

Campaign Skills Handbook

Module 6 Message Development *Creating Powerful and Persuasive Messages*



Introduction

As a candidate or political party competing in an election one of your challenges will be communicating with your targeted voters in a way that is meaningful, memorable and persuasive.

Because you'll have limited time, money and volunteer support, when you get the opportunity to communicate with a voter – whether in person, through the news media or online – you will want to make the most of it. You want voters to remember who you are and to understand the difference it would make if they voted for you.

Making every communication opportunity work for you is the main goal of having a clear, succinct and powerful message. A message is a short, truthful statement that lays out for voters why they should vote for you, and provides a contrast between you and your opponent(s). Crafting and consistently using a compelling message is essential to persuading targeted voters to vote for you.

This module covers the fundamentals of political communications: what is a political message, why having one is important, and how to come up with an authentic and compelling message for an electoral campaign. Topics covered include:

1. What is a Message?
2. Know Your Audience
3. The Challenge: Getting Heard
4. Criteria for Effective Messages
5. Developing Your Message
6. Framing Policy Issues
7. Using the Message

What is a Message?

In its simplest form a message is a statement of why someone should vote for a party or a candidate on election day.

Once you have decided who your target audience is, you need to decide what you will say to persuade them to vote for you. This is your campaign message. It tells the voters why you are running for office and why they should choose you over your opponents for the same position.

What is a Message?

A message is a short, truthful statement that lays out for voters why they should vote for you, and provides a contrast between you and your opponent(s).

The test of a good message comes when a supporter can give a concise, persuasive reply to the question, “Why should I support candidate A or their party?” The answer to that question should be your message.

Political messages are used to inform the public about what political candidates and parties stand for and to convince people to support their approach to public policy. Political messages should be backed up with a policy of how the candidate or party is going to achieve what it stands for or how it is going to prevent what it is against, e.g., if you are for job creation, how do you intend to create more jobs?

However, your message is not your policy program, nor is it a list of the issues you will address if elected. It is not a catchy phrase or slogan. All of these things can be part of an overall campaign message, depending on whether or not they will persuade voters, but they should not be confused with the message. A message is a simple statement that will be repeated over and over throughout the campaign to persuade your target voters.

The differences between a slogan, message and platform are as follows:

Slogan

- Very short
- Limited information
- Seen by all voters

Message

- Short
- Substantive
- Tailored to target voters

Platform

- Long
- Comprehensive
- Not many people read it

Activity 1: Message

What do you think makes up a good message? Write down 2-3 political, or even commercial, messages that you find especially compelling. What do you think makes these messages effective?

Know Your Audience

In most countries, there are millions of eligible voters, all of whom come from a wide variety of backgrounds. There are older people and younger people, people from rural areas and from urban areas, and people who work as teachers, farmers, police officers, factory workers, lawyers, students, homemakers, business owners, military officers, and street vendors. There is a vast assortment of people with a variety of life experiences and political perspectives. No matter how hard you campaign, you will not be able to campaign to all of these different types of people. In fact, if that's what you try to do – to offer a campaign message that speaks to everyone – it's likely that you will not connect with anyone.

To be successful, your campaign needs to reach out to specific subsets of the general public, not to everyone. By focusing your efforts, you'll be able to connect with voters who are most likely to support you, and reflect their particular needs and values.

So if you aren't communicating with the general public, with whom are you trying to communicate? Your campaign is reaching out to specific groups of people that you have identified as supporters or potential supporters. Before you embark on any communications planning or designing your message, it's vital to understand the wants, habits, preferences and perspectives of these voters. In this way, you can connect your goals to what's important to them.

