

Successfully Communicating With Key Messages

by Scott Summerfield and Sheri Benninghoven

You've been asked to deliver a "state of the city" address to the chamber of commerce or do a lengthy interview with the city hall reporter from your local newspaper. You'll probably check with staff for updates on major projects and issues, gather some statistics and use this research when you're in the spotlight. Sounds pretty easy, right? You've done it many times and you invariably feel successful when the speech goes off without a hitch or the interview contains accurate details about your important initiatives.

But are you really making the most of these opportunities? Often, city officials gauge their success in these settings by the quantity of information they've delivered or the accuracy of their quotes. In reality, city officials who focus their comments on the three or four most important aspects of a project or issue are the most successful at informing their audiences, improving their agency's credibility and motivating their residents to take a desired action.

Numerous cities credit using "key messages" as the turning point in improving their public communication. Key messages give you a proven tool to influence what's being said about your city, rather than merely answering a reporter's questions or allowing a resident to draw their own conclusions from a bewildering report. True success, though, depends on understanding what key messages are, learning how to create them, becoming the delivery agent for your city's messages and developing a key message culture in your city.

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What Are Key Messages?

Key messages are the most overlooked element of communications planning, yet it's relatively easy to modify your city's culture so that key message development and delivery are as much a part of municipal planning as budgeting or staffing.

So what exactly *is* a key message? A key message is what you want the public to know about a given issue. Typically, you'll have three or four key messages and they usually have one of three purposes:

1. Inform the public about an issue, program or crisis;
2. Generate or rebuild public confidence in the city; and/or
3. Stimulate public action.

A key message is the core content for all your communications tools and what you want the audience to remember after they've heard your speech, read your interview or visited your website. A key message is *not* a fact or statistic, but rather a statement that succinctly communicates what the public needs to know about your agency's role in, or responsibility for, the issue.

City officials often face a challenge when implementing key messaging in their organization. Staff is likely quite comfortable presenting issues in lengthy "staff/agenda report" format for management team or city consideration. Explaining an issue in a three-page document is very different from distilling the most important aspects of it and delivering them as key messages. Indeed, it requires discipline to "stay on message," but as the concept becomes familiar in your city, you and your staff will find it much easier to identify those top-line messages that must be delivered.

How Are Key Messages Created?

It's perhaps easiest to approach key message creation by stepping back from an issue and thinking about the story you want

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to tell your audience. You'll probably have several audiences, each of which will better understand the issue if key messages are tailored specifically for their interests and motivations. For example, a city proposal to build a performing arts complex will generate different responses from arts advocates, residential neighbors of the project, commercial neighbors with parking facilities near the project, county/state agencies and private foundations that fund the arts, and other stakeholders. Each of these audiences must receive a specific set of messages that support the city's credibility in planning and building the project, highlight the project's community benefits and encourage public participation in the planning process.

Typically, you'll want to develop three or four overall key messages for an issue, along with a similar set of messages for each individual audience. These messages are then supported by facts and statistics called "proof points."



The following example shows key messages for a highly visible public works project, the Mineta San Jose International Airport Improvement Program.

Key message: The Mineta San Jose International Airport Improvement Program will meet the needs of Bay Area travelers for decades.

- Proof point: By 2010, the airport will add a new terminal and renovate one existing terminal.

Key message: The improvement program puts Mineta San Jose International Airport at the forefront of a safer and easier flying experience.

- Proof point: The airport will greatly increase the number of security check-point lanes.
- Proof point: State-of-the-art security technology will be used.

Key message: The Mineta San Jose International Airport Improvement Program combines the latest technology, smart planning and unique design for the best possible travel experience.

- Proof point: Passengers will enjoy more convenient concessions, car rental operations close to terminals, and improved ticketing and baggage claim facilities.

Key message: Getting in and out of Mineta San Jose International Airport will be much easier with the improvement program.

- Proof point: Roadways will be straightened and widened.
- Proof point: More curbside drop-off and pick-up space will be added.

How Are Key Messages Delivered?

Think for a moment about how your city communicates. Several tools probably come to mind: newsletters, websites, fact sheets, Q&As, town hall meetings, presentations at community groups, print and broadcast media relations and probably many others.

These tools all offer opportunities for you to tell your city's story through key messages. The unique nature of each medi-

um, though, requires you to consider how you can best deliver your messages to the audience members who are seeing, hearing or visiting you or your website. Television, for example, is a visual tool that can vividly illustrate your story, so you should consider and suggest which locations best support your messages. Your city newsletter is likely to be distributed to every local household (and perhaps every business), so your writing, graphics and photos must be easily understood by readers in many demographics.

Although each tool presents its own communications challenges and benefits, they all have the ability to reinforce your messages. Supporting those messages with facts, examples, anecdotes and third party endorsements (such as someone who has benefited from a similar city project) adds credibility to the story you're telling.

