link on the signature lin[e] of contributing staff members.
- Ask contributors to post links on their social media.
- Include print versions in prospective and new membe[r] packets.
- Include a link to your newslett[er] on your chapter website.

Headlines: Headlines need to be short, catchy and informational. Here are two winning formulas for headlines that draw in readers:

1. Lists
   - Four ways to increase efficiency
   - Five things your senator needs to know
   - Three ABC programs to take advantage of
   - Three things new apprentices are using immediately
   - Four lessons about leadership
2. Trends
   - Construction leaders can expect more workforce shortages
   - General contractors notice a steep increase in some materials costs
   - Construction safety concerns: The fatal four and heat safety
   - The new normal: What to expect during the hiring process
   - The easiest way to network with merit shop contractors

Photos: Use good quality photos in your newsletter to make the newsletter visually appealing.

Promote It: It is not enough to have a good newsletter. You'll need to promote it on your website and on your social media platforms to get the impact you want. Print a set number of copies to distribute to member sponsors and guest columnists.

Bragging Rights: Do not forget to use the newsletter as a subtle self-promotion tool as well. Just as your members need to be reminded about what their dues money pays for, they also need to be reminded that you are doing a good job on their behalf.

Sponsors and Advertisers: One way to offset the cost of your newsletter is to solicit advertising and sponsorships. Associate and supplier members are good advertising prospects because a chapter newsletter allows them to have direct access to all your contractor members and to identify their firms as being an ABC supporter.

Sender: The sender of the newsletter can make the difference between gaining a reader and ending up in the reader's trash. Consider creating an email unique to the newsletter, so the sender is abcnewsline@abc.org. Or will your members respond better to an email from the chapter president? Chair? Communications director? Committee chair? You may need to experiment to see what gets the greatest response from your members.

Pro Tip **Monitor your deliverability and open rates to determine your newsletter's impact.**

Deliverability and Open Rates

Deliverability: The likelihood an email will make its way into your user's inbox without getting bounced or trapped in a spam filter.

Open rate: The number of subscribers who have opened your email.

Here are some ways to maximize deliverability and open rates:

- Phone first. Design your newsletter to be optimized for readability on mobile devices. Several newsletter platforms, such as Issu, offer this as a feature.
- Use photos judiciously. Because most email systems automatically block images and most users rely heavily on their preview screen to decide what to open, make sure the content of your newsletter is understandable without images. Never send your entire newsletter as an image.
- Make it easy for readers to opt out of receiving your newsletter. Regulations around spam and other unwelcome email are fast-changing. Many states require individuals to opt in as a way of agreeing to receive your newsletter. Meanwhile, be sure to include an "unsubscribe" option.
- Include links to your chapter website and newsletter website in every edition.

Social Media

Seven in 10 Americans now use social media to connect, network, get news updates, share information and entertain themselves (and others). In fact, nearly half of Earth's population is active on social media. On average, each of those active social media users has more than seven social media accounts and spends 142 minutes a day on social media. Approximately 81% of small and medium-sized businesses and 91% of large retailers use social media. An impressive 97% of construction industry professionals also use social media, with LinkedIn, Facebook and Twitter as the top three platforms.

Your ABC chapter should be capitalizing on social media, and you can execute a thoughtful social media strategy with some planning, creativity and diligence.

Social media channels provide opportunities to share breaking news, best practices and other resources, as well as engage with other ABC members and industry professionals on construction and association news and initiatives. Social media is also a great way to authentically interact with membership and connect with traditional and online media sources.

Use the hashtag #ABCMeritShopProud to connect with other ABC social media posts and be featured on ABC National's homepage.

Integrate Across Channels

Creating platform-specific content is always preferable, but it's time-consuming work and not always an option for chapters without the staffing resources. Creating content and maintaining an active social media presence requires time and resources that are often scarce. When you are creating great content for just one channel, you're missing out on reaching other groups of people across different networks. Each time you create, write or design something for Facebook, make sure to think about how it can be used across your channels. You will be expanding your reach without exerting too much more effort.

Use Your Positioning and Personality

Make sure that you reflect and reinforce the ABC brand in all your social media communications. Highlight content that sets ABC apart and use your brand attributes to create a consistent voice across your channels.

Embrace Storytelling

Your social media platforms should regularly feature stories about individuals. Your primary audience of potential participants will connect to stories that feature individuals like themselves. And if you collect those stories in a methodical way, you'll always have a piece of content to feature during an otherwise slow week.

Measure Traffic and Reevaluate Your Content

As you create your content posting calendar, review the analytics for all of the tools you use (e.g., Facebook Insights) to see what's working. It pays to create a posting routine, so you can easily track patterns of usage and then tweak based on that feedback. For example, if you keep track of more than just the data that Facebook provides (i.e., any outside influences, exactly what type of post it was, etc.), you can then make more informed decisions for your future content calendar.

The Big Picture

Goals

Before deciding to spend time and resources on social media, it's important to understand what you're trying to achieve. What are your goals on social media?

Audiences

Who are the groups you want to reach using social media? Members, potential members, craft students, like-minded organizations, lawmakers and press are a handful to keep in mind. Once you decide who your priority audiences are, make sure you are using the right platforms and targeting them with the right kind of content.

Actions

Once you have your priority audiences in mind, it's time to think about what actions you want them to take. This will determine the type of content that you share with them, and how you use it on each of your platforms.

Tools

Once you know which audiences you want to reach and what you want them to do, it is time to think about where you can reach them. Each social network has different capabilities and reaches different people, so when thinking about where to put your resources, make sure you're choosing the right platforms. See below for a quick synopsis of what each network is particularly good for.

Your social media efforts should support and reinforce what you're already doing online—actions like influencing someone to attend/sign up/follow will come from an accumulation of touchpoints on your website, by email, on social channels and through in-person meetings.

In an ideal world, you could have a strong and thriving presence on each of these channels and more up-and-coming platforms as well. However, time and resources are limited, and it's best to commit your time to a handful of social networks instead of spreading yourself thin across several of them. The best way to decide where to spend your time is to know where your audience is, and how you can engage them to achieve your goals. Which platforms will reach your audiences and achieve your goals?

Channel	What it's good for	Sample audience actions
Facebook	Watercooler content News Sharing visual content Reaching new audiences Telling stories	Joining a group for a specific audience Sharing a volunteer profile Liking or commenting on a photo Tuning in to Facebook Live
Twitter	News Quick messages Distributing content Connecting with other like-minded organizations Customer service Live updates from an event or a conference Shout-outs from members	Mentioning ABC in a tweet Retweeting ABC Quoting ABC Following ABC Tuning in to Twitter Live
LinkedIn	Professional conversation Positioning ABC as a thought leader Connecting groups of people to each other Connecting with other like-minded organizations	Mentioning ABC Sharing ABC content Following ABC
Instagram	Authentic content Behind-the-scenes images Personal images	Tuning in to your members' live stories Sharing live stories from events or from behind the scenes Sharing members' stories/posts on your story feed Commenting on posts

Community Management

It's important to know how much time you can devote to social media each week and make sure that your time is spent efficiently and effectively. Even if it is only one or two hours a week, be honest! That will help you set manageable goals for your social media presence. Ask your colleagues to pitch in, especially at member events and craft competitions. Most business accounts on social media allow multiple individuals to access the accounts simultaneously.

Regular Social Media Tasks

MODERATE

- Follow new followers on Twitter, Instagram and Facebook.
- Interact promptly! Answer questions and comments on Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn and direct them to your webpage and resources.
- Direct outstanding questions and comments to the right people.
- Scan ABC National's social platforms to see if there are people that should be funneled to your page.
- Do not delete comments unless threats or profanity are involved.

ANALYZE

- Dig into the analytics and insights on each platform to learn your audience, know what time of day they check the platform and the type of content that resonates well in each space.
- Drill down on specific high or low points and see which posts or events correlate with them, and then take note of future posts that are similar.
- Review Google Analytics to see incoming traffic to your website from social networks.

ORGANIZE

- Scheduling posts in advance is made easy with paid services like Hootsuite, but be mindful of scheduling posts too far in advance. With ever-evolving news cycles, your content can be mistaken for insensitive if it is posted at the wrong time.
- Review the content calendar to note upcoming posts.
- Make sure that all your planned content is still relevant.

MONTHLY/WEEKLY

- Create your content calendar by mapping out what you will be posting and talking about on your social channels this month. Keep in mind overarching organizational goals and campaigns, any external holidays or events and any content that you know will be available (like a report that is coming out) Check out ABC's calendar of news opportunities at abc.org/news for ideas
- Align social media efforts with your overall communications calendar and big pushes for sign-ups. Review to make sure you know how and when social media can fit into those organizational priorities.
- Review the social media plan to make sure all the goals, audiences and channels are still relevant, and see if any newer channels (i.e., Snapchat and TikTok) should be included.
- Walk new staff members or volunteers through social media guidelines.
- Update the analytics dashboard with new data points and review for patterns.
- Maintain your social media pages (update your Facebook banner photo, check your Twitter bio, etc.).

WEEKLY/DAILY

- Read social media comments.
- Check Twitter @ replies.
- Search hashtags on Twitter and Instagram to check activity.
- Create, schedule and post, even if the content would work best on the weekends.
- Gather the content you want to post each week (write status updates, fi pictures, gather interesting news articles).
- Stockpile content for future posts and campaigns.
- Review current member content to see if there are any good blog posts repost or share on social media.
- Comment on other ABC member pages or relevant blogs to drive and deepen engagement. Check out ABC's calendar of news opportunities at abc.org/news for ideas. Visit ABCMeritShopProud.org to join the conversation.

Other Content Ideas

- Keep an eye out on for industry recognized social media campaigns/ weeks such as Careers in Construction Month, Construction Safety Week, Women in Construction Week, etc. ABC National shares social media assets and content with chapters in advance of most industry recognized events via email to the listserv communication@abc.org.
- Host a photo contest or giveaway.
- Host a fundraiser.
- Determine a theme and ask people to upload their photos and tag your page to enter the contest.
- Share the winning photo at the end of the month.
- Use graphics and statistics that motivate your audience to share.
- Utilize personal profiles of staff, members and craft students that inspire.
- Consider profiling members, individual contractors and individuals who have taken advantage of ABC discounts.
- Include a photo and answers to a standard set of questions.
- Experiment with themed events based on the day of the week—these are just examples that you might need to tweak to pick up on local memes or translate to themes that make sense in your area:
    - Throwback Thursday/Flashback Friday/Member Monday/Teacher Tuesday/Savings Sunday
    - Merit Shop Monday (post a photo of an exciting location, ask users to share)
- Post an ABC member of the week (profile of a member).
- Post video interviews or profiles.
- Post question and answer sessions.
- Feature photos and updates of your staff and team in action, so that users feel like there are real people behind ABC.

Resources by Channel

Here are some basic channel-specific best practices for your social media presence. Use them as a guide whether you are just getting started or trying to deepen your engagement with a community that already exists. This is not an exhaustive guide to each channel, but rather a starting point.

Facebook

Facebook can serve as a main hub for your social media presence, since the specific content that you create for your page can also be used for a variety of other platforms. Think of it as the water cooler of the platforms. If you only have time to focus on one channel, Facebook offers the easiest access to the broadest audience possible, and the best chance of reaching new people.

When you are creating content for Facebook, keep in mind that the main ABC National page serves as an aggregator for all the different chapter pages. Therefore, consider creating content that would appeal to a wide audience, so ABC National (or other chapters) can share it with the wider community.

Fill out your "about" section to include the most up-to-date information. This space could be used to briefly describe who you are and what you do at a glance (i.e., your mission statement). Include your chapter's phone number!

Use just your logo as a profile picture, which are available on the ABC Brand Center, and then use your banner photo to highlight particular campaigns, when appropriate. You want the profile picture to be consistent and easily recognizable in your fans' feeds.

If you're looking to appeal to a broader audience, engage with multiple groups and share your content, then a page is the best place to do that.

Post no more than three times a day. Ideally, once a day or every other day.

Because of the way Facebook works, it's better to post fewer times a week and get higher engagement on those posts. If you post frequently, and see a decline in shares and likes, then your posts might not show up in your fans' newsfeeds.

Post on the same days at the same time for at least one month, then begin varying by one element—i.e., at a different time but same days—to find your most engaged times. You can also track engagement levels when you view the analytics.

Twitter

Twitter requires you to get your message across in 280 characters or less. It is important to take the time and tailor your content for each platform, so that your audience knows that you are paying attention. Twitter is also a great customer service tool and offers a lot of opportunity for professional networking with members, like-minded organizations and press. If you are not yet on Twitter, consider creating an account and then reusing much of your Facebook content to get it going.

