

think<shift

# MESSAGING: ROCKET FUEL FOR BRANDS

How the right words can power growth

# GREAT MESSAGING BOOSTS YOUR BRAND POWER & FUELS GROWTH

Great messaging is rocket fuel for your brand. In crisp phrases, it tells people what's distinctive, important, even revolutionary about your enterprise. It makes all your communications better and easier. You can feel it when your messaging hits the mark: everything clicks, in person and in writing.

You can feel it when messaging misses the mark, too. Maybe you wince when sending people to your website. Or you find yourself revising the “about” slides in your sales deck every time you use it.

But why messaging is broken and how to fix it are not always clear. Maybe you've outgrown it. Maybe it's too complicated or too bland. This collection of Thinkshift articles considers both problems and opportunities, pointing the way to messaging that commands attention.

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Red alert: when it's time for fresh messaging	<b>3</b>
Think your work is too complex for words? It's not	<b>7</b>
B2B messaging can be fun—just use the HELIX code	<b>9</b>
Messaging writ small: a great tagline tells a story	<b>11</b>
How to tell if your messages sing the right tune	<b>13</b>
You've got smart messaging—now use it	<b>15</b>

# RED ALERT: WHEN IT'S TIME FOR FRESH MESSAGING

You probably know someone who's an amazing storyteller—you can happily listen to them tell the same tale over and over. But eventually, the story grows old.



**M**essaging is like that—no matter how good it is, it won't last forever. A real raconteur knows when their story is stale, but with business messaging it's not always obvious when you need a change. Here are three of the most common situations that spark a messaging reassessment.

## 1. The business has changed

If your business has grown substantially, shifted market strategy or undergone other substantive changes, your messaging is past its sell-by date. It not only lacks freshness, it also isn't giving you the benefits it should. Unless it actually stinks, though, you might not even notice it's gone off. Two signs that it has: team members are making on-the-fly revisions to messaging because

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it just doesn't feel right anymore, or you find yourself having to explain, "This isn't exactly what we do these days."

Out-of-date messaging probably won't kill you, but if you let it ride, it could seriously hinder your communications effectiveness, and the problem will certainly continue to get worse. Whether you need a complete overhaul or just a refresh, do it now.

The benefits can be significant. Following a business strategy shift, a messaging refresh for [one of our cleantech clients](#) got teams working toward the same end and enabled executives and other key staff to communicate clearly about the company's technology, value and vision.

## 2. You need to reach a new market

You know that tapping into new markets requires new messaging—but how much? You don't want to say completely different things to new audiences (that could come off as pandering and cause a loss of trust), but you do need to speak to different interests, experiences or geographies. Sometimes all you need is a few new messages; sometimes you need to broaden or rethink existing messaging.

You can assess the level of messaging work you need by considering how far you're trying to stretch. For instance, RSF Social Finance wanted to extend its reach beyond dedicated supporters to audiences that shared RSF's values but weren't necessarily knowledgeable about social enterprise finance. We supplemented RSF's existing

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messaging, and then made it real to the expanded audience through a [storytelling program](#).

Here are some guidelines for determining the level of new messaging you need:

**Light refresh.** A few new secondary messages should do the job if your new market is similar to existing ones in terms of concerns and values. New messages might be about different technical requirements, a specific need you can fill or a demographic characteristic you can speak to.

**Medium refresh.** You probably need a medium-level refresh, such as a full set of additional messages, if the new market is looking for different benefits or differs in fundamental ways from your current audience. (The RSF example used above was a medium-size project.)

**Heavy overhaul.** If you're doing something new for someone new, you'll need major messaging work, most likely including revisions to existing messaging.

### 3. Competition is heating up

When you cut a fresh path or stake out your own niche, you typically need messaging that explains what you do and why people should want it. But when competitors start to crowd your space, you'll need messages that make you distinctive in order to stay out front. "We were first" won't cut it. It's a worthy claim, but it's not enough to maintain a strong brand.

