

Momentum

Playbook 11

Build Your Messaging House

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Playbook 11:

Build Your Messaging House

The Incredible Sinking Building

Millennium Tower is a 58-story luxury high-rise condo tower here in downtown San Francisco. It was built in 2009, offering condos that cost between \$1,499,000 and \$2,595,000 USD.

The tower is sinking.

It has sunk 16 inches already and is also tilting. Some structural experts predict it may sink an additional 8 to 15 inches unless steps are taken to stop it.

Why?

It seems the developers chose to build the structure atop dense sand rather than anchor it by drilling into the deeper bedrock. This has caused buckling sidewalks, water intrusion at the garage levels and cracks throughout. And with further sinking, this only looks to get worse.

Of course, lawsuits, excuses and blame are flying around. The builders claim they were not required to do this by current city laws, and they believe the issues are being caused by a nearby construction project. The city is blaming inspectors and the developers. Local politicians are asking for heads to roll. Homeowners are blaming everyone and, since they've spent a pretty penny, will soon file a lawsuit. And because of all the bad press, sales are stalling at the same developer's new residence project.

Doesn't matter how nicely appointed are these residences, or how pretty the units look or the fabulous views or even the snazzy marketing materials. The building is still sinking and tilting.

Without a firm messaging foundation to guide your brand efforts, your business can sink and tilt, too.

What You Say Matters, Not Just How You Look

The core of a successful brand is the message that supports it. What is the business saying, promising, offering? Remember, that core promise is your brand.

Brand is conveyed in three ways: Visually, Verbally and Experientially.

“Visually” is the easy part: your logo, colors, design, website and packaging. Even store décor or how your marketing materials look. They are the clothes and make-up of your business.

But before you can decide what to wear, you have to know what you’re trying to say.

That’s where “Verbally” comes in.

The verbal aspect of your brand is your messaging: How you talk, what you say, and which messages you convey.

For example, do you lead with price, or do you lead with value? Does your company speak in conservative, authoritarian tones, or are you more playful and whimsical in your copy?

When your visual promises are supported by your verbal claims, they align and offer one promise, which leads to where the rubber hits the road: *experience*. In other words, once you’ve promised me, the potential customer, something verbally and visually, does the experience I get match that promise?

If everything you say screams high-end, classic luxury, is that what I’m going to get, or will I get a cheap product and clueless customer service?

If you have a whiz-bang website and promise hip, cool, cutting-edge gadgets, but don’t spend a dime on R&D or good design, will I really have that experience?

The biggest gap for many businesses is getting the messaging (verbal) component right. It supports everything else. They tend to either mimic their competition or speak in an inconsistent way.

How can you convey messages that attract the right buyers, speak to their buying drivers and needs effectively--and, even more so, enable you to stand out in a crowded marketplace? The goal of the brand-building game is to get prospects to know, like, and trust you so that when the need for your product or service arises—when they are most ready to buy—they think of you first.

The right messaging can make or break that relationship.

It's Also *How* You Say It

When I was a bratty teenager, my mother would often chastise me for my tone of voice. I would argue that my requests (whatever they may have been) were not unreasonable. And she would counter with:

"It's not what you said. It's *how you said it*."

Same goes for your brand messaging. You can state the honest, square facts and no one may care or even understand you.

How you say things is just as important as what you say.

Here are three tips to consider when crafting messaging so you can pique interest, create a relationship, and stand out from your competition.

1. Paint a picture by stating benefits

Too many companies get caught up in talking about they do, sell, offer, or provide. They dazzle prospects with talk of whiz-bang features or a laundry list of services.

These are known as **features**. And they are all true. But they are all about what YOU do, sell or offer.

Customers don't care about you. They care about what's in it for them. They care about *benefits*.

They're selfish and they should be, because it's their money!

How does your product or service make my life better, my family safer, my body healthier, my business more successful, my job easier, or my bottom line bigger?

Don't just brag about features. Lead with benefits from the customer's point of view.

If you start the sentence with "I" or "We" do something, or if a prospect would have to ask, "What does that do for me?" or "Why should I care?" then you have not landed on the benefit yet.

I like to play a little game with my clients called "**So What?**" For every supposed "benefit" they cite, I keep asking, "So what? So why does that matter to them?" until we finally land on the true benefit. Amazingly, they often instinctively flip their sentences from "We offer" to "You get..." and finally get there!

Create a vision for what life or work will be like when they use your products or services. Then you can link them to proof points about why you are able to make those claims through the features you offer.

Remember, make your messaging about them, not you!

2. Walk your talk by stating proof points

When you throw a brand promise out into the world, you'd better deliver. As I like to say, don't write a brand check your business can't cash.

Always back up benefits with proof points.