- Make use of the banner photo space.
- Use a profile picture that clearly differentiates your account from other ABC accounts (such as your specific chapter logo).
- Follow the accounts that are following you if it makes sense; on a weekly basis, follow new followers.
- Regularly update your lists when you follow new followers.
- Begin to post daily, so that you are top of mind for your followers.
- Once you start posting regularly, try to post no more than three to four tweets a day, including retweets.
- Suggested balance:
  - One Facebook post (sends traffic to your page and keeps your messaging consistent)
  - One participant or volunteer update
  - One retweet or repost from another ABC partner
- Replying to individual tweets can be more frequent, as they don't fill up all of your followers' newsfeeds.
- Cross-post content from Facebook to save time on creating Twitter-specific content.
- If it's a status update, post as a tweet.
- If it's a piece of content like a photo or infographic, post as a link back to your Facebook page.
- Do not automatically link the two properties; instead, take time to tailor the content specifically for Twitter.
- Keep an eye on trending topics to find places where you can insert ABC into the conversation.

LinkedIn

People tune out irrelevant or promotional messages to focus on useful, engaging content. Companies that inform and engage are not just selling, they're building relationships. LinkedIn helps ABC forge relationships with the world's largest professional community. LinkedIn users are almost 50% more likely to buy from a company they engage with on LinkedIn. A whopping 80% of LinkedIn members want to connect with companies, because those connections provide them opportunities to enhance their professional decision-making.

- Find the right groups.
- Step up to the mic.
- Be a connector.
- Engage your colleagues.
- Announce your company page to customers and partners.
- Add a "follow" button to your website.
- Dive into the comments.
- Invite customers to write reviews
- Establish growth goals—measure your success.

Instagram

Instagram has more than 1 billion users and an estimated 71% of U.S. businesses use it. The content must look different and stand out amongst your other platforms because it's primarily focused on images. The caption can be the same, but you need those behind-the-scenes moments that you will not find elsewhere. Give your audience a reason to engage with your content. Keep the audience in mind and what their personal interests migh be—sports, food, family, politics, scenery, heavy equipment and the like. Add to Instagram stories often and spoon feed your audience content that requires them to interact with it.

- Focal points are the visuals, so the visuals must be good.
- People go to social media for authenticity, so the content on this platfo MUST be authentic and visually compelling.

- Make sure the content on this platform stands out among other platforms. Give your audience a reason to visit with that behind-the-scenes content you cannot get anywhere else.
- Rule of thumb: Post no more than three times per day.
- DON'T make your audience go looking for your content. That said, always post to your story, even if it means sharing your post directly to the story. You want to make your content as visible and easily consumable as possible. Here's a useful statistic: 500 million Instagram accounts use Instagram stories every day.
- Be trendy with your language; use fun emojis. This platform is not as professional as the others.
- Hashtags are important. The average post on Instagram uses nearly 11 hashtags. That's one of the main ways your audience can grow.
- Tag people. They will share/like/engage with your content.
- Add a location. Posts with a location get 79% more engagement.
- Show company culture.
- When you have an event that runs multiple days or hours, limit the amount you post. Add as much as you want to the story and save it to your highlights but keep posts on the event to one or two a day.

Other Channels

Stake your presence on channels and use services like Flickr and YouTube that make it easy to manage/host your content. But until the audience grows, do not worry about managing them as a social network. Instead, use them as tools to host content for your other social media channels. Keep an eye on relevant social networks that emerge that we might not have covered here—and remember to always go where your audience is.

What to do now:

- Use Flickr as a photo repository so you can easily access photos to repost on Instagram; do not worry about the social networking aspect. See ABC National's Flickr account for more.
- Use YouTube to host your videos.
- Once or twice a month, review like-minded organizations communications, blogs and articles and stay up to date on best practices for emerging networks.
- Learn more about your audience by asking them questions.
- Find out what other social networks they spend time on to make sure you have a presence there.
- Create and send surveys for feedback to small groups.
- Find out what kind of content users enjoy seeing, how often they visit different networks, etc.
- Whenever posting a video to YouTube, be sure to also cross-post it to Facebook and Twitter.

For more information on ABC's social media presence and to learn how to set up a vanity URL for Facebook, visit nationalconnections.org/communication.

For more information:

- Analytics sites, tracking sites and social media infrastructure are constantly being developed. A great resource for up-to-date information on social media developments and analysis tools is the PR Daily Newsfeed email. Sign up for their free newsletter here: prdaily.com/Main/Home.
- Also remember to incorporate "writing for the web" best practices in all of your social media outreach efforts. Refer to page 27 for dos and don'ts of web writing.
- Other questions can be directed to Rebecca Gale at gale@abc.org.

Photography

Photographs provide an excellent opportunity to build your chapter's public image and help shape your members' and your community's perception of the construction industry and craft professionals.

Photos provide an inviting and striking dynamic for your social media, publications, website, brochures, annual reports and other communications. Always make sure your lens is clean, your battery is charged and you have plenty of memory.

Please note: Only use photos online that you've taken yourself, own the copyrights for or purchased through an image platform such as Shutterstock, or use photos from ABC National's Flickr account.

The following are tips to improve your photography skills.

Do

DO: Make sure the photographs you use are of a merit shop construction site that has not had any injuries, accidents or fatalities.

DO: Take at least six or seven shots to get the right one. Several elements can ruin your shot (blinking subjects, poor focus, incorrect light). Always take extra shots to ensure you have the one you want. Digital cameras make this easy. Take as many shots as you can and delete the worst ones later.

DO: Fill the frame. Always move as close to your subjects as possible. It is always better not to have to use the zoom. Do not lose your subject in the background. And remember, a flash only illuminates subjects within 8 to 10 feet.

DO: Put people up close and landmarks further away. If you are going to have people in the shot, be sure their faces can be seen.

DO: Think about your light. Try to use natural light as much as possible. Most digital cameras have internal light meters and exposure bias readings. Learn how to use them to get the correct exposure.

DO: Compose your shots in thirds. Once you are technically proficient with the camera, push yourself to think like a pro. Your shots should be balanced and show depth; think about the elements in your foreground and background and how they do or do not work together. Sometimes the goal of the photo will dictate its composition, such as "grip-and-grin" photos at award ceremonies. But do not be afraid to be creative and try new ideas.

DO: Make sure your subjects look presentable (shirts tucked in, ties straightened) and there are no miscellaneous items, such as drinks or golf clubs, in the frame. Hands out of pockets, arms to the sides, no cigarettes or cocktails in photos.

DO: Double check to see that there are no safety violations of any type. Have your safety director on site for any public events where the media, lawmaker staff or others may be shooting b-roll or taking photos. If they are in a vehicle, make sure their seatbelts are on, etc. View ABC's safety guidelines checklist here: brandcenter.abc.org/SafetyGuidelines.

DO: Take different angles of group shots.

DO: Get action shots. They are much more interesting than a line of people looking into the lens.

DO: Get close-ups. Show what that craft professional is doing with the tools and materials. Zoom in on the intricate designs.

DO: Shoot video, too, even if it is on your phone. It is great for websites and social media.

Don't

DON'T: Worry about not having a fancy camera. The best camera is the one in your hands. While it is nice to have a high-quality camera—Single Lens Reflex (SLR or DSLR) with a slave (detachable) flash—most smartphones have high-quality cameras fully capable of taking web-worthy photos. Consider taking an introductory photography class if you need help.

DON'T: Forget to check your camera's default resolution settings. It is easier to make high-resolution photos smaller than to make a low-resolution photo larger.

DON'T: Be afraid to carry your camera and use it often. Get in the habit of thinking about potential photo opportunities, whether at a planned event, an organized shoot or just an interesting location.

DON'T: Publish or share any safety violations of any type. Your supporters will not notice—but your foes will. View ABC's safety guidelines checklist here: brandcenter.abc.org/SafetyGuidelines.

DON'T: Use images of construction/craft professionals that are union construction sites.

Advertising

Advertising is an effective tool for delivering information directly to targeted audiences. Unlike earned media, in which a reporter decides what information is included in a story, advertising allows you to carefully craft and control your message, maximizing impact.

Typically, print ads can be purchased in either black and white, two-color, four-color or all color. You can purchase 1/4-page, 1/2-page or full-page ads in a variety of styles. Additional ad size options are often available. Costs are relative to circulation, audience, size and number of colors in the ad, as well as the frequency with which you want to run the ad. If you are unsure about how to create and place your ad, you may want to consider retaining a public relations firm or ABC's marketing team to assist in the development of your ad campaign.

Online advertising is another way to distribute your message. Consider advertising in online newsletters and on websites your target audience subscribes to or visits. Online advertising is often less expensive than print advertising.

When developing your advertising campaign, keep these guiding principles in mind:

- Choose media outlets that reach your target audiences. Ask each respective media outlet for specific information about its audience composition and reach. In regard to radio and television, make sure you receive information on reach for specific programs. For example, programs during drive-time radio will reach more listeners than midday programming.
- Think creatively. Although daily newspapers may have the most reach, a targeted business or trade publication may provide better access to a target audience.
- Repetition=recall. An ad buy must run during a period of several weeks or months to affect awareness of the target audience. One full-page ad in a newspaper will not affect the target audience. However, 1/4-page newspaper ads placed in the same location (e.g., the opinion editorial section) over eight weeks should begin to make an impact on the target audience.
- Be imaginative with the buy. Do not limit yourself—explore radio, billboards and transit advertising. If the issue you are seeking to address involves a local school, buy ads in the school paper or buy a billboard tha is directly across from the school or school board building.

When planning your advertising buy, first develop an advertising budget. Buying time on radio or television or buying space in newspapers is expensive An effective advertising buy delivers maximum exposure to the target audiences at the most reasonable cost. When doing issue advertising, explore the possibility of sharing ad costs with other local organizations that share ABC's perspective.

The ad buy will determine how and when the advertising campaign reaches the target audiences. Although many media outlets may exist within your local market, we recommend beginning by focusing on these:

- Business/trade publications: Business weeklies, the business section of the daily newspaper and radio programs that focus on local business. Also, local and regional construction trade publications provide a very focused industry audience.
- Local (or statewide) newspapers: Concentrating on the business or metr sections.
- Billboards: Now that many billboards are digital, it's a great way to target potential members or craft students while they commute with multiple messages, not just one.
- Radio: Target stations with opinion leader audiences. Drive-time radio programming on AM stations that feature all-news or talk formats; at-wo programming on FM stations with high office or penetration rates; or business or public affairs programming.

Public Speaking

Speaking to a community audience is an excellent way to communicate ideas to encourage action. The good news is that anyone can give speeches that inspire action. Be sure to post photos and quotes on your social media and website. A short video will get attention as well.

Effective speaking is an art to be honed throughout life, but there are fundamentals to a good speech:

- **Know your audience—and focus on their needs.** What are your listeners' passions, fears, interests and concerns? If you understand your audience, connect with their core beliefs and address what they are thinking, they often will agree with you and will explore new ideas or allow you to spur them into action. If you are talking, but they have tuned you out, it is a waste of everyone's time. "This evening you'll hear four ways that the proposed legislation will affect our community so that you can vote in the way that best serves you and your business." At the end of your speech, remind the audience how they can use what they just heard. "Now that you have an understanding of the ramifications of this legislation, you'll be able to make a good decision about what's best for your organization." When they know how they can use it, they will find the presentation worth their time and attention.
- **Define your message.** What two or three key points do you want your audience to remember? Avoid rambling through a stream of consciousness and instead communicate clear, concise and memorable action items.
- **Know your goal(s).** Before you speak, decide what you want your listeners to do after hearing your speech. Do you want them to email their senator? Hire a merit shop company? Sign up as a member? Attend a program? Be inspired? Vote? Be sure your speech calls for specific action(s) on their part.
- **Start strong.** Find a way to immediately grab your audience's attention. Tell a relevant story. Share an alarming fact. Ask an introspective question.
- **Establish rapport.** The most effective speakers view public speaking as a one-on-one conversation with each member of the audience. This creates rapport. Great speakers do not perform, they connect and inspire. They have a powerful conversation instead of reciting text.
- **Be repetitive.** At the outset, tell an audience what they will gain from the presentation. At the end, remind them what they gained. Identify three key words you want them to walk away with, then sprinkle those words throughout the presentation. We remember through repetition.
- **Believe in your message.** If you do not care, do not expect your audience to care.
- **Prepare.** Use statistics and other data sparingly but remember that information can motivate action. This requires research on your part. Great speakers spend far more time preparing for a speech than they spend giving the speech.
- **Keep it short and succinct.** Attention spans are short, so do not be long-winded. Focus and be succinct. The world's greatest speeches have been both concise and powerful.
- **Be personal.** It is best if you relate to your audience. Talk to them—do not read to them. Remember that a good speech is a conversation between the speaker and the listener.
- **Be assertive.** The most compelling editorials in a newspaper have a strong opinion and defend it well. The same holds true for speeches. Do not beat around the bush. Speak with purpose and convince your listeners of your premise. Use action words.
- **Use memorable anecdotes.** Often the best illustrations come from personal experience. Stories that your audience can relate to are often a great device for leaving a memorable impression. Humor can work but be careful; there are many pitfalls in telling jokes.