In Module 3 of this program, you conducted geographic and demographic targeting to determine who your supporters and potential supporters are, and where they live. In Module 4 you looked at how to communicate with voters and how to track what voters are saying to your campaign, and in Module 5 you looked at how to identify and assess policy issues important to your voters. All of this information will help you answer the two key questions you'll need the answers to before you can begin to craft your message:

1. Who are my targeted voters?
2. What are the issues and problems they care most about?

Once you've identified your key audiences, creating audience personas will help your campaign develop powerful messages and effective strategies. Personas are hypothetical "stand-ins" for your actual audiences; they are characters you create to help you tell your story and convey your message. Personas are a communication tool that helps to make numbers and figures more human, and to apply a human element to policy issues. You'll find far greater success writing a communications

plan, message or speech that works for a specific person rather than trying to plan or write for a faceless demographic audience.

Although personas are fictional, they must be defined with rigor and exactness. The more information you have about your targeted voters, the easier it is to create accurate personas. When you base personas on research, you'll ensure that the personas truly represent your audience.

Once you have created personas to represent your target audiences, the campaign team should keep them in mind when designing voter contact materials such as posters, signs, advertisements, and flyers.

Activity 2: Creating Audience Personas

1. Return to the targeting exercises you conducted in Module 3. Below, write down the groups of individuals that you identified as your target voters in this election.

2. Review the answer you have given to the previous question (question 1 of this activity). In your mind, begin to draw a mental picture of what a typical person from each of these groups looks like. How old are they? Are they male or female? What is their level of education? What do they do to earn a living? What clothes do they wear? What cars do they drive? What do they do for leisure or pleasure? What TV programs do they watch?

In the space below, give a name or title to each category of voters you are targeting. Then, create a persona for each. You can either draw a picture of what a typical voter from each category looks like, or use the table to write down as many descriptive words about them as you can.

Persona 1:	Persona 2:	Persona 3:

Draw a picture of Persona 1:

Draw a picture of Persona 2:

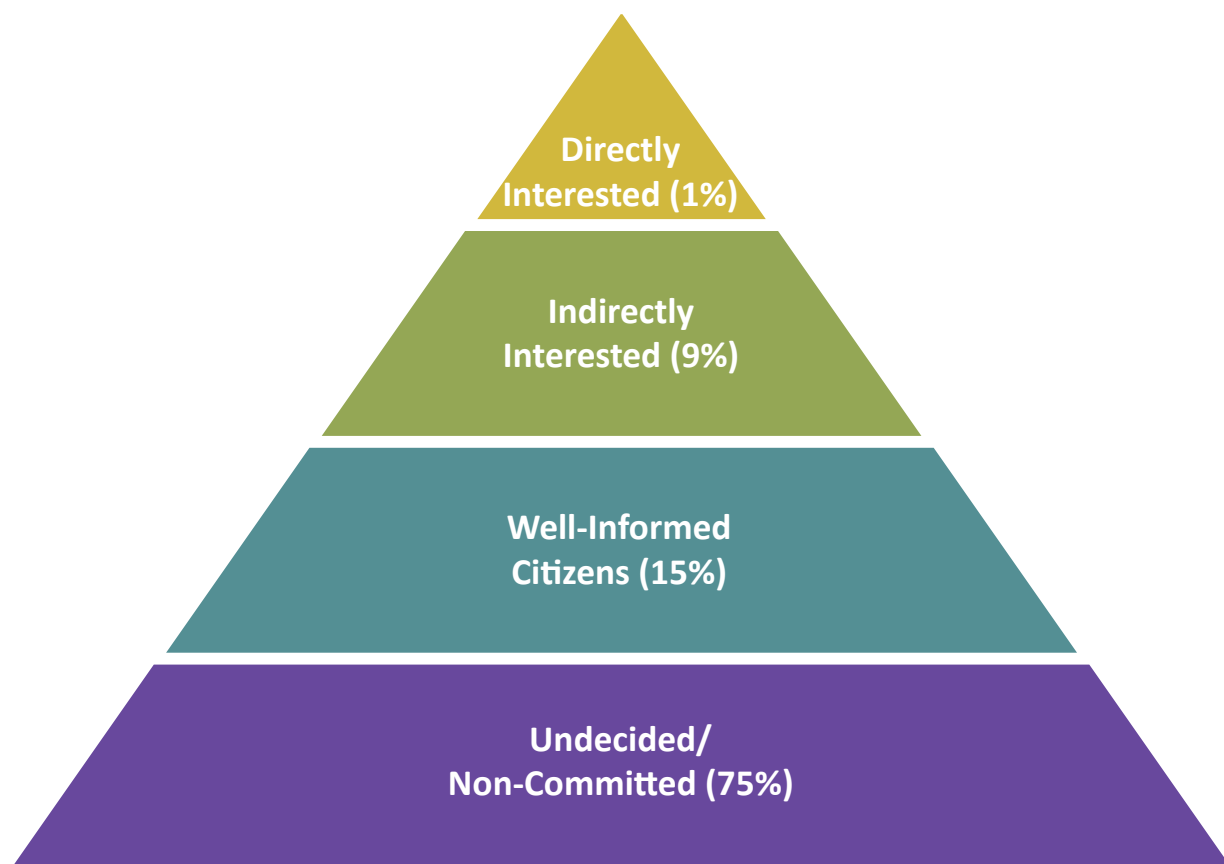
Draw a picture of Persona 3:

The Challenge: Getting Heard

Your targeted voters receive thousands of messages every day – from the news, entertainment media, family, friends and neighbors, billboards, posters, television advertisements, radio, etc. You are not just competing with your opponents; you are competing with all of the other messages out there just to be heard.

The fact that most voters are not very interested in politics makes things even more challenging. The pyramid below gives a general breakdown of the level of interest in politics in most societies around the globe.

At the top of the pyramid are the people who are eagerly interested in politics. This makes up about 1% of the population. These are people who have a direct interest in the outcome of the elections, as it might affect their jobs or way of life. It includes political leaders and activists that spend a huge amount of their time and financial resources campaigning, or political analysts who make a living by commenting on what's going on in politics.



These people are going to listen to every word your campaign says, no matter how complicated you make it sound.

The next segment on the pyramid is composed of people who are indirectly interested in politics. They make up about 9% of the population. This is a wider group that includes members of political parties, civil society organizations, trade unions, some employees of state-owned companies and public institutions, and professional organizations that could be affected by a change of state policies. The results of the elections might affect them, but won't necessarily change their lives. This group will also be very interested in what you have to say.

The next group is well-informed citizens, making up about 15% of the population. This segment of society includes all of those who like to read beyond the catchy headlines and who like to know what is going on in their societies. It frequently includes lawyers, journalists and school teachers, but it is not limited to these professions as you can find well-informed citizens in just about any social group. They are interested in what parties are saying in their campaigns and they will make sure they learn about you no matter how you craft your message.

These first three groups usually already know who they are voting for. They understand the environment, follow politics and usually already have a political stance that is unlikely to change. Together, these three groups comprise 25% of the population.

It is the next and largest group on the pyramid that often has the biggest impact on politics. These are the people who can decide whether you win or lose the election. This group is 75% strong and includes ordinary citizens who live ordinary lives. They go to work if they have jobs, they spend time with their families and neighbors, and they watch popular shows on television.

A big portion of this group doesn't vote and may never vote, but those who do make all the difference. Sometimes, as in the illustration below, they are simply busy with their own lives and don't have a lot of time to think or worry about politics. Keep in mind as well that at the same time your campaign is trying to communicate with them, they are also receiving multiple messages from other campaigns and other media. This can mean that they don't have a lot of information when it's time to vote, and can support a candidate or party based on information that's easily accessible to them, such as affiliation, appearance or who is likely to win.

These voters typically don't have the time or the interest to pay much attention to political campaigns, and give volunteers little opportunity to actually talk to them.

This is why, if you have a chance to talk to these voters, you need to make sure that your message is clear and relevant.

It is for this reason that research and preparation are such important parts of your campaign. Voters in the base of the pyramid are not going to listen to you if you are not talking about issues that matter to them, which means they will not remember your message or recognize you on the ballot when and if they come out to vote.