The competitive messaging challenge may require a fresh creative approach, new market research, greater attention to the ways your company (not just your products or services) is different, or all of those things. We helped

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a **client** with lookalike competitors stand out by extending their distinctive brand voice into a full messaging platform, then playing it through with thought leadership pieces, web copy and content marketing that sounded like no one else in the field.

Even if your messaging is on the level of a pop song earworm—people can't forget it—sooner or later your enterprise is going to go through some kind of change that requires new messages. Timely adjustments will help you benefit from growth and change, ensure that new initiatives succeed and keep you in control of your story.

*September 2016*

# THINK YOUR WORK IS TOO COMPLEX FOR WORDS? IT'S NOT

Deep Impact Co. struggles to express its core values, or even describe what it does. Written or spoken, the company's messaging produces knit brows. It just doesn't add up to a coherent story.



**T**he communications team knows this, but has thrown in the towel. Failed attempts to develop messaging have convinced leaders that their system-focused, multiple-level, multiple-audience work is just too complex to explain concisely and coherently, and no outsider could possibly understand it well enough to translate. So they're resolved to keep struggling.

We meet companies like Deep Impact all the time. It's painful

because they've committed to the least plausible explanation for their problem: that messaging just won't work for them. More important, resignation is not a growth strategy.

## **First, get out of your own way**

If your enterprise has revolutionary ambitions obscured by a word salad, the first step toward clarity is to get out of your own way. Most people in this situation suffer from what the Heath brothers, in *Made to Stick*, dub the curse of knowledge:

**Complicated work doesn't have to mean uncomplicated messaging.**



*Once we know something, we find it hard to imagine what it was like not to know it. Our knowledge has “cursed” us. And it becomes difficult for us to share our knowledge with others, because we can’t readily re-create our listeners’ state of mind.*

People at companies like Deep Impact have heads full of details and subtleties. And no organization should try to explain the complexity of its goals and activities on first contact. Embrace the idea that effective messaging—strong, simple, memorable—lacks detail. That comes after you’ve got people’s interest.

### **From six points to two, with power**

Here’s an example from our files: seafood sustainability organization 50in10 was struggling to explain its work effectively. The shortest description of who they are, what they do and what they achieve

consisted of six separate points in three categories. And in all that verbiage, there was no key differentiator. We distilled it to 41 words:

*50in10 is the only organization taking a whole-system approach to restoring the world’s endangered ocean fisheries. By addressing issues at every point in a fishery system, we can ensure a rapid and lasting recovery with widespread environmental, economic and social benefits.*

Complicated work doesn’t have to mean complicated messaging. In fact, it shouldn’t. Deep Impact Co. needs to go back to the drawing board with a partner who gets them. Otherwise, they’ll keep on failing to communicate or inspire. Everyone can do better than that—and revolutionaries deserve better.

*April 2016*

# B2B MESSAGING CAN BE FUN—JUST USE THE HELIX CODE

B2Bs can be sexy, and there are sound business reasons to make the effort. (To be clear, we mean compellingly attractive, not underwear-model sexy.) But how do you achieve that kind of appeal?



Companies seeking an “I want that” reaction typically rely on “I’ll know it when I see it” as an evaluation tool. We’ve come up with something a bit more systematic: the HELIX code, standing for Humor, Emotion (or Empathy), Looks, Intelligence and the X-factor. Consumer brands selling everything from ice cream to cars routinely use this code to attract loyal customers, and B2Bs can do it too. It may take a little more imagination, but it’s worth the effort—in part because so few

B2Bs even try. Succeed at sexiness, and your B2B company will stand far above the crowd. Plus, sustainable businesses have an advantage here, since they’re inherently smarter and more innovative than others in their market. Here are three approaches that can help make B2Bs irresistible.

## **Build from the core**

Start with your primary message—the distillation of what you do, how it’s different and why it matters. Ask your team: What’s smart about it?