Practice, practice, practice!

Want help putting together a presentation or practicing the one you're about to give? Reach out to Erika Walter at ewalter@abc.org or Laurie Richards at laurie@laurierichards.com.

Toastmasters is a great way to always be upgrading your public speaking skills. Public speaking courses can also help.

Branding

The purpose of branding is to distinguish an organization's programs, products and services from those of other organizations and competitors. As ABC has risen to prominence as a national-level player in the construction industry, it has become increasingly important for the association to present itself to members and the general public in a strong, professional, clear and consistent way.

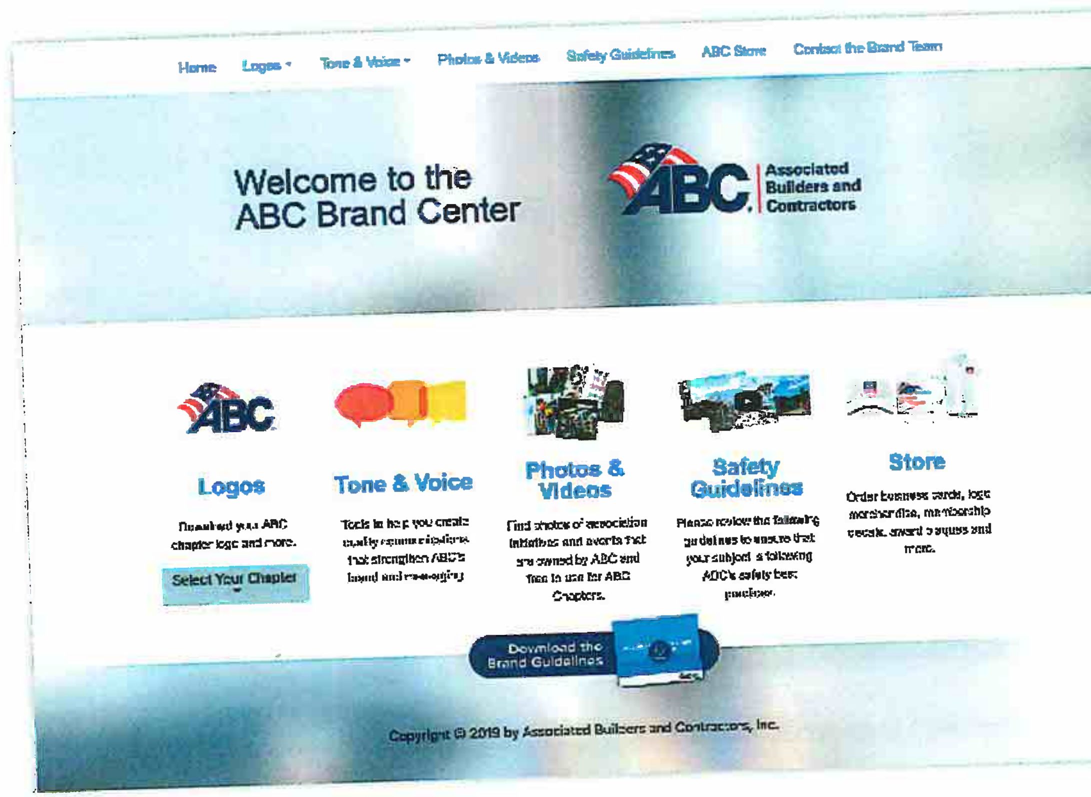
In 2019, ABC unveiled new brand guidelines and a branding website to implement a completely integrated approach to the overall ABC brand.

The ABC Brand Guidelines establish a set of rules and standards for how we communicate and present ourselves. For the brand identity to be successful, it must be used consistently across the organization. These guidelines serve as a central resource for using brand language and visuals consistently so we can amplify ABC's message and maximize the impact of the association's work. The brand guidelines also provide flexibility to address specific audiences, convey powerful messages and achieve timely objectives as needed.

On the brand center website, chapters can access ABC, chapter and program logos; an overview of the association's tone and voice with approved language for its programs, services and priorities; and safety-approved photos and videos.

If you have any questions for the ABC brand team or would like to request a new logo be created, reach out at brandcenter.abc.org/contact.

ABC has also set up an online store for chapters and members to order ABC-branded merchandise, including awards and certificates, print collateral, promotional items and signage.



Community Outreach

Each year, ABC chapters and members engage in activities that strengthen their communities by serving the needs of others. When your chapter organizes or participates in a community outreach event, it's important to send out a news release to the media.

When preparing a news release, remember to include information such as the date, time and location of the event; how many volunteers are participating; the amount of money or time donated; and what charity or organization is benefiting from this event and how it affects your community.

Once the news release has been sent, the next step is to post it on your website. If there is a specific place to feature community service activities, post the release in that section. If no such location exists, place the release in the news section of your site.

Your website is also a great place to publicize your event before and after it takes place. If possible, dedicate a portion of your website to the community outreach activities of your chapter and your member companies. You can quickly and easily add an ABC Cares page to your website and use it as a place to locate information about your community service efforts.

After completing any community outreach activities, be sure to notify ABC about your event by emailing the ABC Public Affairs or Chapter Services team

- Sandy Lynch, Vice President, Public Affairs and Member Services, lynch@abc.org
- Donna Reichle, Senior Director of Public Affairs, reichle@abc.org
- Francis Lowe, Director of Digital Communications, lowe@abc.org
- Erika Walter, Director of Media Relations, ewalter@abc.org
- Grace Austin, Senior Writer/Editor, austin@abc.org
- Rebecca Gale, Communications Manager, gale@abc.org
- Doug Curtis, Vice President, Chapter Services, curtis@abc.org
- Danielle Woodall, Director of Membership, Communications and Resources, woodall@abc.org

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Media Relations Training for Nonprofits: Creating Moving Quotes and Memorable Quips

by Rachael Lighty

A strong sound bite can help nonprofits stand out among the sea of organizations competing for potential donors, volunteers, recognition and media placement. Effective messaging is essential for nonprofits to tell their story in a way that evokes a call to action for their audience. Creating moving quotes and memorable quips can give the nonprofit's stories a human voice, change the pace of a news piece, and add creativity and color to content and copy.

Unfortunately, quotations in press releases and media interviews can often sound as if they were manufactured by a computer; not spoken by a human being. Quotes can be the least interesting parts of copy – but they shouldn't be. By making your quotes or sound bites easy to remember and easy to repeat, your message will be heard and shared, among the audience you are targeting.

In today's blog, I will discuss ways in which you can transform your quotes and quips from blah to brilliant, as well as provide a crash course pitching and interview skills, with an emphasis on creating quotes that speak to the audiences of nonprofit organizations.

There are 3 key topics that I will review at a high level in the blog, but for a more in-depth look at each of these topics, and others, I encourage you to watch my webinar on Media Training for Nonprofits (link below).

Best Practices for Pitching

The Elevator Pitch

The first step in getting others to be interested in the story of your nonprofit is to craft and hone your elevator pitch. All staff members and volunteers at your nonprofit should have some training and knowledge of what the elevator pitch is for your nonprofit organization. Take the time to perfect your pitch – it's your best tool in your toolbox to quickly get the attention of your audience.

I will briefly touch the top tips for elevator speeches for nonprofits, but I encourage you to read the Blog, Through the Eyes of The Nonprofit, to really dive into how you can perfect and hone your elevator speech. As a nonprofit, this is not only important for pitching media, but it's extremely important in advancing your nonprofits mission with all audiences – donors and partners, government agencies, volunteers, staff members, and those who receive assistance from your nonprofit organization. I encourage you to really spend time on the key points in your elevator speech. You can combine those message points with the tips in this blog to immediately begin to stand out to your audience – no matter your stage.

- **Keep it short.** Your pitch is longer than your sound bite, but not a long narrative. Your pitch should be longer than 30 seconds, but no longer than 3 minutes. Time it. Practice It. And get feedback on your pitch from others in your organization before trying it out on external audiences.
- **Don't wing it, script it.** Map out your key messages for the audience you want to engage with.
- **Include a story.** Talk about the people or the cause you help. Put a face to the aide you provide.
- **Check out other pitches for inspiration.** The blog suggests Peter Singer's book, The Life You Can Save and features a 3 minute video that I encourage you to watch.
- **Know what you want – and include an ask.** This can be a direct ask for financial, volunteer, or in-kind support and donations, or just an invitation to your audience to learn more about your nonprofit organization.

- **Delivery matters.** As a representative of a nonprofit, it's important to make sure you think through all of the verbal and nonverbal aspects of your pitch. Have passion, clarity and focus.

Join the Conversation by Understanding How Top Journalists Work

- **Start small.** Leverage your closest media contacts and pitch reporters who know you and/or your nonprofit best.
- **Prove your credentials.**
- **Make introductions.** If you know a reporter is likely to cover your issue in the months ahead, reach out to them for a possible meeting now. The goal is to introduce the reporter to your nonprofit, your expertise and familiarize them with the sources who might benefit them as they report the story.

Before You Pitch

Before you write an email or pick up a phone to call a reporter, take the time to ask yourself the following questions:

- **How exciting, timely and unique is my story?**
- **What is my hook/focus/goal/key message?**
- **Is the pitch tailored to the media that I am pitching?**
- **Have I worked with this journalist before?**
- **Who is my intended audience?**
- **Why should the journalist's editor/boss/reader/audience care?**

Pitch

Writing Memorable Quotes and Snappy Sound Bites

Make It Meaningful

Ok, so you pitched your story. And the journalist is interested! What's next?

Now it's time to create your message content. Words are powerful. They convey your message and influence the audience and its perception of you. Word choice and arrangement need just as much attention as speech organization and purpose. Select clear, accurate, descriptive and short words that best communicate your ideas and arrange them effectively and correctly.

Every word should add value, meaning and punch to the your quote.

> **Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall.**
> President Ronald Reagan

Reagan

Make it Creative

Rhetorical devices are special ways of arranging words to make an idea or thought sound more pleasing and easier for listeners or readers to remember. Below are some of the more effective devices.

- **Simile** – A simile is a comparison that uses the words "like" or "as."
  - Example – "If we deny our children an education, ignorance will grow like a cancer."
- **Alliteration** – In alliteration, the initial sounds in words or in stressed syllables within the words are repeated in a pleasing or memorable manner.
  - Example – "Unnoted and unused." "Hallowed Halls." "Protect and Preserve Peace."
- **Triadic Phrases** – Triads are ideas, adjectives or points that are grouped together in threes. Expressed this way, thoughts have a pleasant rhythm, are dramatic and become more memorable.
  - Example – We mutually pledge to each other our lives, our fortunes and our sacred honor.
- **Not X, but Y**
  - President Barack Obama has used this type of rhetoric in many of his speeches over the past few years.
  - Example – "Our destiny will not be written for us, but by us." Barack Obama
- **Watch for Jargon.** Use specialized terminology only when speaking to people familiar with those terms.
- **Tell an Appropriate Anecdote** – Tell an appropriate anecdote to drive home the message of your story.

Best Practices for Interviewing

In addition to preparing your message and content, it is also important to practice your delivery so you know how you sound and look when you respond to questions throughout an interview.

How people react to our message:

Message Graph

It's hard to be natural when you're talking to a reporter on the phone – with the keyboard clack clack clacking, or face-to-face with a microphone and camera in your face.

The truth is, however, that people leave the best impression and have far greater impact when they communicate in their own, natural expressive style. Start paying attention to how you communicate when you're at ease, with friends and trusted colleagues.

I want to keep driving home the importance of practicing your responses to questions. The more knowledgeable you are about the subject and the more prepared you feel, the more confident you will sound. Practice so that you can speak with confidence.

In your deliver, focus on:

- **Vocal projection**
- **Rate of speech**
- **Pausing naturally**
- **Using enthusiasm** (as appropriate)
- **Show energy and emotion to support the words you are saying**
- **Annunciate and articulate**
- **Practice avoiding verbal fillers** (Um, ah, actually, well, etc.)

Your delivery will keep getting better with practice, so make sure you are practicing by yourself and with others who can give you honest feedback to help you improve.