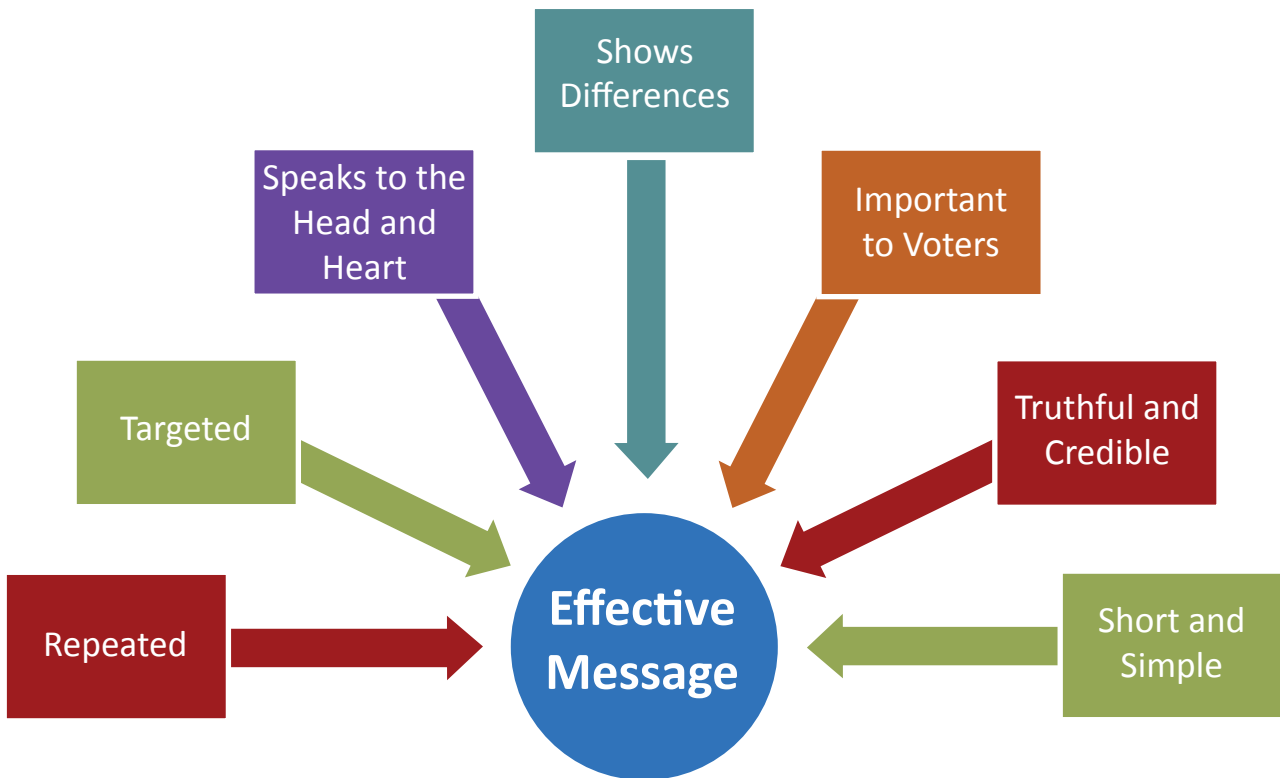


Who has time for politics? . . .

What can you do to increase your chances of being heard by voters who are not very interested in politics and are overwhelmed by the number of advertising and political messages they are receiving? The best way to communicate effectively with these voters is to develop a message that is short, simple and speaks directly to the hearts and minds of voters.

Criteria for Effective Messages

A campaign will spend the majority of its resources getting the candidate or party's message out to targeted voters. To ensure your message will reach the voters with whom you need to communicate, make certain it meets the following criteria:



Criteria for Effective Messages

Make it Short and Simple

Messages must be concise. If you cannot effectively deliver your message to a voter in less than one minute, then you are likely to lose that voter's attention and possibly their vote.