Having a sense of humor doesn't mean you'll sacrifice credibility.



What's intrinsically cool? How can you frame the message using humor, emotion and design?

### Have fun

Having a sense of humor doesn't necessarily mean you'll sacrifice credibility. And it doesn't have to mean telling jokes—you can be playful or whimsical. MailChimp, for example, built its brand on not taking itself too seriously. From its goofy mascot to its chatty blog to its behind-the-scenes Instagram feed, the company imbues its functional tool with an aura of fun. It one reason MailChimp has the [largest share](#) of the email marketing category.

### Borrow some allure

Sexiness doesn't have to come from within—not when we're talking about marketing, anyway. One way to increase your appeal is to associate your brand with something else that's considered sexy or cool. We turned to drink for the Silicon Valley

finance consulting firm RoseRyan, creating a [campaign based on custom cocktails](#) for the firm's 20th anniversary. We commissioned gorgeous drinks from a happening restaurant, gave them finance names and voilà—press coverage for a milestone that normally wouldn't have rated a second glance.

Remember, robots don't buy business products and services (yet). Humans do. And we don't stop responding like humans just because we're at work. We're always going to be more receptive to something desirable than something dull. B2Bs that realize that and build a sexy brand have the advantage, whether they're breaking fresh ground or competing in a crowded field.

*August 2015*

# MESSAGING WRIT SMALL: A GREAT TAGLINE TELLS A STORY

A great tagline is smart, not just smart-sounding. It tells a story. That is, it conjures up a picture of your vision, what you do and what you stand for.



Consider these classics, recognizable to most even without the company name:

*All the news that's fit to print*

*Just do it*

*The happiest place on earth*

These taglines are frequently held up as hitting the gold standard: catchy, specific, simple. The simplicity is deceptive: they reflect primary messages about mission and value. A tagline is messaging, highly distilled.

These taglines are above average because they evoke a story—of the newspaper that covers everything you need to know, an athletic wear company that believes you can do it, a theme park that delights.

They also know their place. Taglines run the gamut from descriptive to emotive, but ultimately, a tagline is functional. It's often the first thing people see—on your website, your business card or in your email signature—and it needs to

**Gold-standard taglines are clever, but not at the expense of clarity.**



communicate a core aspect of your enterprise. Gold-standard taglines are clever, but not at the expense of clarity; smart, but not at the expense of simplicity.

When creating Thinkshift's tagline, "Brand building for revolutionaries," we wanted to capture the essence of what we do and say something about our clients. It's also a little mysterious, which sparks conversations.

Another tagline that packs a punchy description into a short phrase is "Planet-smart banking," which we created for New Resource Bank. It's snappy, memorable, and tells you exactly what they do. It also speaks to a benefit that isn't obvious from the bank's name.

The Earthjustice tagline, "Because the Earth needs a good lawyer," is one of our all-time favorites because it's a mini-story that's very specific. (Compare it to "Finding the ways that work," the tagline of the Environmental Defense Fund.)

That's not to say a good tagline has to be clever or bold. The tagline for the Fish 2.0 business competition, "Where seafood businesses and investors connect," is excellent because its precise story invites companies and investors to take part. (Fish 2.0 is a client, but we can't take credit for it.)

Taglines are a distillation of who you are, why you do it, the value you provide and the values you hold. They are best created as part of a comprehensive exploration, such as a brand refresh or messaging and brand story development. And they're a natural fit with naming. But even if a new tagline is all you plan to tackle, it's worth spending the time to develop a full slate of options and consider whether that catchy phrase is smart or just smart-sounding.

Skip the shortcuts, and you'll be much more likely to create a tagline that's fit to print—and fits you best.

*March 2016*

# HOW TO TELL IF YOUR MESSAGES SING THE RIGHT TUNE

You've crafted your messaging platform. It's designed for usability and impact. You built it on a foundation of research (markets and customers) and exploration (who you are and what you want to be).