Tip from the Pros: ***When conducting an interview – stand up. Whether it's on the phone or in person, your voice with be more even, your tone will be strong and confident and it will be easier to breathe naturally as you speak.***

At the end of the day, the important thing for nonprofit organizations is to effectively share their message with the appropriate audience in a way that elicits an action. When preparing for and conducting media interviews, make your audience curious. You want them to finish watching the news piece, or finish reading an article wondering what they could do for you and what more they could learn about their cause. Your message elicited an emotion in them, which speaks to one of their five basic needs.

Get your audience to discuss your story with others and know what you want and don't be afraid to include an ask. This doesn't have to be a direct ask for a financial contribution – it can be expressing a need for volunteers, ideas or inviting the audience to learn more about your nonprofit organization. Many times reporters will ask you if there is anything else you want to add. This is great time to plug your website or your social media pages and encourage your audience to interact with you in the future.

Call to Action

For more information on media training for nonprofits, watch my webinar on Media Training for Nonprofits (link below). In the webinar, we take a deeper dive and explore the following topics more in-depth:

- Best Practices for Pitching
- Targeting Media Outlets
- The Message Triangle
- Writing Moving and Memorable Quotes
- Creating Snappy Sound Bites
- Persuading with Power
- Message Delivery
- Verbal and Nonverbal Cues
- Best Practices and Interviewing Tips

Webinar: Media Training for Nonprofits: Creating Moving Quotes and Memorable Quips

For more resources on how to improve the effectiveness of your communications and media relations strategies and skills, visit the following websites and blogs for inspiration:

- **Nonprofit Tech for Good:** http://www.nptechforgood.com/
- **through nonprofit eyes:** http://blog.moredonors.com/2010/09/10-elevator-pitch-tips-for-non-profits.html

- **The PR Coach:** http://www.theprcoach.com/not-for-profit-public-relations/
- **9 Tips for Writing Copy for Worthy Causes:** http://marketcopywriterblog.com/2010/08/23/9-tips-on-writing-copy-for-worthy-causes/
- **13 Tips for Pitching Your Story:** http://www.fundraising123.org/article/13-tips-pitching-your-story
- **The Art of the Press Release:** http://www.artsjournal.com/lies/2009/01/the_art_of_the_press_release/

References:

Content in this blog is based in the author's 11 years of media relations experience. Research, content and messages were reinforced by the following:

1. **Through Nonprofit Eyes (Blog),** http://blog.moredonors.com/
2. **Toastmasters International, Competent Communications,** http://www.toastmasters.org/225
3. **PR News Media Relations Guidebook: Navigating the Changing Media Landscape, Volume 2,** http://www.prnewsonline.com/media-relations-guidebook-vol-2/
4. **Public Relations Society of America, Pitching Challenging Brands,** http://www.prsa.org/Learning/Calendar/display/6098/Pitching_Challenging_Brands
5. **Pew Research Center's State of the Media 2013 Annual Report on American Journalism,** http://journalistsresource.org/studies/society/news-media/news-media-2013-pew-research-center
6. **Big Dog's Leadership Page – Presentation Skills, D.R. Clark, 1998,** http://www.nwlink.com/~donclark/hrd.html

About Rachael Lighty:

Rachael Lighty is the lead spokesperson and media relations associate for Baltimore Gas and Electric Company (BGE), the largest natural gas and electric company in Maryland. Ms. Lighty has a Bachelor's degree in Communications from Bloomsburg University and 11 years of diverse media relations and strategic communications experience – ranging from business-to-business communications and promotions to media relations, and crisis and political communications, with a focus in corporate social responsibility. In her role at BGE, her main focus is on media relations, crisis *communications, corporate social responsibility, public relations and executive speechwriting.*

Ms. Lighty is currently pursuing her Master's Degree at Georgetown University's in the school's Public Relations and Corporate Communications Master's Program – a program that has been selected as the "PR Education Program of the Year" by PR Newsweek for three years in a row.

In her free time, Ms. Lighty serves as the Vice President and Communications and Marketing Chair for the Baltimore Public Relations Council. She also serves as a board member of the United Way of Central Maryland's young professionals group, Emerging Leader's United. Ms. Lighty provides freelance publicity consultation for a Baltimore-based publishing company and serves as a communications consultant for the United Way of Central Maryland Emerging Leaders United, the American Heart Association, Young Professionals for Alzheimer's Awareness, Ulman Cancer Fund for Young Adults & the USAF Tech Sgt. Daniel Lee Zerbe Memorial Foundation.

Connect with Rachael Lighty on LinkedIn (www.linkedin.com/rachaellighty) or via Twitter, @rachaellighty.

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Pitching to Media for Nonprofits: How to Get Noticed (With Examples!)

Team CauseVox February 19, 2023 12:00 am

As a nonprofit professional, you might have some experience pitching to media. Whether you're trying to sell tickets to an event, reach a new audience of potential donors or simply raise awareness about your cause, you may know how this process tends to go.

Let's say you want to spread the word about the amazing work and mission of your crowdfunding campaign. And, ideally, you'd love to do that in a way that seems genuine and organic — not forced and "salesy". So, contacting a journalist in the hopes that they'll write an article about your campaign seems like a natural choice.

However, you've gone down this road before. And, so far, you're not impressed with the results. Either you're met with radio silence, or you're on the receiving end of one of those dreaded "I'll keep this information on file" emails. Does this sound familiar?

As a freelance writer and journalist myself, my inbox sees a flood of press pitches on a weekly basis. So, believe me when I tell you that there's definitely a right way — and a wrong way — to pitch a journalist.

How to Write a Media Pitch

Curious as to how you can successfully present your campaign or nonprofit to a writer while improving your chances of having them actually write about it? Look no further! I've rounded up three sample journalist pitch emails that you can study and replicate.

While you might need to make some minor adjustments to tailor them to your specific purpose, these are sure to increase your likelihood of getting a response — rather than being immediately dumped into journalist's "trash" folders. But before we go into the samples below, let's go over a few of the basics of pitching to media for nonprofits.

What Is A Media Pitch?

A media pitch is a targeted message to a journalist or news outlet that will generate interest in your organization so that they will cover it in their publication. Although this seems like a simple concept, it helps to break it down further to make sure that you know all the dos and don'ts of pitching to media.

- ***Targeted Message:*** A media pitch is not something that you can draft once and copy and paste to all news outlets. You will definitely want to have a template so that you're not reinventing the wheel every time you contact a news source. But make sure you tailor the content of this template with specific details that will appeal directly to the contact.
- ***Generate Interest:*** It's important to note that not everyone is as immediately interested in your nonprofit's work as you are. This is especially true for news sources that cover a range of stories as they may have limited bandwidth to

focus on your organization. So it's your responsibility to get them interested by selling the story of your work and mission in an intriguing way.

- ***Remember the Goal:*** When you're pitching to media, keep in mind that you have only one goal: to get news outlets to cover the story and activities of your nonprofit. If you try to use this pitch to accomplish other goals, you may end up without a clear call to action for your contact.

What Is The Difference Between A Media Pitch & A Press Release?

Pitching to media is one of the most important public relations strategies available to your nonprofit. A media pitch is different from a press release as it is designed to form a relationship with a media outlet to get them to cover your nonprofit moving forward rather than an announcement about an event or milestone. However, you can learn a lot about communicating with journalists by reading our article on writing effective press releases. Read our online guide to publicity for online fundraising here to learn how to identify and pitch journalists your cause's next fundraising campaign.

Is Pitching To Media Difficult?

As a nonprofit professional, you may not have much experience in the world of media. If you've tried pitching to media outlets in the past and received only silence, you may be wondering whether this process is simply difficult. If you're asking yourself this question, know that you are not alone. Nonprofits of all sizes experience difficulty getting news outlets to cover them. But we're here to tell you that the process of writing a media pitch doesn't have to be difficult.

Media professionals receive so many pitches per day that they only have time for those that meet certain criteria. All media pitches should be:

- Relevant
- Newsworthy

- Brief
- Structured
- Timely

If your pitch is missing one of these elements, you may find that you are consistently failing to find news outlets willing to cover your story. But if you are able to write a pitch that meets all the criteria, chances are you will have journalists and news outlets getting back to you in no time. Check out this list of other helpful tips for pitching your nonprofit to journalists.

Writing a media pitch doesn't have to be difficult. Make sure that both your template message ***and*** each individual message is relevant, newsworthy, brief, structured, and timely and you'll find that the process is easy.

Let's take a look at how best to structure your media pitch to make it simpler to write.

Structure Of A Media Pitch

Every media pitch should follow a simple structure. If you deviate too far from this structure, you may come up with something that isn't easy for a journalist to understand. You can be sure that any pitch that takes someone too long to read or understand will go straight to the trash. The good news is that by following our step-by-step guide below, you can avoid this common pitfall of pitching to media.

There are four essential beats of a media pitch that every journalist will look for and they should be presented in a specific order. Not only will following this structure make it easier for you to write, but it will also give you the best chance of getting noticed by a news outlet.

Here are the four parts of an effective media pitch:

1. The Lead

Begin your media pitch with a "lead." A lead is a hook that will make a journalist understand why your story is newsworthy. Remember when we mentioned that not everyone is as interested in the work your nonprofit does as you are? Well here's where you can get them interested.

When you're coming up with a lead, ask yourself the following questions. What is the single most important need or issue in the population that you serve? Is there a meaningful statistic or data point that communicates this need or issue? Do you have an image that will stick in the reader's mind? Can you use a specific story of a real person to illustrate the problem that your nonprofit is working to solve?

The common denominator behind all these questions is the *human element*. Everyone loves a success story, but chances are, journalists won't want to hear about how your nonprofit "raised X amount of money with an annual gala." This figure, although important, won't grab the reader and make them keep reading. It's not specific enough to conjure a clear mental picture. In contrast, let's take a look at an effective example of a lead from the Little Black Dress Initiative.

Although this example was taken from their website and not a media pitch, the opening question ("Can one black dress worn for five short days create awareness about issues that affect others for a lifetime?") will force the reader to ask themselves a series of productive questions. For example, they may ask themselves how a little black dress can possibly accomplish this goal. This is exactly the kind of emotionally impactful messaging that will resonate with a journalist.

2. Call To Action

Now that you have hooked your reader in with a clear and effective lead, it's time to get down to business. What are you hoping to gain by reaching out to this person? We mentioned above that the end goal of every media pitch is to have a news outlet cover your organization. While that's true, you want to make a specific ask when pitching to media that is clearly stated early in the message.

There are many different potential calls to action that you will have to choose from. Examples include promoting an upcoming event or program, conducting an interview with staff or a board member, highlighting a volunteer who has gone above and beyond with their support, etc. Whichever call to action that you choose, make sure that it logically follows from your lead. For example, don't begin your message with a moving story about a beneficiary and then jump to asking a journalist to conduct an interview with a staff member. Chances are, they would prefer to interview the beneficiary.

An example of a Call to Action in a media pitch.

As someone who works in the world of development and fundraising, you are probably familiar with the various dos and don'ts of writing effective calls to action. If you need a refresher, check out this article, which is loaded with great tips for drafting calls to action.

3. Value Proposition

Ideally, news outlets would be interested in covering your nonprofit based solely on the important work that you do. They might be, but they are also busy and they receive hundreds of pitches every single day. So how can you differentiate yourself from the pack when you are pitching to media?

Let's take a look at a great example of a value proposition from Dressember for their 2022 fundraising campaign.

This value proposition was posed to donors rather than media professionals, but you can see that donors who sign up learn exactly what they will receive by participating. Their donations will go directly to supporting thousands of anti-trafficking programs worldwide. For those donors who want to support this cause, this is a fantastic way of making sure that their fundraising goes towards helping the largest number of people possible.

For media outlets, your value proposition may also speak to the value of reaching a large audience with the story of your organization. Nonprofit features tend to make people feel good and have the capacity to bring in new readership. That's exactly the kind of value proposition that will entice journalists.

If you're pitching to media to promote a specific campaign or event, then you may consider offering them an exclusive "Media Sponsorship" for their coverage. You can feature them in any event materials and thank them during the event program. This will show the community that the news outlet shares their values.

4. Conclusion: Thank And Recap

Now that you've provided your lead, call to action, and value proposition, it's time to end the media pitch. Remember to keep it simple by including only these four elements. The longer your message is, the less likely a journalist is to read it.

The best way to conclude your media pitch is with a sincere thank you. As we have mentioned several times, journalists are very busy people. By thanking them at the end of your pitch, you are showing a respect for their time and attention that they are sure to appreciate. This conclusion also serves the dual benefit of signaling to the reader that the message is reaching its end.

After you thank the contact, make sure to repeat your call to action. You can reframe the message or keep the same verbiage you used above. We recommend the former, since it will seem more natural. But the important thing is that you remember to repeat the call to action. You want to leave the recipient with a clear idea of what you are asking for and what they can do to support your mission.