Why can you make those benefit claims? What capabilities, features or proof do you offer that make me believe I can lower my costs, get a world-class video, increase my sales, attract a larger audience, remove my wrinkles, lower my blood pressure, manage my financials with ease, or boost my self-esteem?

Proof points communicate the HOW or WHY you can deliver the benefits you claim. They can take the form of:

- **Your Offerings.** You deliver the benefits simply because of what you offer.
 - For example: full-service accounting services; website design and development; one-on-one coaching sessions; daily classes; monthly healthy eating workshops.
- **Specific Features:** Specific advantages or special aspects that bolster your claim
 - For example: You use the latest HD cameras and have your own recording studio; Your trainers are certified and must complete an additional 20 hours of education each year; Your massage therapists use essential oils as part of every service, at no extra cost; Your event includes big name brand sponsors.
- **Statistics:** Third-party studies, tests or your own ROI data that support your claims.
 - For example: The BrandZ report shows that [companies with the strongest brand power outperformed the S&P](#), even during the economic downturn; Yoga practitioners are [20% more likely to have a more positive self image](#) as compared to the general population; Studies show that when women turn to other women in times of stress (tending and befriending), [they release more oxytocin, thus countering stress and producing a calming effect](#).
- **Press, Certifications and Awards:** Third-party validation of your work, education and results.
- **Social Proof:** Customer testimonials, case studies, online reviews, or the caliber of your current customer list.

Back up your benefits with proof points and clearly state your differentiators from “the other guys” (which we'll get to in a moment) so we know you are more than empty marketing promises.

3. Be human

As a scarred veteran of Silicon Valley tech marketing—I now work with not just tech players but other B2B and B2C industries—I dream that one day all websites, marketing collateral, and press releases will actually sound like human-speak and not meaningless jargon.

I mean, really, “best of breed solutions to maximize human capital and innovation?” Who really talks like that? What does that even mean?

As you read a few weeks back, Einstein once said, “If you can’t explain it to a six-year-old, you don’t understand it well enough yourself.” Your copy and messaging should speak directly to the person reading it in a brochure or on a Web page.

What kind of human does your company sound like? What is your brand personality? Formal and conservative? Perhaps that is appropriate to your market or audience. Or maybe you’re whimsical and sassy.

You can use brand voice to stand out from the masses and engage a prospect on a more human level. Sure, you may have to adapt to the language of your audience or industry, but that is why your brand strategy should reflect your ideal customer in sharp detail. That way, when you “speak” through your messaging, you immediately connect with the person more intimately and you can stand apart.

Do Microsoft and Apple sound the same? Do Gap and Escada?

Revisit *Playbook 10: What’s Your Vibe?* for ideas on how to articulate your brand voice.

How Are You Different?

We’ve talked about benefits, proof points and voice. Now we’re going to talk about the elephant in the room: *Differentiators*.

There’s a reason we covered getting to know your competition in a previous Playbook. Now you’re ready to verbalize how and why you’re different or better than other options prospects might have.

This conversation usually goes two ways:

“I’m not different at all. So many people do what I do! How can I possibly stand out?”

or

“No one does exactly what I do. I actually have no competition. People just have to experience me to know why I’m different.”

Both statements are useless to you.

You are different because you are offering something with your unique perspective, process and story. Your benefits may be different from the competition, based on who you target and where you position your offerings.

“Different” does not have to mean you are the ONLY business that does something. Unless you’ve invented a teleportation device, most of us are not doing something radically new. We just do it in a different way or with a unique spin. Or we target a specific niche.

And to think you don’t have *any* competition, or that people don’t have an alternative to what you do,

is just ridiculous. Unless you invented the teleportation device, that is. Their option can always be to “do nothing.”

An example:

Honda: Reliability, safety and value. More affordable. Different buyers.

Porsche: Speed, performance and cache. Less affordable. Different buyers.

They both sell cars. Nothing earth-shattering there. Yet they offer something different to different audiences!

Your messaging needs to clearly convey why you're different or better than another option.

For example, I'm a brand strategist...one of about 600 million, or so it seems! But I offer a certain packaged suite of services (strategy only, no execution), to a specific audience (solopreneurs and fast-growth SMB's) with a specific methodology and voice. What I bring to the table—my approach, process and style—is a big part of why I'm different from the rest.

I solely focus on strategy. I don't do execution. I don't do design. I don't even assume you have to do social media of any kind. I don't target large global enterprises. My philosophy is that when you decouple the brand *strategy* from any biased *execution*, you will spend less, attract more of the right people and stand out from the crowd to achieve your business goals. Strategy before tactics always. Not all brand strategists or marketing consultants specialize that way.