Your message must also be delivered in language the voters use and understand easily. Don't use technical words that the voters do not understand or have no real meaning to them. Creating a visual image in the minds of voters is much better than talking about abstract ideas. For example, talk about people, things and real-life situations to validate or illustrate your message.

Must be Truthful and Credible

The message needs to authentically reflect the values, practices, policies and history of the candidate or political party. It must be consistent with what has happened in fact. In addition, your message should be believable; candidates and political parties that make unrealistic promises simply add to voter apathy.

Voters must believe that what you say, both about yourself and what you will do, is true. One way to establish trust is to back up your statements with validators such as proof of past experience and knowledge or know-how on issues relevant to your message.

Important to Voters

An effective message reflects the values and concerns of your target audience — the voters. Keep in mind the problems that voters face everyday in their lives, not issues that politicians think are important to public policy. For example, voters are more likely to support candidates that talk to them about their jobs, their children's education or their safety, than a candidate that talks about the budget, even though the budget may deal with all of these things.

Show Differences

Voters must make a choice between you and other candidates, or your party and other political parties. You need to make it clear to the voters how you are different from the others in the race by contrasting yourself with them. If every candidate stands for economic development and more jobs, then voters will have no way of making a clear choice. If, on the other hand, you support visible electoral reforms or ending corruption and your opponents do not, then the voters will have a very clear choice.

Speak to the Head and the Heart

Politics is an emotional business and politicians who appeal to the hearts of voters generally defeat those who appeal to their heads. This does not mean that you should abandon the intellectual basis of your party or candidacy, or that you should underestimate the intelligence of the voter. This means that you must find a way to tie your campaign message to the concerns of your voters and make it clear that you understand the problems they face everyday.

Target Your Message

If your campaign message speaks to everyone, then in reality, it speaks to no one. The people who will vote for you are different from those who will not vote for you and both groups have different concerns. Your campaign must determine what these differences are and address your message to your likely supporters. In many cases, voters just need clear information about who really represents their interests. If they have that information, they will vote for that person or that party. Don't fail to provide it.

Repeat the Message

Once your campaign determines what message will persuade your target voters to vote for your candidate, then you must repeat that same message at every opportunity. While you will be living and breathing your campaign and may get tired of repeating the same message, most voters are not paying very much attention to politics and will only hear your message a few times. For your message to register with the voters, they have to hear the same message many times in many different ways. So, if you change your message, you are only confusing the voters and missing an opportunity to communicate a message that will be remembered.

Developing your Message

Now, it's time to start constructing your own message. This section will walk you through three developmental steps to do this: 1) answering essential questions; 2) developing a key word list; and, 3) using the message box. Each of these tools can be used on its own, or they can be used together as complimentary steps to build and test an effective message.

Essential Questions

A vital place to start developing your message is to answer a number of essential questions about why you are in this election. These may appear very basic, but many senior and experienced politicians have stumbled on the campaign trail when they couldn't provide meaningful answers to these essential questions:

- A. Why are you running for office? What problems are you running to solve?
- B. How will you solve these problems?
- C. What makes you a better choice than your opponents?

When answering question A, make sure that the problems you want to solve match the problems that your targeted voters want to solve as well. If you are running to improve your country's system of higher education, but the voters whose support you need are concerned primarily with security and sanitation issues, then you have a problem. Think about solutions for the problems you identified. Many politicians stay on the problems, without offering solutions. People will vote for those who offer solutions.

When answering question B, help voters see that you have a realistic solution to these problems by explaining how you plan to make these solutions a reality. Elections are a time of promises; your task is to distinguish yourself or your party from other candidates and parties by offering realistic plans and a clear strategy that clarifies how you will reach your objectives.

Answering question C is not about talking negatively about your opponents. It is about making contrasts between your values, plans and priorities, and theirs.

Activity 3: Answering Essential Questions

1. In the spaces below, answer each of the essential questions to begin to develop your message.
 - A. Why are you running for office? What problems are you running to solve?