Finally, and this is perhaps the most important part of the conclusion, remember to include your contact information at the end of your pitch. Don't make the mistake of hooking a journalist with a compelling pitch and leaving them no way of getting back to you to follow up.

An example of a Thank You and Recap in a media pitch.

Now that we've gone over the structure of a media pitch, here are a few best practices to keep in mind as you begin the process.

Best Practices When Pitching To Media

Identify The Right Journalists

Not every journalist will be interested in covering your nonprofit. If, for example, you support children with diabetes, chances are that someone who primarily covers celebrity news will not be interested in writing about your work. Make sure that you are reaching out to the right media sources by creating a media list.

We've provided an in-depth explanation of how to create a media list elsewhere, but here are a few of the most important take-aways to keep in mind:

- Focus on who the ideal audience for your message would be and then find journalists who write for that audience.
- Keep your media list updated with the relevant contacts for each media source.
- Use online resources like HARO, LinkedIn, and Google to find media outlets that are interested in the work that you do. To learn how you can use social media sites like LinkedIn to connect to journalists, check out our article on social media best practices.

Identifying the right journalists is one of the most time-consuming steps in the process of pitching to media. It will likely involve a lot of trial and error. If possible, connect with someone who works in media who may be able to provide guidance and suggest outlets that might cover your nonprofit.

When you are done creating your media list, it should look something like this:

But remember that you want to keep updating it over time. This will be a living document, likely to change with every new relevant media outlet that you encounter.

Build a Relationship

We are far more likely to help our family and friends than complete strangers. You may not have family who work in media and are willing to spread the word about your nonprofit, but there's no reason you can't approach this process as you would if you were looking for friends.

Pitching to media takes a long time, partly because of the planning and research involved, but partly because you need to build relationships with journalists before you can expect them to get involved with your nonprofit. Spend time getting to know these people before, during, and after you make your ask. Set up meetings and phone calls, keep consistent contact, and always approach them with respect and gratitude for their time.

By building relationships with media professionals as part of your pitching strategy, you will find that they may eventually reach out to you to ask for news stories rather than the other way around.

Personalize Your Pitch

It would be easy to create one pitch and send it around to every journalist and media source on your media list. This would save both time and energy that could be spent fundraising. But, what if you used this strategy when communicating with donors? What if you had one appeal and one acknowledgement to save time and energy on development? Chances are, you would see your community of engaged donors dwindle over time.

When communicating with journalists, it's important to use as much personalization as you would with donors. The two groups are similar in a lot of ways. Both are able to support your organization (in different ways) and both deserve the care and attention of a personalized approach.

If you're not sure how best to personalize your pitch, check out this article on personalizing your communication with donors and apply some of the lessons as you are pitching to media.

Have A Great Hook

We mentioned this in the above section about structuring the lead of your pitch, but it bears repeating here because it is so valuable. The average email open rate across industries in 2022 was about 17% with a click-through-rate of only 10%. This means that only one in ten recipients will read an email thoroughly enough to take action from it. While these numbers may seem discouraging, they offer you the opportunity to stand out from the pack if you deliver a strong hook in the opening lines.

We've already provided a few examples of great hooks for media pitches. Here are a few more to help you succeed:

- Tell a story about an issue that affects the local community in which the journalist works.
- Ask a leading question with a surprise answer.
- Share a shocking statistic that will encourage them to read on to learn more.

Focus On The Subject Line

Studies have shown that about 35% of email recipients will decide to open an email based only on the subject line. This is a huge proportion of your audience that will be more or less engaged depending on the strength of your subject line. Like a strong hook, an effective subject line can entice a journalist and make them ask questions that you will then answer with your email.

When drafting a subject line for a media pitch, it's important to avoid the generic. For example, "Request For Coverage" is a weak subject line as it doesn't tell the journalist anything about your nonprofit or why they should get involved. "Support Thousands Of Cancer Patients By Partnering With St. Jude's" is far more effective as it provides a clear call to action with a strong emotional impact.

What Can *You* Offer *Them*?

When framing your media pitch, always return to your value proposition. Why should a journalist cover your nonprofit? Even if they are the most altruistic person on the planet, they still receive hundreds of pitches every day, so you need to make sure to stand out with an intriguing value proposition.

Often, your value proposition will involve helping them reach a new audience through your donors. If you are offering this incentive to them, make sure you explain *how* you are going to help them reach this audience. Will you feature them on your website or social media channels? Or will they organically receive more engagement due to the name recognition that your nonprofit already has within the community in which they work?

Follow Up

This one should be obvious, but you would be surprised how many nonprofits fail to follow up with journalists with whom they have made initial contact. Following up couldn't be easier and will remind your contacts at media outlets that you are committed to your partnership. In addition, it will help you stay accountable with this project.

Even if someone doesn't return your email, you still might consider following up to make sure that they are not interested before moving on. This simple act takes very little time on your end and may drastically increase your success rate.

In fact, this best practice is so important, let's take a look at how to effectively follow up on a media pitch in more detail.

How To Effectively Follow Up On Your Media Pitch

The best way to make sure that you are appropriately following up with your media contacts is to track your communication in a spreadsheet or database. That way, you can log every email and follow up so you know where you are in the process at all times. Remember that journalists are busy people. You may need to follow up once, twice, or even three times after your initial contact to get the ball rolling with a media outlet.

When you follow up, you shouldn't just copy and paste your initial email into a new one. However, you should provide some context for the message so that if they didn't read your initial email, they will understand your pitch based on the follow up alone. You can accomplish this by simplifying your pitch into its most essential elements and adding them to the follow up email. This could include bullet points with your hook or lead, your call to action, and your value proposition.

Now let's put everything we've just covered into practice and look at some examples of media pitches.

Examples of Media Pitches

1. Establishing A Relationship

If you don't have a specific or time-sensitive story topic in mind — instead, you're just trying to get your nonprofit out in front of a bigger audience — you might consider drafting an introductory email like this one.

Why does it work?

- It's short and straightforward. Journalists are busy, and there's really no point in inundating them with links, attachments, and pleasantries if they simply have no interest in your general mission. Instead, this short and sweet email provides a quick, general overview and leaves it up to the writer to determine if they're interested.
- It starts a conversation. Obviously, your big goal is for the journalist to write about your nonprofit. But, something needs to happen before that — they need to respond to you. By asking the writer if they'd like to receive more information, this email directly prompts a response and encourages continued discussion.

2. Reconnecting With A Past Media Contact

Perhaps you've already spoken with a particular journalist about your potential story ideas. Whether you've connected in person, via social media, or through previous emails, it never hurts to circle back on a past conversation when the time is right. This sample email does a great job of touching base without being pushy.

Why does it work?

- It reminds the writer of their interest. This email starts with a brief reminder of not only your existing relationship or connection with them but also their previous interest in the information you're bringing to the table. Doing this increases your chances of having the writer read through your entire message, rather than immediately hitting "delete".

- It includes a link to more information. Instead of cramming all of the nuts and bolts into the body of the email and overwhelming the journalist with a text-heavy mess, this message contains a link that the writer can reference when they're ready.
- It offers help. Again, journalists have a lot on their plate at any given time. So, the recognition of their busy schedule and the offer to help with the story is always much appreciated — and will definitely up your chances of getting a response!

3. Pitching Something Newsworthy

Typically, journalists are on the hunt for something that's engaging and newsworthy. They don't want you to spit out an overview of your company history. No, they want to hear about the things that are new and exciting — the interesting tidbits that nobody else knows about yet. So, what better way to get their attention than with advanced notice of something fresh you have in the works, just like this sample does?

Why does it work?

- It references the writer's previous work. When you're pitching a journalist — especially one you've never met or worked with before — you need to make sure to do your research. Not only does this help you determine if they author the type of content that fits with your story, but it also shows that you've been following their work. Trust me, journalists receive an overwhelming amount of blind and generic pitches. Showing that you're in the know about their writing and interests goes a long way!
- There's no unnecessary fluff. This message cuts out all of the pleasantries and conversational fillers. It even begins with the matter of fact statement, "I'll get straight to the point." You m' e f e writing like a robot, but remember that journalists are conditioned to only look for the information they

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LEADERSHIP

10 Media Training Tips For Crisis Communicators

By Nancy Marshall, Forbes Councils Member.
for Forbes Agency Council, COUNCIL POST | Membership (fee-based)

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The PR Maven®, speaks about growing your audience and your personal brand for professional success and personal happiness.

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What do you do when the media calls for an interview after a crisis? From time to time, businesses are forced to engage in crisis communications—messaging to the masses during turbulent times. You may want to just say "no comment," but that's the worst thing to say after a crisis. It immediately implies guilt and will hurt your reputation in the court of public opinion.

Perhaps your business is going through a product recall, or you're dealing with an environmental issue. The 2010 BP Deepwater Horizon oil spill is just one infamous example of corporate turbulence. The parties involved likely had to rapidly develop a viable public relations plan—at a time when 4 million barrels' worth of oil was flowing into the Gulf of Mexico.

But you can't just wait until a crisis strikes to be ready to communicate. It's critical to prepare a crisis communications plan months and even years in advance, proactively mapping out how to respond if and when the ship starts rocking. The best reaction comes from planning your actions in advance and listing specific steps that you will take to respond. That's how you weather a storm —you don't just act in the middle of one, but *before*.

At the heart of crisis communications—namely, the planning process—is media training, which means preparing yourself to respond to media inquiries when the time comes. When the media calls, you can't be caught off guard.

Here are 10 media training tips for crisis communicators:

1. Never say "no comment," and always tell the truth. Issuing a non-response comes across as a deflection, like you have something to hide. Similarly, lying will always get you in trouble. Journalists are in the business of exposing lies, which makes crises even worse. Tell the truth, even if it isn't necessarily the "full" truth.

2. Establish a crisis communications team, and invest in media training. Again, this should happen well in advance. Return on investment—communicating effectively during a crisis —stems from preparation. There is no substitute for proper preparedness.

3. Create a message map, and don't forget the front lines. Identify your key talking points and stick to them. Let's say you're "conducting an internal investigation" or "doing due diligence." Whatever your core message is, don't deviate from it. Repeat it so journalists get the memo, and the general public will too.

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4. Have empathy, but keep it brief. It is important to show compassion. For example, if your business just went through a round of layoffs (which is common today), don't forget to express sympathy to the employees affected. Personalize your talking points, but don't spend too much time on feelings either—remember to pivot back to the message map.

5. Anticipate difficult questions, and don't feel pressured to respond immediately. Journalists will ask the tough questions—that's what they do, so expect them to come. But you can take your time to think through the best response and answer appropriately. A response doesn't need to be instantaneous, so use your time to strategize.

6. Control your anger, and don't reinforce negative terms. Let's face it: A crisis can be overwhelming, causing negative emotions to reach a boil. Don't let them. It's important to stay cool, calm and collected. Practice patience. As for not reinforcing negative terms, instead of saying, "We did not lie," if you're accused of doing so, say, "We always tell the truth."

7. Remember there is no "off the record," and don't rely solely on the media. Just assume that all of your answers to media questions are on the record and could be used publicly. It's safer to keep your guard up. But at the same time, don't focus exclusively on the media to tell your story. There are other channels, so consider alternative approaches, such as an internal memo or face-to-face meetings with employees.

8. Choose your location, and beware of smartphones. These days, unsavory moments are captured by phones on a daily basis. Tackle your crisis communications accordingly, assuming that everything could be photographed or filmed. With that in mind, try to position yourself in the best possible light, choosing physical locations that can convey a positive message. A conference room, for instance, conveys professionalism.

9. Present yourself accordingly. In addition to picking the right location, it's important to look the part. Dress up. Comb your hair. Use makeup, if needed. Appearing disheveled is a red flag not only to journalists but also to the general public. Staying cool, calm and collected means coming across that way physically. So be presentable.

10. Rehearse, rehearse, rehearse. You can never practice enough as a crisis communicator. Media training doesn't work if you don't hone your talking points through repetition. Make sure you know your message like the back of your hand.

There. Now you're prepared for the next crisis. Hopefully, it never comes, but preparation wins the day—in good times and bad.

By Nancy Marshall, COUNCIL POST | Membership (fee-based). Nancy Marshall, The PR Maven, has been in PR for 35 years. She talks about growing your audience with media relations & personal branding. Read Nancy Marshall's full executive profile here.

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A single crisis can disrupt your brand's reputation in an instant. With media channels operating around the clock, you must act swiftly and strategically to maintain trust. Whether you're responding to misinformation, addressing operational challenges, or managing public scrutiny, your ability to communicate clearly and effectively will determine how well you navigate the situation.