The same is probably true for you. **HOW you do what you do, what you believe, how you benefit your clients could be different from a seeming “competitor.”** These are the differentiators you want to cite throughout your messaging. This is why we worked on your WHY way back when.

A Messaging Platform: Your Business Foundation

Every business needs a messaging platform. A messaging platform is merely an internal outline to guide what you say to the world. Think of it like the outline for a full book. It covers the highlights and from this, you can write polished, external copy, such as website copy or an elevator pitch, that has the personality and pizzazz we talked about above.

A basic messaging platform includes all the elements we discussed above:

- **Benefits:** No more than three as your main, signature ones.
- **Proof Points:** Proof to back up those benefits.
- **Differentiators:** Why you are different from the rest.

Once you have this foundational messaging platform, you or a skilled copywriter can build out the rest of your “Messaging Toolkit.”

Please don't worry about this Toolkit right now – just want you to see where it's all leading! We'll be putting together more aspects that make up the Toolkit as we go along and then I will give you a handy worksheet so you can capture them all in one place.

Your Assignment: Build Your Messaging Platform

What are the three main benefits your customers GET from what you offer? What do you want to hang your hat on in the marketplace? Remember...

Honda: Reliability, safety, value

Porsche: Speed, performance, cache

Start your benefit statements off with a verb of some kind, is that makes this easier for you: *“My clients/readers/attendees will...increase, decrease, improve, gain, discover, enjoy, enable, find, etc.”*

If you find yourself starting the sentence with “I offer” or “We provide”, this is not a benefit! You will have to ask why the client would care about what you're stating.

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

For each benefit listed above, what proof points can you cite to back them up? These can be testimonials, what your actual offerings include (features), awards, industry data, results, press, etc.

For benefit #1:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

For benefit #2:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

For benefit #3:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

What are my key differentiators? Remember, this could be HOW you do what you do, who you target or even the unique style, philosophy, or approach you bring to your work. You don't have to have five, but aim for at least three:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____

Bonus Time! Your Elevator Pitch, Revisited

For your messaging platform, you can simply bullet-out your benefits, proof points and differentiators. Nothing fancy required. There is a more formal template you can use, but I won't complicate things for you right now.

There is one part of the template, however, that I do want to share with you. It will look vaguely familiar.

Remember back when you created a draft Elevator Pitch? You cited three key benefits at that time.

Now, after doing this assignment, you are ready to refine that Elevator Pitch. It is also known as a Core Positioning Statement or Core Value Proposition (it goes by many names), and sits right at the very top of your messaging platform. When I create these formal templates for clients, the Core Positioning Statement "rolls up" from the main benefits as the *last thing* we create, and also serves double-duty as a quick and easy elevator pitch. Magic!

Use the template discussed earlier to craft a clear elevator pitch you can use right now! Remember, this is meant to be spoken so use words you would actually say:

(YOUR NAME or BUSINESS NAME) offers/provides/delivers _____ (WHAT) _____ to/for

(WHOM) so they can _____ (BENEFIT 1, 2, 3) _____.

For flair, you can add a BONUS TAG on the end, like a tagline or a mission statement.

Your Turn:

But wait, you're not quite done....

Now: I'd love to see your three main benefits posted in the Facebook group by Friday. And if you refined your elevator pitch, a.k.a, Core Positioning Statement as well? Even better!

Remember, we are here to encourage you and provide any feedback. If you're like me, often it's fellow collaborators that help me polish my ideas to a glossy sheen.

Again, I'm going to reward you all year long, so don't lose your MOMENTUM: Post it now and keep that train moving!

One Last Thing...

This may seem incredibly boring or academic to you. You may be wondering when you get to do the "fun" stuff. I promise, there is a lot of fun stuff coming!

But as with the Millennium Tower, if you don't have this foundation, everything will sink, making things that much harder. You will have to keep reinventing the wheel and most importantly, people won't get a consistent thread about what you do.

I could lie to you and jump into random tactics. But that will hurt you long-term and that's not what I'm about!

This will save you so much time in presenting and describing your value. It is also a godsend when it comes to working with a writer who needs to get up to speed quickly.

As we build out your brand through this course, you will appreciate how much easier it is to create these tools once and refer back to them for many purposes.

Plus, it is also a very useful psychological exercise to explore what makes you great and why people will fall in love with your work. And what could be more fun than that?!

Say it loud and proud!

Maria

Goodies and Inspirations

[Fabulous post by Chris Brogan](#) about leading with benefits and following with features.

When you find your messaging talking too much about “You” and not enough about “Them.” remember [this classic tune](#). Yes, my best friend has a crimper to make her hair look like that. Ah, the 80’s.....

And for an advanced-level look at everything you’ll want in your Messaging Toolkit, [check out this past post](#). You’ll be getting this worksheet, but in case you want a sneak peek!