B. How will you solve these problems?

C. What makes you a better choice than your opponents?

2. Let's look now at an example of two competing candidates.

Two presidential candidates are running for election in a country that struggles with unemployment. In the final stage of the campaign period, they were both given a minute to give their final words. Imagine that you are a voter, and you will vote for one of the candidates.

Review their final remarks in the boxes below:

Candidate 1, Omar:

"I am a man of action and I will bring financial success to our great nation. I plan to provide employment to every citizen and to get our country to be the economic power in the world.

I know exactly what to do, and with me our great nation is going to be rich and successful again.

Vote for me if you wish your country to be rich and your family to be employed!"

Candidate 2, Hani:

"I am running for office because we've had too many empty promises that leave families hurting because the government failed to secure jobs for our citizens. My plan is to tackle this issue by providing tax benefits to new employers, reorganizing the National Development Bank to fund the business ideas of our citizens, and prioritizing job creation in the national budget.

My opponent is full of promises, but I'm the only one who cares about people and can deliver solutions."

Which candidate would you vote for? Why?

Which of the candidates does a better job answering the essential questions discussed earlier in this section? When a candidate does a better job answering these questions, have they delivered a better message?

Consider the following analysis. Do you agree or disagree? Why or why not?

Hani told you what he plans to do and how. Omar is a typical politician who says a lot, but doesn't provide clear plans and solutions. His words are empty clichés that you have heard many times.

Hani's message is different. It provides a lot of information, but remains fresh and simple. His message stays realistic, concrete and creates a mental picture of an efficient society where people are employed in new companies. It also appeals to values such as opportunity, hard work, fairness, responsibility, community, democracy, and efficiency.

Key Word List

A key word list is a list of words that describe you, your priorities or what's at stake in the election. These are typically descriptive or action words that help paint a picture in a voter's mind of the type of person a candidate is, what principles a party is committed to, and what type of leadership a party or a candidate would bring to elected office.

Here are some examples:

change	future	trust	effective
leader	traditional	skills	committed
cares	jobs	people first	hard-working
independent	progressive	fighter	new
devout	forward	peacemaker	honest
one of us	rights	respect	transparent
represent			

A simple brainstorming session with members of the campaign team and key supporters can help a candidate or party come up with a short list of values-based words that communicate what your party, your candidacy or your campaign is fundamentally about.

Activity 4: Using a Key Word List

Below are a number of questions to help you develop a message by using the key word list method. Answer each question and consider what types of words you should be using to communicate with voters.

1. Review the list of descriptive and action words above. Are there other powerful words you could add that apply to your situation and your campaign?

2. List 5 words that describe you, your priorities or what's at stake in the election.

3. What do these words say about you? Do they reflect the concerns of your targeted voters? Do they draw a contrast with your opponents? Do they give people a reason to support you?

4. Considering the key words you've chosen, come up with a simple statement that answers the three questions: why you are running, what you will do, and why you are the better choice in this election. This is your message.

Message Box

The message box helps you determine what you will say when you talk about who you are and what you stand for in a way that distinguishes you from your opponents. The message box is a tool designed to help candidates and political parties design their messages and think through their election strategies thoroughly and methodically. Using the message box, you can determine what you will say during the campaign and how you will respond to your opponents' attacks.

The message box is a simple square with four separate quadrants, each of which covers a specific aspect of electoral communication between a candidate or political party and their strongest opponent: what we say about us, what we say about them, what they say about us, and what they say about themselves.

The two quadrants at the top of the box are about what we are going to say in our campaign. The first box is what we are going to say about ourselves: our strengths, values, and agenda. Next to it is what we might choose to say about our opponents: their weaknesses and vulnerabilities. The bottom half is what our opponent is saying. On the left is what they say about us: our weaknesses and vulnerabilities, and on the right is what they say about themselves: their strengths, values, and agenda.

