



## **Chapter 6**

# **Developing Your Campaign's Message**

# What is your campaign about?

## Theme

The theme is the overarching rationale for the campaign. The answer to the questions: “Why you? Why Now?” Every message, regardless of the target goes back to the general theme of the campaign. Your theme shouldn’t seem hollow; it should have meaning to the voter. Challengers and incumbents have inherently different themes.

The **challenger’s** theme argues for change.

- Ronald Reagan, 1980: “Are you better off today than you were four years ago?”
- Every issue, every response in the Reagan campaign went back to this question. Whether it was a question on crime, jobs, or national security, the campaign’s message would implicitly or explicitly invoke this theme.
- Howard Dean’s “Take our country back” implies the need for change in a way that resonated with those who felt the country was going in the wrong direction – a classic challenger position.

The **incumbent’s** theme argues for continuity.

- Ronald Reagan, 1984: “It’s morning in America!”
- Like any other incumbent, Reagan focused on the issues which Americans could be proud of. When focusing on the positive becomes difficult, a theme stressing continuity is just as important. From Abraham Lincoln in 1864 declaring, “We must not change horses midstream...” to George W. Bush’s invocations of terror, the incumbent must present to the voter a rationale to stay the course.

<b>Examples:</b>	<u>Race</u>	<u>Democratic Message</u>
	• Carter vs. Ford	▪ Change
	• Carter vs. Reagan	▪ Continuity
	• Mondale vs. Reagan	▪ Change
	• Dukakis vs. Bush	▪ Change
	• Clinton vs. Bush	▪ Change
	• Clinton vs. Dole	▪ Continuity
	• Gore vs. Bush	▪ Continuity
	• Kerry vs. Bush	▪ Change

## Message

A message is more specific, more detailed, and more focused than the campaign theme. It’s a basic idea that you should be able to express in less than 30 words (27 to be more precise, and we’ll see that later).

Messages can be targeted to particular audiences, tailored for common responses, and changed up as the campaign goes along. Messages are strongest when they go beyond the simple “I support X issue” and start getting to the values the candidate shares with those whom he or she wants to represent. Regardless of the specific message, all messages must consistently reinforce the theme of the campaign.

**If You Can Master Message, You Master Media –  
If You Can Master Media, You Can Win Your Campaign.**

# The Message Box

Our messages don't exist in a vacuum. We wage campaigns because we are challenged or are challenging an opposing idea or candidate. We need to be able to anticipate their messages and prepare ourselves to respond and bring the conversation back to our own message.

A tool we use to map this rhetorical landscape is the Message Box. The Message Box is a visual representation of the potential messages from both parties in the campaign. It details what we say about ourselves, what we say about our opponents, what our opponents say about themselves, and what they say about us – covering the campaign from each possible angle. It looks like this:

<p><b>What we say about ourselves/ our plan</b></p>	<p><b>What they say about themselves/ their plan</b></p>
<p><b>What we say about them/ their plan</b></p>	<p><b>What they say about us/ our plan</b></p>

To help us refine our message, we plot the general messages in the appropriate boxes. To give an idea of what this would look like, we'll fill out an example using a major issue in the upcoming legislative session.

<p><b><i>“Every Vermonter deserves to have a doctor”</i></b></p>	<p><b><i>“The free market allows Vermonters to choose the best options”</i></b></p>
<p><b><i>“The costs of the current system is spiralling out of control”</i></b></p>	<p><b><i>“Socialized health care leads to more government bureaucracy”</i></b></p>

# How to Use the Message Box

Going through this exercise early on in the campaign will help you anticipate and think through your strengths, weaknesses, potential opportunities, and potential threats (**SWOT** – strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats). In addition to helping you refine your own message, the message box allows you start plotting defense and planning attacks beforehand. You will have to respond to your opponent and having a message box allows you to respond in a way that brings it back to your message.

Because you can anticipate what your opponent will say, you can pre-empt his/her message. If, for example, you anticipate a campaign where your opponent will emphasize his own experience, you might talk about the need for a fresh perspective and somehow attempt to paint your opponent’s time in office as a liability. At all times, the message of your campaign should work to bring the dialogue back to your side of the column – back to “what we say about....”