Key messages should be an integral part of your city's communications planning process, which is identical for any situation — whether it's normal business or a crisis. Consider the city's overall goals or objectives (such as the priorities set by the city council each year), develop key messages to support these objectives, determine who needs to hear the messages, create strategies to meet your objectives and identify the best tools to reach those audiences. Cities that consistently plan their communications efforts find that they are perceived more favorably by the public, spend resources more wisely and anticipate situations before they spiral out of control. They also look forward to media interviews because key messages provide the core content; the reporter is no longer setting the agenda.

Benefits of Key Messages

Key messaging offers many benefits for city officials, on both the personal and agency levels. For an elected or appointed city official, key messaging:

- **Gives you a new and strategic way to think about your projects or issues.** Key messages are particularly helpful if you're new in your role and working to establish yourself within the organi-



Practical Examples From Three Cities

The City of Irvine produces a key message submittal form for departments to easily send their messages to the public information officer and a city council key message schedule (similar to an agenda schedule) for each council meeting. These are supplemented by documents that explain key messages and provide samples for major city issues.

The City of Pasadena distributes a weekly e-mail noting *news-worthy* (versus *all*) city council agenda items in the subject line to local news media, several hundred interested community members and leaders of local organizations. The document is written in an easily digested, lighthearted (if appropriate) style, distinguishing it from more traditional municipal materials.

The City of Reno, Nev., produces *Desk Topics*, containing key messages and bulleted supporting facts, to city council, city employees, board/commission members and community leaders. The document provides a concise snapshot of important issues.

zation. You can use the messages to clarify staffing and budgeting decisions, emphasize the staff/public input process you used for a project, and highlight your thorough understanding of the issue.

- **Provides you with answers to tough questions.** Ready access to key messages for every important city project, initiative and controversy enables you to respond thoughtfully and knowledgeably in virtually any setting.
- **Helps you gain a clear picture of developing stories.** As a city leader, you must be ahead of the curve on new issues. Key messages provide you with the important elements of a situation and can help you more efficiently formulate the city's response.
- **Generates understanding for all employees.** With key messages, the city can educate one of your most important but often overlooked audiences — city employees. By distributing the three or four most important messages to your entire workforce, you empower them to help tell the city's story.
- **Brings consistency to issues or crises.** Responses by the mayor often differ from responses by the city manager or a department head during a controversial situation. Key messages help staff stay on point so the public receives the same information from all officials who represent the city.
- **Focuses staff discussion to gain consensus.** Citywide management team or department staff meetings can easily become bogged down by compelling situations. Making key message development part of the discussion will help distill thoughts and lead to a deliberate response to the issue.
- **Provides the basis for media contacts, web content, Q&As, etc.** Lengthy staff reports are rarely the best way to help reporters or members of the public understand an issue. Key messages allow you to focus your interviews, tailor your website and create documents such as Q&As, fact sheets and speaking points, which help the public learn about the issue.

- **Ensures that the public hears key points from a variety of sources.**

Cities typically designate one expert as spokesperson for a given issue, often because others in the organization aren't able to articulate impacts, options or status. Key messages provide a method for others (city council members and planning commissioners, for example) to communicate the city's point of view in multiple settings.

Creating a Key Message Culture

Implementing a key message culture in your city is fairly easy. As with any change in management style, you may face some initial resistance because key messages are probably not part of your current planning or response process.

Demonstrating successful case studies to the management team and other city staff, city council and commission members is an ideal way to establish a clear connection between key message delivery and project success. Many cities have found a higher level of acceptance for controversial projects — or have been perceived as more credible during times of crisis — when they've used key messages to communicate. Support for a key message culture must start with the city council and city manager and then be promoted, accepted and implemented throughout the organization.

Creating teams at the assistant/deputy city manager level can also be an effective way to implement key messages. Typically, a team of two or three managers confer (perhaps in partnership with the appropriate department head) for each significant issue, situation, program or crisis and develop key messages with supporting proof points or facts. The message "platform" can then be distributed throughout the agency, ensuring consistent communication.

Your city's public information officer is a wonderful resource for establishing a key message culture, helping craft messages until staff becomes proficient and monitoring media coverage to ensure that the messages are being delivered consistently.

The League also provides key messages and talking points for major issues facing California cities; these are available in the Advocacy Center on the League website at www.cacities.org/advocacycenter. You can tailor the League messages to meet your community's own interests and priorities, or use them as-is in your communications efforts.

The Bottom Line: You Can Message Your Way to Success

It's hard to imagine that a rather simple change in how your city does business can lead to dramatic improvement in public understanding of controversial projects, confidence in your organization during a crisis, and personal growth for you and your staff. A key message culture, though, is a proven catalyst for these successes, and fostering one in your city will provide immediate benefits for your organization and your community. ■

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