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A crisis is not the time to figure out your response strategy — you need to be prepared before issues arise. Organizations that plan ahead can respond more quickly, prevent confusion, and ensure that messaging stays consistent. In fact, 98% of business leaders who activated their crisis communication plan found it effective, with 77% rating it as very effective. Despite this, only 49% of U.S. businesses have a formal crisis communications plan in place, leaving many organizations vulnerable when a crisis unfolds.

Don't be one of the vulnerable orgs when there are plenty of steps you can take now.

Start by developing a structured crisis communications plan that includes escalation protocols and internal workflows. Make sure your team knows exactly who handles messaging, media inquiries, and stakeholder outreach. Regularly conduct crisis simulations to test response effectiveness and refine your approach. Simulated scenarios allow you to identify gaps and improve decision-making under pressure.

Monitoring media in real-time

Crises unfold in real time, and staying ahead of the conversation is critical for protecting your organization's reputation. Media monitoring allows you to track breaking news, gauge public sentiment, and address emerging narratives before they spiral out of control.

Setting up real-time alerts for brand mentions, industry topics, and crisis-related keywords ensures that you never miss an important development. Media Monitoring Alerts can notify you immediately when your organization is mentioned in the news or across social platforms, allowing you to respond swiftly. In a crisis, speed is everything --- waiting too long to acknowledge an issue or correct misinformation can allow negative narratives to dominate public perception.

Beyond monitoring brand-specific coverage, tracking broader industry conversations can provide valuable context. For example, if your company is facing scrutiny over a product recall, observing how competitors have handled similar crises can offer insights into effective response strategies. Sentiment analysis can also help you assess how the media coverage, helping you refine your messaging, engage with journalists strategically, and take control of the narrative before it takes control of you.

Defining team roles clearly

When a crisis occurs, uncertainty over responsibilities can slow your response and create inconsistencies in messaging, both internally and externally. Defining roles in advance ensures that your team reacts quickly and that communication remains aligned across all channels.

Start by designating a crisis lead who will oversee the response strategy, coordinate messaging, and serve as the central decision-maker. This person should have a clear understanding of your organization's crisis communications plan and be empowered to make real-time decisions. Identify and train key spokespeople who will represent your organization in media interactions, ensuring they are equipped to respond confidently to inquiries. These individuals should be prepared to handle both planned statements and unexpected questions with composure.

Your cross-functional crisis response team should include PR, legal, customer service, and leadership, ensuring that different aspects of crisis communications --- such as public messaging, compliance considerations, and direct customer engagement --- are covered. It's critical that these team members work well under pressure and understand their distinct roles so that no essential communication tasks fall through the cracks.

In addition to defining internal roles, having strong external media relationships before a crisis occurs can streamline your response. This is where Muck Rack's Media Database becomes a valuable tool. The platform allows you to identify and engage relevant journalists, track their recent coverage, and build media lists tailored to your industry. Proactively cultivating these relationships will help ensure that when a crisis arises, you already have established connections with the reporters who are most likely to cover your story.

By setting up a structured, well-trained crisis response team and maintaining strong media relationships, your organization can act decisively and maintain control over its

Pre-approved statements speed up response time without sacrificing accuracy, allowing you to communicate quickly during critical moments when every second counts.

Develop flexible message frameworks that can be quickly customized for different crises. These templates should offer enough structure to maintain consistency while providing room for situation-specific details. Ensure these templates are aligned with legal and compliance requirements before a crisis hits to avoid potential complications when time is limited.

Regularly update your messaging templates based on new risks and past crisis learnings. What worked six months ago might need refinement based on evolving public expectations and media environments. By continuously reviewing and improving these templates, your team can respond with greater confidence and precision.

Pitching tools allow for the creation and customization of messaging templates, facilitating swift and accurate crisis responses. These tools help you maintain message consistency while adapting to the specific needs of each situation.

Customizing messages for different audiences

Employees, customers, and stakeholders need tailored communication approaches during a crisis because each group has distinct concerns and information requirements.

Segment your messaging based on audience needs while keeping core facts consistent. Your employees may need detailed operational instructions, while customers might primarily want reassurance about service continuity. Regulators will likely require comprehensive compliance information. Maintaining factual consistency across these varied messages prevents contradictions that could damage credibility.

Choose the right channel for each audience — email for employees, social media for consumers, and direct outreach for regulators. The medium you choose should match how each audience typically receives and consumes information from your organization.

Ensure internal and external communications are aligned to avoid mixed messages. Brief your internal teams first so they can effectively support the external narrative rather than contradicting it unknowingly.

Misinformation can spread rapidly, complicating crisis management efforts. Failing to respond quickly can allow false narratives to dominate public perception, creating long-term reputational challenges. A proactive approach to misinformation management ensures that your audience receives accurate information directly from you rather than through speculation.

The first step in combating misinformation is to continuously monitor social media and news outlets for misleading narratives. Set up real-time alerts for brand mentions, industry-related topics, and crisis keywords so that you can identify emerging issues before they escalate. When false information surfaces, act swiftly to issue fact-based corrections --- delays can allow misinformation to spread unchecked. Your response should be clear, concise, and supported by credible sources.

Engaging with trusted third-party sources, such as journalists, industry analysts, and influencers, can help amplify corrections and ensure that accurate information reaches a wider audience. These partnerships are especially valuable when addressing complex or technical misinformation that requires additional context.

Establishing strong media and community relationships ahead of a crisis will likely make it easier to control the narrative when challenges arise. One way to do this is by actively engaging with journalists and key stakeholders using Muck Rack's Social Listening Tools. By analyzing real-time conversations and identifying influential voices discussing your brand, you can proactively build relationships with reporters and community leaders before a crisis occurs. Engaging with them consistently versus just when you need to correct misinformation helps establish your organization as a reliable source of information and usually makes it easier to disseminate accurate updates when needed.

Acting with transparency

Transparency is fundamental in maintaining trust during a crisis. Concealing information, delaying responses, or using vague language can worsen the situation and damage your organization's credibility. Research shows that transparent communication enhances public trust and encourages protective behaviors during crises. On the other hand, a addressing the situation. Use clear, jargon-free language to ensure your message is understood, and provide regular updates to reinforce your commitment to resolving the issue.

PressPal AI can be a useful tool during these times, enabling you to respond quickly while maintaining message accuracy and clarity. It helps you refine statements, ensuring they are fact-based, consistent, and aligned with how journalists and the public will perceive them.

Demonstrating accountability to rebuild trust

Taking ownership of mistakes strengthens public trust over time, even when acknowledging errors feels uncomfortable in the short term.

Be honest about what happened rather than deflecting blame. Audiences appreciate transparency and can detect when organizations attempt to minimize their responsibility. This is especially true of your brand's biggest fans. Clear acknowledgment of the situation demonstrates integrity and helps reset expectations.

Outline clear corrective actions being taken, with specific steps and timelines when possible. Vague promises of improvement carry little weight compared to concrete plans with measurable outcomes.

Follow through with visible, measurable improvements to prevent recurrence. Document and share progress on these commitments to show your company values accountability and continuous improvement. Muck Rack's reporting tools can help showcase the impact of corrective actions and transparency efforts, rebuilding trust with stakeholders by demonstrating real progress over time.

Engaging directly with impacted stakeholders

Proactive outreach fosters goodwill and shows commitment to resolution, turning potentially negative experiences into opportunities to demonstrate your values in action.

amid broader crisis management efforts.

Communicate how stakeholders will be supported moving forward, including any compensation, remediation, or policy changes that will benefit them specifically. Clear follow-up plans help restore confidence that the organization values its relationships.

When you use medium-agnostic reporting tools, you can monitor and measure all your engagement efforts and brand perception in real time, making sure everyone on your team has a grasp on the impact your efforts are having for the company. Creating and sharing detailed, interactive reports that show exactly how your team is responding and what specific steps you're taking helps build genuine trust with your audience. These visual snapshots make your progress visible and concrete, showing people you're not just talking about fixing the problem, you're actually doing it and can prove it.

Training spokespeople for high-stakes communication

During a crisis, your spokesperson serves as the public face of your organization, shaping how your message is received by the media, stakeholders, and the general public. Whether addressing journalists, handling press conferences, or responding to difficult questions, a well-prepared spokesperson can help maintain credibility, minimize reputational risks, and keep the narrative focused.

Investing in media training ensures that your representatives remain composed under pressure and consistently deliver clear, accurate messaging. Your spokespeople should be familiar with your crisis communications plan and well-versed in your key talking points, so they can respond confidently without sounding overly rehearsed. Practicing mock crisis interviews can help them refine their responses and prepare for difficult or unexpected questions.

Nonverbal communication also plays a critical role in how messages are perceived. Tone, facial expressions, and body language can reinforce or undermine the credibility of a statement, making it essential for spokespeople to project confidence, empathy, and transparency in their delivery.

It's also important to prepare spokespeople to handle fast-moving digital narratives. With news cycles evolving in real time, journalists expect immediate and fact-based responses. To help your team align messaging and stay proactive, this Muck Rack crisis management guide provides key strategies for managing press interactions, maintaining message discipline, and responding effectively in high-pressure situations.

By equipping your spokespeople with the right skills and resources, you help to ensure that your organization communicates with confidence and consistency when it matters most.

Leveraging owned channels to control the narrative

While credible third-party sources can be helpful when a crisis occurs, relying on third-party media alone isn't enough. By using your owned channels --- such as company blogs, press pages, and social media --- you can communicate directly with your audience and ensure accurate, unfiltered updates. Muck Rack PR Software can also be strategically leveraged to manage and distribute your messaging effectively.

Regularly update your audience with CEO video messages, social media statements, and FAQ pages that address common concerns. Consistently publishing updates on your own platforms helps shape public perception and keeps stakeholders informed on your organization's response efforts.

Using post-crisis analysis to strengthen future response

Every crisis presents valuable opportunities to refine your future strategies. The way your company responds today can dramatically improve how you handle similar situations tomorrow.

Conduct thorough post-mortem reviews to evaluate response effectiveness as soon as the immediate crisis has subsided. These assessments should examine what worked well, what fell short, and where communication went awry (whether anyone external noticed it or not). Bring together key team members who were involved in the response to share their observations and experiences, making sure to document specific examples rather than general impressions.

Implement data-driven changes to crisis plans based on these learnings. Update your messaging templates, refine escalation procedures, and adjust team responsibilities to address any gaps identified during the review process. These modifications should be specific and measurable, allowing you to track improvements in future crisis responses.

Muck Rack's reporting tools allow teams to assess media impact, sentiment trends, and messaging effectiveness, informing future crisis communications improvements. By analyzing data from past crises, you can identify patterns in coverage, understand which messages resonated most strongly, and develop more targeted strategies for similar situations in the future.

Next steps

A well-executed crisis communications strategy requires proactive planning, clear role definitions, real-time media monitoring, transparency, spokesperson training, proactive misinformation management, and strategic use of owned channels. By implementing these best practices, you can navigate your team through crises confidently and maintain the trust of your stakeholders.

To strengthen your crisis communications strategy:

- Evaluate your current crisis plan and answer this question honestly --- Does it reflect today's media landscape?
- Explore Muck Rack's PR tools to enhance your crisis preparedness and media monitoring capabilities.
- Subscribe to Muck Rack's PR insights newsletter for the latest crisis communication best practices.