What We Say About Us <i>The reasons people should vote for you</i>	What We Say About Them <i>The reasons people should vote against your opponent</i>
What They Say About Us <i>The reasons people should vote against you</i>	What They Say About Them <i>The reasons people should vote for your opponent</i>

When working with the message box, it is important to include all factors that may play a role in the election campaign including things that may go unsaid or charges that can be made by implication. For example, if you say that you are the more experienced

candidate, by implication you are saying that your opponents lack experience. By saying you are honest, you can imply that your opponents are dishonest, untrustworthy or corrupt.

Keep in mind that your opponents can do this to you as well. For example, your opponents may say that they have the best plan for jobs and education, suggesting that you don't care about these things or don't have a good plan to address them. A message box helps you anticipate these types of contrasts and think through how you will respond to both stated and implied charges.

The message box also helps you see your campaign or your party from the perspective of your opponent, which is not always easy to do. We're not used to seeing our opponents positively and ourselves negatively. However, being able to think through these dynamics clearly will make a significant difference in how effective your communications are during the campaign. Unfortunately, not everything said by the political parties and candidates during an election campaign is true. The real question is what information voters will believe to be true. Seeing your campaign from the point of view of your opponent helps you anticipate what they might say about you that could be confusing or even incorrect – but that voters might believe – and help you figure out how to respond to or prevent such situations.

Finally, the message box helps you figure out how to maximize your strengths, anticipate where you might expect attacks from opponents based on your weaknesses and how you might respond.

In the context of a campaign with multiple candidates and parties, you will create message boxes for all of your significant opponents.

Here is an example of a message box in an imaginary campaign between Fatima and Mohammed. As you can see, Fatima wants to present herself as someone who tirelessly works for the benefit of the community. This example shows you a great feature of the message box – the four boxes actually correspond with each other. When Fatima talks about the opponent, she says he will not be there when you need him. Then, she goes back to the box about herself and says, “You can count on me to fight for you.”

However, she anticipates that the opponent might attack that statement by saying that she fights with everyone and that she doesn't get the job done. This can be addressed in her speeches, where she can point out examples of the fights she won and jobs she has already achieved. This is the point of the message box – to give you an awareness of what your message needs to address.

Fatima's Message Box

Fatima → Fatima	Fatima → Mohammed
"You can count on Fatima to fight for you."	"Mohammed won't be on your side when it matters."
Mohammed → Fatima	Mohammed → Mohammed
"Fatima fights with everybody and doesn't get the job done."	"Mohammed brings people together to get things done."

Activity 5: Using the Message Box

- Fill out the chart below, using your messages and those of your main opposition party or candidate. In the first quadrant, write out the three main things you say about yourself (these should come from your message). Next to that, write out the three main things your opponent says about him or herself. Now, in the third quadrant, write what you say about your opponent. Finally, in the last box, write the three main things your opponent says about you.

The complete message box should outline all of the important messages that could possibly be said during the election campaign by you and all of your major opponents.

What we say about us	What we say about them
What they say about us	What they say about them

2. Review all of the statements in your message box, both those that could be attributed to you and to your opponent. Based on the strength of the statements, assess whose message is more likely to dominate in the campaign – yours or your opponent’s? Why do you think this is the case? If you think your opponent currently has the stronger message, what can you do to bolster your message?

Framing Policy Issues

Developing a message to communicate about policy issues is based on the same principles that you used to develop a powerful campaign message about who you are and what you stand for. The purposes of constructing messages around policy are to help inform and inspire voters on key issues and to help create an even stronger contrast with your opponent on these issues.

Crafting messages for policy issues is often referred to as “framing.” This is a useful term because it describes exactly what you are trying to do with subjects that can be complex and overwhelming. Framing issues puts borders around them, so you can talk about them solely in terms that connect your message, your targeted voters’ concerns and your proposed solutions.

Take the matter of the economy, for example. This is a massive issue with many different parts and pieces, some of them very difficult for voters to understand. But if you are the job-creation candidate, then you put a frame around the aspects of the economy that can help create good jobs and focus your communication in these areas.