The message box keeps us grounded and prevents the campaign staffers from becoming an isolated echo chamber of sorts. This exercise is useful to start off a campaign, but don’t just let it sit there. Update it every week. If your campaign is switching to a different message or if your opponent is attacking you from a different angle, you’ll be ready. A good message box will predict how the campaigns will be defined if you control the message (first column), or how the campaigns will be defined if your opponent controls the message (second column).

**Exercise: Complete a message box**

Try one out for yourself. Write out a message for an issue, campaign, or local Party

<p>What we say about: _____</p>	<p>What they say about: _____</p>
<p>What we say about: _____</p>	<p>What they say about: _____</p>

## Message in the Field

A campaign will spend the majority of its resources getting the candidate's message out to targeted voters. Your message box gives you a general idea of what people are saying. Now we have to make sure the message we're using is getting through to our audience. Make sure the message you are developing sticks to the following criteria.

### Good messages are **CONCISE**

- Go directly to the point. Avoid complicated syllogisms. It's a message, not a thesis.

### Good messages are **CLEAR**

- Use stark language. Leave no doubt about whose side you're on. This is most effectively done when you base your message on values.

### Good messages are **CONSISTENT**

- Repeat, repeat, repeat. Voters are barraged with a steady stream of conflicting information every day. Having multiple messages dilutes your ability to reach the voter. Make sure your earned media reflect what is said in your paid media. Consistency and repetition reinforce the message. Consistency and repetition reinforce the message. Consistency and repetition reinforce the message.

### Good messages are **CONVINCING**

- Never, never, never lie. No short-term advantage gained through deception is worth the loss of credibility that occurs when caught in a lie. But being convincing is more than just telling the truth. You risk your credibility by talking about issues people simply do not care about. Is your message relevant to the people hearing it?

### Good messages are **CONTRASTIVE**

- Your job is to draw a distinction between you and the opposing candidate or issue position. Your job is to draw a favorable contrast. People can not decide if the alternatives are unclear or unimportant to them. Again, contrasting your values – why and how you came to support/oppose an issue – is more effective than your stance on a particular issue.

## Another Note on Repetition... Another Note on Repetition

Staff, volunteers, activists, and other political junkies will notice a campaign constantly repeating a message. It can become so repetitious that people can recite it in their sleep. By the time the staff gets sick of a message, that message is only just beginning to register in the minds of voters. The vast majority of the population does not make following the nuances of a campaign a priority in their life. They are inundated with messages. The only messages which get through are those which adhere to the above criteria and which are constantly present in the voters' lives. Voters will only occasionally notice a political message and you must make sure yours is the one they notice.

Corporate marketers use the '700 impressions' rule. A consumer must see the same thing 700 times before it alters their buying behavior. The most successful marketers are so omnipresent that our use of their brand is unconsciously emblazoned in our thinking. How many times have you used the brand "Kleenex" when you meant the product "facial tissue?"

### **Does Repetition work?**

Complete these phrases:

"Milk, does a body \_\_\_\_."

"Beef, It's what's for \_\_\_\_."

"Pork, the other \_\_\_\_."

Corporate advertising has used the steady repetition of simple phrases to cut through the clutter of everyday life. We know these old phrases today because of repetition.

**Your campaign must deliver its message multiple times before the target voter has noticed it even once.**

## The Ideal Message Format : 27 – 9 – 3

Now that you have an idea on how to develop your message, how do you best convey this message to the people? Remember that campaigns are a series of communications. You have to find a good way to start that conversation, a way to catch people's attention. Too often our messages get lost on people because we assume that other people are lining up to hear what we say; we forget that we need to give them a good reason to listen to us first. Instead, we bombard them with dry, long-winded imperatives.

Fitting our message into the 27 – 9 – 3 format allows us to get our foot in the door. What is 27 – 9 – 3?

### **27 words • 9 seconds • 3 points**

You have 27 words in 9 seconds using three quick points. The 27 – 9 – 3 method forces you to use clear, concise language. It allows for easy repetition.