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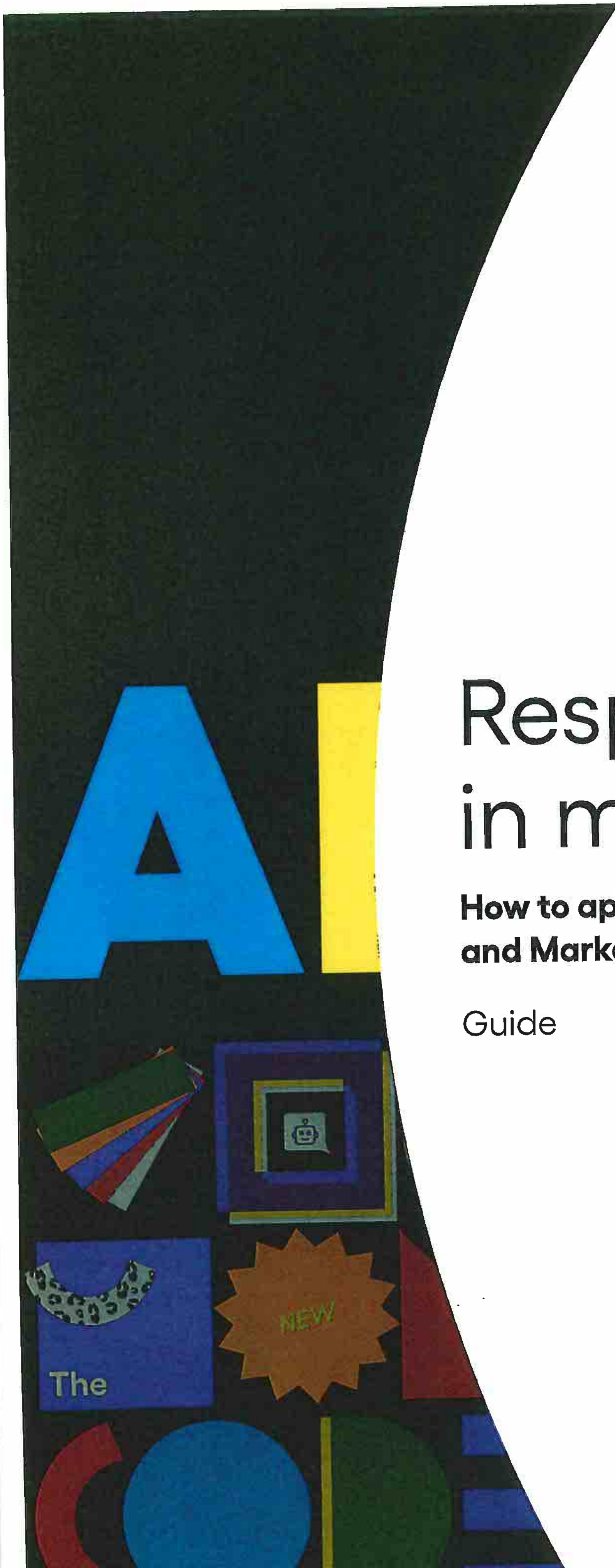

Responsible AI in marketing

How to apply the ICC Advertising and Marketing Communications Code

Guide

ICC

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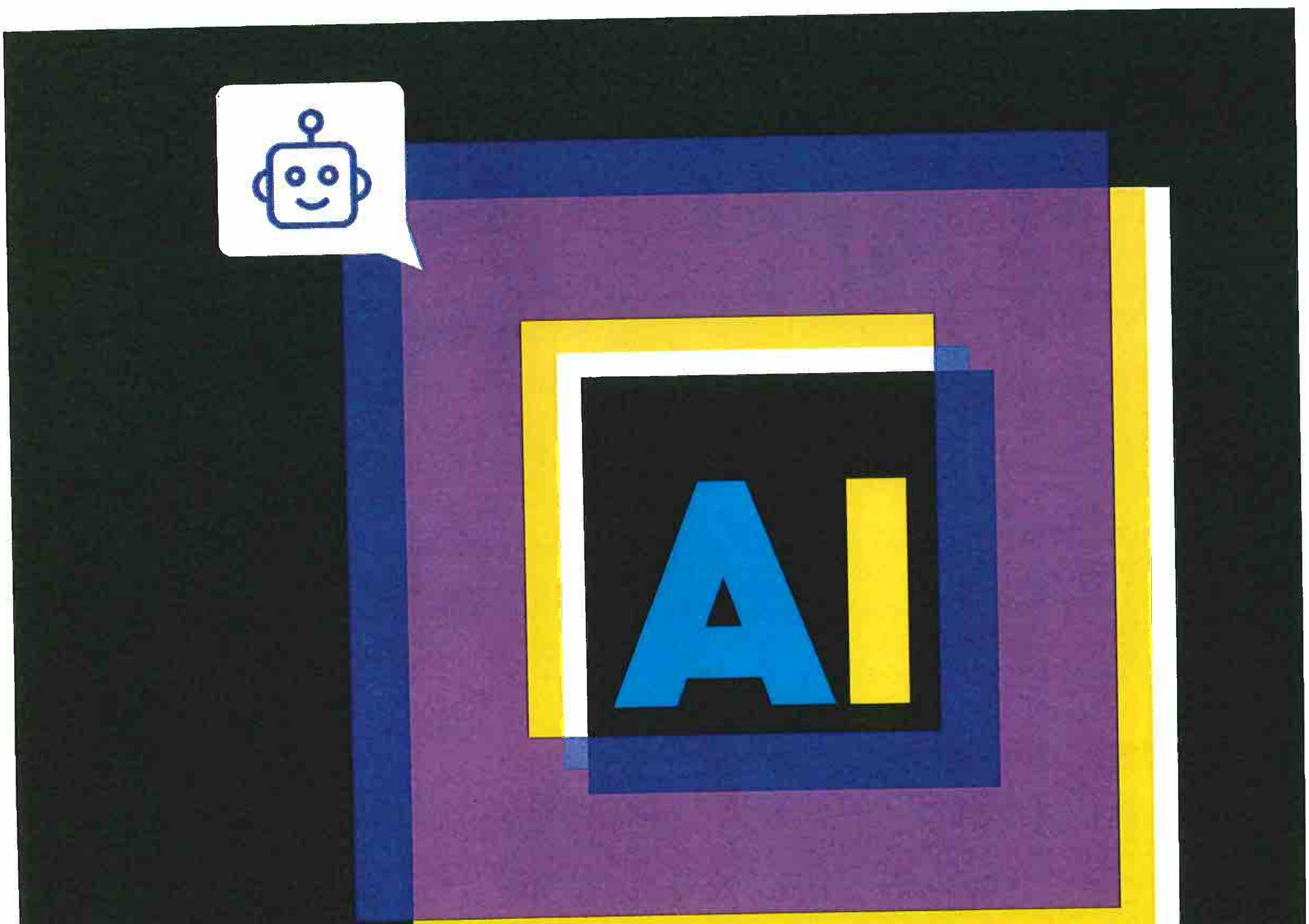

1. Introduction and background

a. The ICC Code

As the world's largest business organisation, the International Chamber of Commerce (ICC) promotes high standards of business ethics through the development and dissemination of codes and guidance on responsible marketing and advertising communications.

One of ICC's landmark achievements is the ICC Advertising and Marketing Communications Code (the ICC Code). First adopted in 1937 and updated several times since then (most recently in 2024), the ICC Code provides practical guidance to advertising industry stakeholders, including advertisers and advertising agencies as well as to self-regulatory advertising organisations and national governments.

By promoting self-regulation in the business sector in accordance with globally recognised high ethical and legal standards, consumers can be confident that businesses abiding by the ICC Code and related ICC guidance can be relied upon to provide advertising that is legal, decent, honest and truthful, thus fostering a robust marketplace that both enhances creativity and preserves consumer trust.

The ICC Code sets forth general principles governing marketing communications of all types and in all media and including more specific sections related to matters such as marketing to children and teens and data-driven marketing.

b. The ICC Code and AI

In March 2024, ICC issued a statement addressing the use of artificial intelligence (AI) in advertising and marketing communications. This statement emphasises the media neutrality of the ICC Code and reminds marketers of their responsibility for ensuring that their communications are legal, decent, honest and truthful regardless of the technology used, including AI.

The 11th edition of the ICC Code, released later in 2024, includes updates that explicitly incorporate AI into the provisions of the ICC Code to help guide the use of AI in advertising and marketing. These updates do not mark significant departures from the longstanding principles of the ICC Code, which reflect the inherent media neutrality and universality of the ICC Code and its utility in emerging areas.

ICC produced this guide in light of the updated edition of the ICC Code and the importance and proliferation of AI technology. It provides guidance to marketers who grapple with questions of how to apply the ICC Code rules where AI is rapidly integrating into the ad creation and delivery process. The guide includes a summary of the most relevant ICC Code rules and two checklists to help marketers ask the right questions.

c. AI and advertising self-regulation

Marketers have long used digital tools and technology to enhance, create or deliver advertising campaigns. Such use does not affect the applicability of existing rules and standards. The same holds true with AI and, if anything, AI amplifies the importance of ethical and self-regulatory standards like the ICC Code. Naturally, the use of AI in advertising and marketing may raise questions about discussions and developments by other organisations in the area of marketing communications, which will be of ongoing interest to marketers who want to use developing technology responsibly.

It is important to note that AI is a complex and burgeoning area. It is subject to increasing regulatory scrutiny, a nascent legal landscape and diverse public opinion. Accordingly, the work of ICC in this guidance is not static. It may change and will continue to develop as new information becomes available.

We believe that it is the right time to set out what current industry best practice is in relation to AI and marketing communications in order to help ensure that AI is deployed responsibly in this area. This guide will be reviewed regularly and updated to ensure that it remains relevant as this technology develops and adoption grows.

A note on the use of AI by advertising self-regulatory organisations

AI-assisted monitoring tools for online advertising used by self-regulatory organisations is one part of the evolving AI application landscape. The monitoring of ads at scale and the application of AI to perform first-level reviews or hints for human reviewers can strengthen self-regulatory organisations and produce useful data about compliance. Over time, this can help both demonstrate the value and adoption of self-regulatory principles and areas for additional focus.

2. Purpose, audience and application of this guidance

The focus of this guidance is on issues related to the responsible use of AI in marketing communications.

The purpose of this guide is to provide:

- a straightforward guide to the way in which the ICC Code applies to AI and
- helpful materials for companies using AI in their advertising campaigns and individuals working on the same.

This guidance may serve as a "strategic compass" for an organisation implementing AI tools into their marketing and will help guide planning for governance, human adoption and decision-making, with the aim of ensuring that the use of AI in marketing is meaningful, responsible and builds consumer trust.

The audience of this guidance may have views and questions on many issues about AI, including its use in the provision of customer services or with respect to specific data privacy questions. These are outside the scope of this guidance, although we underline the fundamental requirement of the ICC Code to ensure that marketing communications are legal, decent, honest and truthful.

Also, as noted above, regulation, policy and viewpoints on AI continue to evolve, and we encourage all to keep a close eye on such developments.

3. The ICC Code's position on the use of AI in advertising and marketing

The following section provides an overview of relevant ICC Code principles and commentary on their application in the context of AI. Citations to ICC Code text are presented in boxes. A compilation of direct references to AI in the 11th version of the ICC Code is also included in the annex.

Applying the Code's principles to AI

Content

The ICC Code is agnostic as to the type of technology and techniques used to create and display ads. Whatever the medium, advertising must adhere to the ICC Code.

> **Article 1 – Basic principles**
>
> *All marketing communications should be legal, decent, honest and truthful.*

Transparency

There may be circumstances in which it will be necessary to identify, in an appropriate way, that AI has been used in the creation of a campaign or specific elements within it in order to counter any potentially misleading impression.

The fact that generative AI output or AI systems were used to create advertising materials or marketing communications does not, by itself, require disclosure.

To comply with the ICC Code it is fundamental that advertising does not mislead. Consequently, disclosures may be necessary where they provide information to prevent consumer deception. However, a disclosure that AI has been used will ordinarily not cure claims that are false or misleading for other reasons.

The ICC Code requires evaluation of communications "*based on their likely impact on the reasonable consumer, having regard to the characteristics of the targeted group and the medium used.*" When considering whether an AI-related disclosure is advisable, be sure to consider the target audience for the marketing communication. When advertising to vulnerable audiences, consider whether the use of AI could mislead the audience to whom it is directed. Where a clarifying disclosure is necessary to avoid or may help to mitigate the potential risk of misleading that audience in particular, the disclosure should be in language understandable to that audience.

> **Article 5 – Truthfulness**
>
> *Marketing communications should not contain any claim likely to mislead the consumer, regardless of how it is conveyed – by text, sound, visual elements or any combinations thereof – and regardless of how the misleading effect occurs – directly or by implication, omission, ambiguity or exaggeration. The combination of elements used in a marketing communication provides the net impression of a claim and controls how it is interpreted by ...*

Responsibility

The use of AI does not absolve marketers of their responsibility for their advertising.

Marketers should know when generative AI output is incorporated in their campaigns. The ICC Code also requires that reasonable transparency is provided by those who prepare, offer and commercialise such systems to ensure that this is possible.

All participants in the marketing ecosystem have a responsibility to comply with the ICC Code.

As organisations implement AI in their marketing processes, they should consider updating internal training and governance processes to ensure that they remain up to date and that individuals understand their responsibility.

Section 2 – Scope and application of the ICC Code: Code responsibility

Marketers should assume overall responsibility for the communications they initiate and bring to the market, whether they largely do it themselves or have it done on their behalf. Responsibility cannot be avoided or circumvented by means of outsourcing or other organisational arrangements. Marketers should undertake their best efforts to ensure that their responsibility is reflected in arrangements with third parties over which they have control. In addition to the prime responsibility of the marketer, all those who contribute to the marketing communication have a responsibility in relation to their participation, influence, control and expected knowledge. [...]