Effective policy messages contain one or more brief, straightforward statements that reflect:

- How the problem is affecting your community
- What is causing the problem
- Whom you hold responsible for the problem
- Your proposed solution
- The actions you ask others to take in support of the solution

Consider the following examples from the case study of Fatima in her race against Mohammed:

Issue 1: Affordable housing

On the issue of affordable housing, Fatima uses her own experience of fighting for her house and creates a message where she promises to fight just as hard for people to get their own homes.

Issue by Itself

“Egyptians who work hard deserve affordable housing for their families.”

Issue with Message

“It took me 20 years of work and saving to build a house for my children and family. You can count on me to fight for every Egyptian’s right to affordable housing when they put in a hard day’s work.”

The values she’s sharing here are fairness, compassion, generosity, respect and hard work. The mental picture she’s creating in people’s minds is a happy family at home.

Issue 2: Care for the elderly

This time the issue is retirement benefits for the elderly and families having the resources to care for older members. Here, she uses her experience with her own parents to assure us that she cares about the issue.

Issue by Itself

“The government should protect retirement benefits for the elderly.”

Issue with Message

“I learned how difficult it is for families when I took care of my parents as they got older. You can count on me to protect our older citizens.”

The values she is sharing here are again compassion, love, generosity, and the mental picture she is trying to create is ensuring our parents and grandparents are taken care of.

Issue 3: Schools and education

The next example is about the issue of overcrowded schools and poor quality of education.

Issue by Itself

“Our schools are overcrowded. Our kids need a good place to learn and good teachers.”

Issue with Message

“Mohammed won’t fight for our children when he votes on the budget. I have supported our libraries and teachers for years and you can count on me in the future.”

In this example, she uses the fact that she was active in a related field – supporting libraries and teachers – and at the same time she uses the “What we say about them” section in the message box to talk about Mohammed’s weakness.

Activity 6: Framing Policy Issues

1. What issues do you think matter most to your voters? List at least 3 below.

2. Of the issues you have listed, which would you focus on if you were elected? What policies would you fight for to address these issues?

3. Now that you have identified the key issues to your electorate, and the policy solutions you will advocate in your campaign, go back to the message you drafted in Activity 4. Using your message, write 3 short sentences describing how you would approach issues important to voters in this election. Refer to the case study of Fatima above for examples.

Using the Message (Repeat, Repeat, Repeat) _____

Every time the candidate or the campaign communicates is an opportunity to repeat and reinforce the message. In fact, your campaign’s message should be the foundation of all communications, whether it’s training volunteers, meeting voters, giving news media interviews, posting on social media networks, designing signs and banners, advocating for policy proposals, or debating other candidates.

Voters today get a great deal of information from many sources: people they trust, television, signs, newspapers, radio, and the internet. Because people are exposed to so many different messages, they often only remember messages after they have seen or heard them many times. Think of how often you see most advertisements on television – it’s probably dozens of times, because professional advertising agencies know that’s what it takes for people to remember their advertising campaign messages.

A campaign only has a limited number of opportunities to communicate with voters. If the campaign message is repeated, the chances of it being remembered are better.

A campaign only has a limited number of opportunities to communicate with voters. If the campaign message is repeated, the chances of it being remembered are better. If, on the other hand, the candidate talks about different issues during every speech and the campaign’s signs and radio ads say different things, voters will be confused and the campaign’s message will not get through.

Sticking to your campaign’s message, even when other campaigns or reporters are trying to change the subject, is called “staying on message.” Keeping your campaign on message is the best way to reach your audience in a manner over which you have control. Those who stay on message control the message.

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

Activity 7: Using the Message

1. Consider each of the situations below. Write down how you would adapt your campaign’s message in each of the following circumstances:

Recruiting volunteers _____

Meeting potential supporters _____

Posting on the campaign's Facebook page _____

Designing a campaign poster _____