Newspaper stories will often include a direct quote in the first two or three paragraphs of any political story. Television and radio have an even stricter limitation: time. The real limitation of finite column inches and finite air time forces the reporter to look for a concise quote which encapsulates the subject's position. If the speaker wants to control what is written and attributed to him or her, the speaker must acknowledge this reality. Successful speakers use the 27 – 9 – 3 to get their 'foot in the door' and hook listeners and will continue to use the 27 – 9 – 3 for any point that the speaker wants quoted or remembered.

### **Examples:**

*Neighbor-to-neighbor/ casual conversation:*

**“So, Jane, you keep supporting these Democrats. Why? Why should I vote for a Democrat?”**

**“Right and wrong, Joe. It's wrong to deprive kids of health care, fight this misguided war, put government in my personal business. Isn't it time for what's right?”**

*Justifying an established position:*

**Global Warming is a threat to all Americans. It will affect our family farms, raise our property insurance rates, and alter animal habitats. We're seeing it now.**

*Promoting your platform:*

**“I think it's time to shake things up: Time to support our schools, time to clean out City Hall, and time to bring jobs back to Anytown.”**

**Exercises:** Try these out.

Why do you deserve a raise?

What is the Democratic Agenda?

What is so great about Social Security?

# Staying On Message

## Why Stay on Message?

Maintaining good message discipline requires three things: Repeat the message, repeat the message, and stay on message. Constantly repeating your message is easy enough, but staying on message is a learned skill. Keeping your campaign on message is the best way to reach your audience in a manner over which you have control. The worst communications gaffes nearly always result from an undisciplined speaker. No matter how wonderful the candidate or issue, straying from your message will open the door to distortion or worse, lack of coverage.

Those who stay on message, control the message. The media can only report what it sees and hears. If you provide nothing but your message, it will repeat only your message. Message discipline has a vastly greater effect on what we see and hear in the media than any partisan or corporate bias.

## Answering vs. Responding

The most likely – and most dangerous – place where we stray from our message is when someone is deliberately pushing us away from it. Assertive reporters may come in with their own angle or their own agenda. But no matter what the reporters’ angle, they can only quote what you say.

The common pitfall for an undisciplined campaign or candidate is to answer whatever question is asked of them. This puts control of your message in the hands of someone who does not have your election as their goal. All of your answers to any question should tie back into the current message of the campaign. If the question is completely off-base, that’s fine, you’re just going to talk about your message. It’s fine to say “I can’t comment on that right now.” Even confessing that you simply don’t know the answer is better than making a statement with an unprepared answer. Often the reporter will ask a loaded question, one that assumes an untrue or unconfirmed premise. The best response is to return to your message.

Remember, it’s your campaign. You are campaigning for a reason and the people deserve to hear what that reason is.

**“Ugh! This guy just keeps saying the same thing over and over. People are going to get tired of this.”**

Nope, not really. Most people aren’t tired of it yet because, unlike you, most people haven’t even heard it.

**“Ugh! He’s not even answering the question. People are going to see right through this.”**

What’s to see through? People are going to see and hear only the message of the campaign. It’s not evasion, it’s focus.

**“Well it looks like evasion and it doesn’t look good.”**

It doesn’t look like anything. Few people watch the press conferences. Most people see the snippets which result when people actually say something. We can control these moments.

## Stay On Message Exercise:

“My dog has three legs.”

This exercise is simple. One person, the spokesperson, is charged with a simple message. Others in the activity are charged with getting the spokesperson off message, to fluster and distract. The message is “My dog has three legs.”

If time allows, take turns and switch out the spokes-person until each person in the group has had a turn fielding questions.

## Sample Dialogue

R: “Why are we here today?”

S: “We’re here because **my dog has three legs.**”

R: “Mm, hm. Don’t you think there more important issues to discuss?”

S: “The most important thing for this community right now is that **my dog has three legs.**”

R: “Given what we know about pre-war Iraq intelligence, where do you stand on the war?”

S: “Well, in my neighbor hood, people are concerned about **my three-legged dog.**”

R: “But the American people want to know why we went to war on faulty intelligence.”

S: “I don’t know much about that, but my neighbors are asking why **my dog has three legs.**”