Responsibility for the results produced by social media algorithms rests with the companies that create and manage them. In the case of user-generated content, which may accompany or relate to marketing communications (e.g. comments), responsibility lies with the individuals who created the content, given the lack of marketer control. Should the latter be found to be emanating from a marketer or associated third party, or reused in their marketing communications, it thereby falls back within the control and thus the responsibility of the marketer. [...]

Companies responsible for preparing, offering and commercialising AI systems, applications and other technologies for the creation, improvement and delivery of marketing communications should provide reasonable transparency to the marketer. [...]

Marketers who use algorithms or other artificial intelligence (AI) instruments have responsibility for the communication results they produce.

[...] The responsibility to observe the Code applies also to the various participants in the marketing ecosystem both offline and online. This would extend, but not be limited to, influencers and influencer networks, creators, bloggers, vloggers, affiliate networks, app developers, marketplaces, designers of online choice architectures (web and systems design), data analytics and ad tech companies, developers of artificial intelligence instruments such as algorithms, software or programming machines. This responsibility applies to the extent that the activities or measures of those actors are linked to and impact marketing communications.

> **Article 24 – Code responsibility**
>
> *Marketers have overall responsibility for their marketing communications. The responsibility to respect the rules of the Code also applies to other participants in the marketing eco-system to an extent commensurate with their respective activities, and level of expected professional knowledge and control, including but not limited to agencies, media, market influencers, bloggers, vloggers, affiliate networks, data analytics, social and digital media platforms and ad tech companies as well as those responsible for preparing algorithms and the use of artificial intelligence for marketing communications purposes.*

Respect for self-regulatory decisions

When engaging vendors to produce advertising that may involve the use of AI, the ICC Code encourages incorporating obligations to comply with the ICC Code and any other applicable regulatory or self-regulatory requirements or decisions.

> **Article 26 – Respect for self-regulatory decisions**
>
> *[...] All parties should include a clause in their contracts and other agreements pertaining to marketing communications, committing signatories to comply with the applicable laws and self-regulatory rules, and to respect decisions by the relevant self-regulatory body and support its operation [...].*

Data-driven marketing

AI presents new opportunities for understanding and using data. Marketers who are keen to deploy these capabilities should comply with the applicable provisions of Chapter C of the ICC Code, particularly in Articles C1 to C5 and C17, which cover, inter alia, notice and user control requirements and tracking.

Consent to use the likeness of real people

Some long-standing requirements of the ICC Code become more widely relevant in light of the potential use of AI to generate images of people including deepfakes and other uses of the likenesses of real, identifiable and/or well-known people. If AI is used to generate a likeness (e.g. video, image or audio) of or featuring real and identifiable people for use in marketing communications, or to materially repurpose or alter an existing image, the permission of those people should ordinarily be obtained and the scope of such permission respected before use of such likeness. Similarly, the scope of that consent for use of a person's likeness should be adhered to. The same consideration applies when using AI to repurpose or materially alter an existing image of or content featuring that person in a manner not covered by prior consent.

AI can also be used to generate a likeness of generic people who are not real. In this case, permission is of course unnecessary, and there are many uses of AI-generated likenesses of a generic person that will not require disclosure. However, depending on context, the presentation of an AI-generated human that could be perceived as real may implicate other ICC Code principles such as those discussed above related to content (Article 1) and transparency (Article 5). For example, if the AI-generated likeness gives the impression that it is a real human and a real user of a product or an authority (for

Keep in mind that applicable laws are still emerging and additional requirements may vary.

Article 19 – Portrayal or imitation of persons and references to personal property

Marketing communications should not portray or refer to any persons, whether in a private or a public capacity, unless prior permission has been obtained from that person; nor should marketing communications without prior permission depict or refer to any person's property in a way likely to convey the impression of a personal endorsement of the product or organisation involved.

4. Checklists for AI in advertising and marketing

The following checklists serve as starting points to

- promote the responsible and ethical use of AI in advertising and marketing communications and
- help identify and address concerns – whether legal, brand image related or otherwise – when using AI in marketing materials.

a. Checklist for organisations deciding on the use of AI tools for advertising and marketing

This checklist is designed for companies looking to deploy AI in their advertising and marketing campaigns. It sets out questions guiding businesses in their decision on whether to use AI-driven tools for their advertising and marketing. The checklist aims to help them comply with the ICC Code and general marketing practices that are consistent with the spirit and purpose of the ICC Code.

1. Organisational responsibility and ethical culture

These questions focus on internal accountability, communication of standards to employees and third parties and fostering a broad culture of responsible and ethical AI use.

- **Responsibility:** Who within your organisation has ultimate responsibility for the use of AI and its output in your marketing campaigns?
- **Third-party communication and compliance:** Have you communicated your AI expectations and standards to relevant third parties? This includes those who create, produce, target and disseminate marketing campaigns on your behalf. How will you monitor and enforce compliance?
- **Leadership culture:** How will you ensure that leaders model responsible use of AI in marketing and foster a culture in which employees are able to raise concerns?
- **Sustainability:** Have you considered sustainability in your use of AI, including consistency with any sustainability goals or commitments your company may have?
- **AI literacy:** How will you develop AI literacy within your organisation?
- **Oversight:** What oversight mechanisms will you implement? Assess the nature (and potential risk of harm) of the automation that you are using and take a proportionate approach to oversight.

2. AI tool selection and governance

These questions focus on the formal process for choosing, approving and understanding the capabilities and limitations of AI technologies and tools within the organisation.

- What AI technologies or tools are approved for use by your organisation? What are the criteria for additions to this list?
- Have you reviewed and documented the limitations (e.g. legal, commercial v. editorial use; ownership/licensing) for AI technologies or tools that have been approved for use?

3. Data integrity and claims verification

These questions address the responsible handling of data used by AI tools and the process for ensuring that the resulting claims are accurate and substantiated.

- What restrictions will you place on the data that can be made available to specific AI tools and how will you make marketers aware of such restrictions? Consider what rights you have in the data and what rights you give the tool by providing the data.
- Are measures in place to protect AI systems and data from unauthorised access, manipulation or "poisoning" that could lead to non-compliant advertising?
- What will the process be to verify advertising claims generated by AI?
- How will you preserve substantiating evidence for AI-generated claims and underlying data?

4. Compliance, transparency and audience risk

These questions cover adherence to marketing standards (like the ICC Code), external disclosures and special considerations for vulnerable audiences to prevent misleading marketing communications.

- What disclosures will you require to identify the use of AI and in what circumstances?
- How will you inform marketers about their obligations under relevant advertising codes, including the ICC Code, and ensure that these are adhered to?
- Consider the audience of your campaigns. If your target audience is likely to comprise vulnerable audiences, such as children or the elderly, have you examined the level of transparency needed to avoid misleading them?

Select all

b. Checklist for marketers to responsibly use AI in advertising and marketing communications

This checklist is designed for marketers using AI in campaigns and suggests questions to consider in order to ensure that the end result is compliant with the ICC Code and general marketing practices that are consistent with the spirit and purpose of the ICC Code.

1. General compliance and oversight

- **General requirements:** Have you applied the ICC Marketing Communications Code Checklist to your campaign, including with respect to the use of AI?
- **Inputs:** Do the prompts and other material that you have made available to an AI system comply with your company's AI policies?
- **Approvals and responsibility:** Have you followed your internal approval paths for the AI tools that you are using and for any end product that you are producing?
- **Monitoring:** Do you have appropriate procedures in place to understand, as needed, what types of AI output you are using for your campaigns? Are you aware of how to address any issues should AI output be used in a manner that does not meet relevant advertising standards, including the ICC Code?

2. Truthfulness, claims and content integrity

- **Product attributes:** Have you ensured AI-generated content does not alter or enhance any attribute of the product or service that you are advertising in such a way that it misleads consumers?
- **Claims:** If AI is used to generate claims about your product or service (e.g. about product performance or environmental benefits), have those been substantiated like all other claims?

3. Transparency and audience protection

- **Labelling:** Is your advertising likely to mislead reasonable consumers about your product or service without additional information about your use of AI?
- **Vulnerable audiences:** If your target audience is likely to comprise vulnerable audiences, will your use of AI create a misleading impression about your product or service? Will this be resolved by disclosing the use of AI?
- **Cultural and local:** Have you anticipated any cultural or local sensitivities that may need to be taken into account in connection with AI-generated content?

4. Third-party relationships and legal rights

- **Permission and people:** Have you secured necessary consent from any real and identifiable individuals created by or featured in your AI marketing materials? For AI-generated images of generic humans, have you ensured that your use does not imply a false or misleading endorsement or impression that is material to consumer perception?

- **Sponsorship:** Does your use of AI-generated content create any false impression of an endorsement or partnership with an individual, brand or other third party?
- **Sales promotions:** Does your use of AI in the creation or conduct of a sales promotion comply with the ICC Code's requirements related to sales promotions?
- **Influencers:** Have you provided guidelines to influencers on the use of AI and made it clear that the same rules apply to AI as to all other marketing? Have you told influencers that they should continue to disclose their relationship with your brand, as required, and ensure that their statements are legal, decent, honest and truthful?

5. Risk management and consumer trust

- **Brand trust:** Have you considered whether your use of AI-generated content in a given campaign may affect the trust that users place in your brand or be inconsistent with what consumers expect from your brand?
- **Consumer perspective:** Even if you are comfortable with the above, always consider putting yourself in the position of the consumer and ask: Could your use of AI nevertheless create some concerns that should be addressed?

Annex: Direct references to AI in the ICC Code

The 11th version of the Code includes specific references to AI where this was considered useful or particularly pertinent.

Article 5 – Truthfulness

[...] Audiovisual materials such as photos, video, sounds or other illustrations that are likely to mislead the consumer with regard to either a product's characteristics, performance, benefits, quality and expected effects, or the association of a person or organisation with the product, should not be used, including where these are misleading because they have been altered or enhanced (e.g. AI-generated or by so-called photo and video editing).

Chapter A – Sales promotion

This chapter applies to marketing devices and techniques which are used to make products more attractive by providing some additional benefit (promotional item), whatever its form, or the expectation of such a benefit. Promotional activities are covered whether a purchase is required for participation or not.

The chapter applies irrespective of the form of distribution or media or technology used. It also applies to sales and trade incentive promotions by analogy, and to editorial promotional offers and to those made by any other forms of media.

This chapter applies to a sales promotion regardless of who is producing it, or how it is produced and executed. Thus, the rules cover promotional practices where algorithms or other artificial intelligence instruments are being used. They also cover all the different ways a sales promotion may be brought to the market and advertised, including through social media or with the help of influencers and affiliate networks.

Scope of Chapter B – Sponsorship

This chapter applies to all forms of sponsorship relating to corporate image, brands, products, individuals ("talent"), activities or events of any kind. It includes sponsorship by both commercial and non-commercial organisations, including sponsorship elements forming part of other marketing activities such as sales promotion or direct marketing. Furthermore, these rules, as well as the General Provisions, apply regardless of how sponsorships are created, modified or delivered, i.e. whether by humans or through automated means, such as AI and algorithms.

Scope of Chapter C – Data-driven marketing, direct marketing and digital marketing communications

Unless specifically indicated otherwise, this chapter applies to all participants in the data-driven marketing, digital marketing and direct marketing ecosystem and their marketing communications activities. It sets standards of ethical conduct to be followed by all parties involved in data-driven, digital and direct marketing communications.

automated means such as AI and algorithms. Those employing such automated technologies should exercise due oversight to ensure that they meet ethical standards and maintain compliance with the Code, commensurate with their role in the process (see Article C1, Responsibility).

The rules are designed to be technology-neutral and future-proof. Companies should seek to apply the Code as soon as possible to new technologies.

Due to the rapidly changing and developing nature of digital interactive media, additional guidance regarding interpretation and application of these rules is issued by ICC where necessary and can be found on the ICC webpage concerning Marketing Communications and Advertising Codes.

Article C1 – Responsibility

All parties concerned need to take into account that responsibility also applies to other participants in the data-driven marketing, digital marketing and direct marketing ecosystem including: [...] those responsible for preparing algorithms for marketing communications and those responsible for designing virtual universes.

About the International Chamber of Commerce

The International Chamber of Commerce (ICC) is the institutional representative of more than 45 million companies in over 170 countries. ICC's core mission is to make business work for everyone, every day, everywhere. Through a unique mix of advocacy, solutions and standard setting, we promote international trade, responsible business conduct and a global approach to regulation, in addition to providing market-leading dispute resolution services. Our members include many of the world's leading companies, SMEs, business associations and local chambers of commerce.

ICC

33-43 avenue du Président Wilson, 75116 Paris, France
T +33 (0)1 49 53 28 28 E icc@iccwbo.org
www.iccwbo.org @iccwbo