**Y**our messages are woven into your website, marketing collateral and sales decks.

You have talking points and a social media guide. You've trained frontline staff so they can talk about your business confidently and consistently.

But how will you know if the platform is effective? Successful messaging hits all the following marks. If it doesn't, it's time to take another swing at it.

## **Messages are authentic**

A key test is whether people in your organization genuinely connect with the messages. For that to happen, messages need to use natural, ordinary language, so that your people are comfortable using them and audiences respond to them. Corporate speak and won't cut it.

## **The messaging gets used**

Reporters use it when writing about the company. Partner organizations

**A key test is whether people genuinely connect with the messages.**



use it when they describe you on their website. Employees use it, not just in presentations and formal communications, but also on their LinkedIn and Facebook pages and when they talk about their work with friends.

For one company we work with, the test came with the release of significant company news requiring media outreach and a new partnership. It was gratifying to see the messaging take hold and appear in newspaper articles, customer blog posts and on a partner website. Meanwhile, employees used it on their LinkedIn pages and elsewhere.

### **The messaging is flexible**

Good messaging provides a starting point for any communications task, whether it's a pithy quote from the CEO in a press release, a boilerplate description of the company, or the brand voice and framework for a report, presentation or website.

The messaging platform should provide users with messages that are as close to plug-and-play as possible, with examples for as many contexts as makes sense. But messaging shouldn't be rigid. It should adapt to circumstance and the person using it, the communications vehicle, the audience and other factors.

*June 2014*

# YOU'VE GOT SMART MESSAGING—NOW USE IT

We can't believe we're saying this, but people often focus too much on the creative side of new messaging projects. By too much, we mean exclusively.



**Y**es, messaging has to be compelling, flexible and spot-on for the target audience. But all that creative work is wasted if you don't have a plan for making your messaging live beyond the first website revisions and a carefully crafted guidebook that no one reads. For messaging to succeed, everyone (not just the marketing team) needs to use it—in conversation, emails, presentations, wherever. Based on our experience with a variety of clients, these are the keys to successful implementation:

## **Enthusiastic leadership**

Driving adoption is not as simple as having the grand pooh-bah say “do it.” Leadership needs to embrace it, use it, model it—internally as well as to external audiences. Otherwise, everyone else will see messaging as optional.

## **Communicating the benefits**

Messaging solves problems for the people who use it. It provides easily grasped explanations of difficult concepts, clarifies goals and values

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throughout the organization, and provides ready answers (even cut-and-paste options) to common questions. Let people know how the new messaging will help them talk about their work more comfortably, effectively, and consistently.

### **Training**

Walking people through practical exercises for using the messaging in real-life situations is essential. This is especially true for sales teams and customer-facing staff: they're primary message carriers who rely heavily on the spoken word, and they need to feel comfortable with their approach as well as the messages. Facilitated role-playing sessions are ideal. It's also a good idea to provide a refresher course a few months down the road.

Using new messaging will feel uncomfortable at first—even if it hits the authenticity mark and rings true to everyone throughout the

organization—simply because it's unfamiliar. Without reinforcement, people will revert to the words they've always used, even if those words inspire reactions like “Huh?” or “Excuse me, I have to go get another drink now.” Then your messaging platform breaks down—and we hate to see good creative go to waste.

*January 2013*



**BRAND BUILDING FOR  
REVOLUTIONARIES**

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Thinkshift Communications is a team of strategists, thinkers, writers and campaigners inspired by the power of business to address pressing social and environmental problems.

We build brand value, fuel growth and advance mission goals for trailblazing sustainable businesses, cleantech companies and social enterprises. We do it by uncovering what's best in their brand, expressing it in rich stories, and amplifying it through PR, thought leadership and content marketing programs.

[thinkshiftcom.com](http://thinkshiftcom.com)

[start@thinkshiftcom.com](mailto:start@thinkshiftcom.com)

415.391.4446

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