The Message House Method

Craft great messages and get your team to use them.
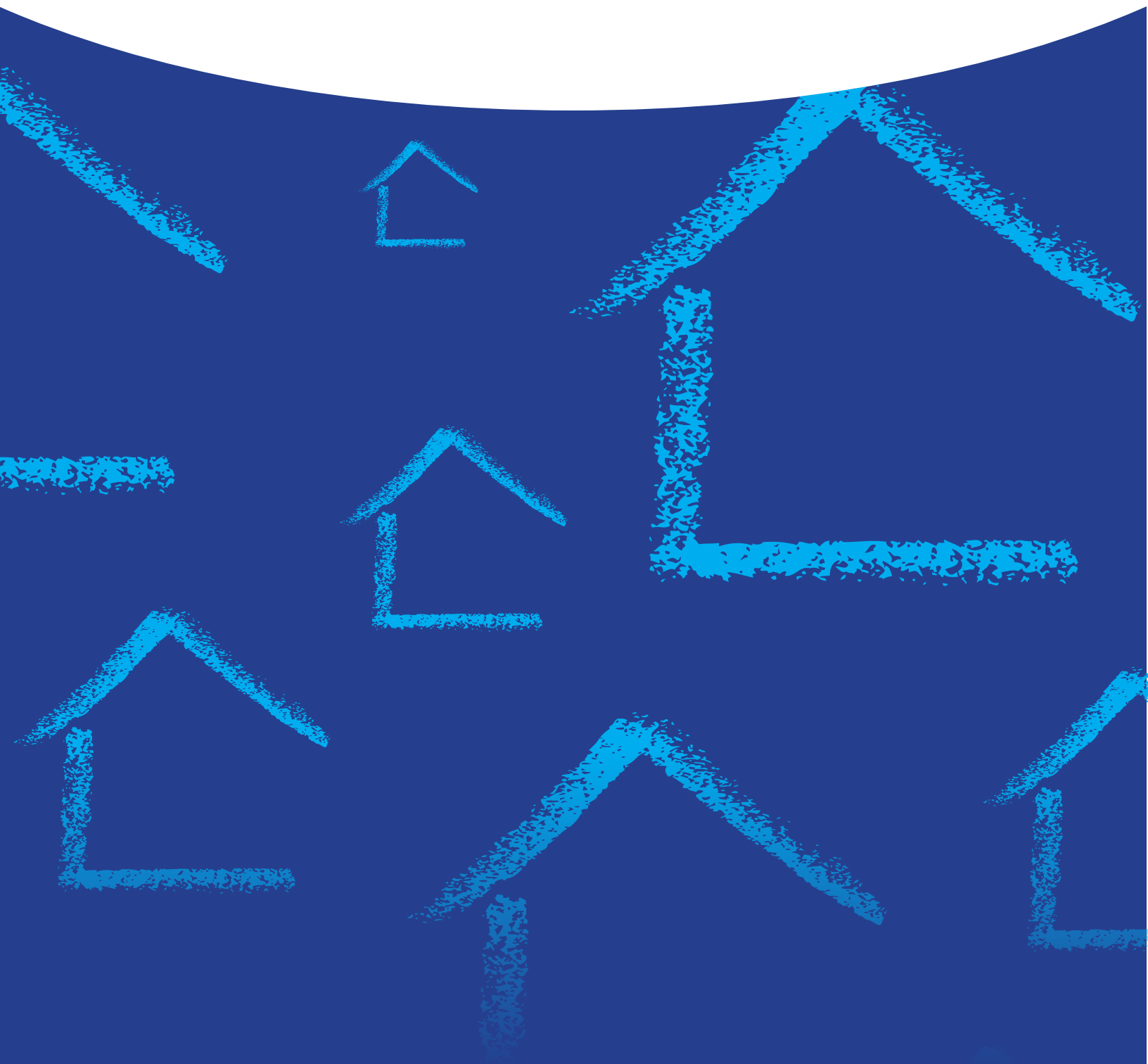
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Table of contents

message house

Introduction

> ## Craft crisp messages, and get your colleagues to use them.

Message Houses make organizations and projects more successful by maximizing messaging discipline. But we are talking about more than just messaging discipline. In many organizations, key players treat communications as an afterthought. They do not communicate across silos. Message Houses can change all that.

Imagine all of your colleagues speaking with one voice. Using powerful messages customized for different audiences. Do you think this would make you more successful? Of course!

The Message House approach is about creating a more integrated, more proactive and therefore higher performing communications culture.

At its core the method is simple: Craft crisp messages and get your colleagues to use them.

But of course, things are never quite that simple. Careful thought needs to be given to what messages you choose. And building a Message House is no guarantee for its getting used. Rolling it out to your team in a smart way is vital.

This eBook provides tips and information on both of these challenges.

The Message House approach is simple, effective and universal. That is why communication professionals from a variety of industries have been downloading the tools at messagehouse.org, including Fortune 100 organizations such as Accenture, Alcatel-Lucent, Coca Cola, Heineken, Hewlett Packard, Intel, Nestle, Philips, Reuters, and Universal Pictures.

I hope you will find the Message House Method, and this eBook, of value as well.

Marc Fest
Founder, MessageHouse.org
CEO, ElevatorSpeechTraining.com

Quick Start Guide

For a comprehensive introduction to the Message House Method, it is best to read this 20-page eBook. However, if you only have little time, you can use the Quick Start Guide below.

STEP 1: Generate your core messages

To generate your core messages, gather your team. Now, ask yourselves: Who is your audience? Next, have a conversation to find short answers to the following four questions (with your audience in mind):

a) Big Picture Message: Why does your project matter in the larger scheme of things?
This message should cause goose bumps and point to something bigger than your project. For instance, if your mission is saving animals (to use the Humane Society as an example), then your Big Picture message might be: "Our vision is a more compassionate society".

b) Utility Message: What do we offer?
This message reflects the immediate benefit and value of an organization's work, or of a project. To use the example above again, for the Humane Society that message is: "We take on the biggest fights to stop large-scale cruelties against animals."

c) Critics Message: How do we pre-empt the most likely criticism?
This message needs to be positive. For instance, if the likely criticism is "It's difficult", then your pre-emptive critics message might be "It's easy."

d) Call to action
Tell your audience what you want them to do, i.e., go to a Web site, make a donation, buy a product. Be concrete, brief and precise.

STEP 2: Build the Message House

Now take your four messages and put them on a sheet of paper inside the shape of a house. You can download a Word template for this at www.messagehouse.org/4xq9.

When you are done, you should have a Message House document looking similar to the image to the right.

STEP 3: Inspire messaging discipline

In the final step, you distribute the Message House to your team and tell everybody:
"Let's stay inside the Message House and we'll be safe."

You will have created powerful messages and used the "sticky" Message House image to inspire messaging discipline.

For more information and tools, including an eBook, Message House templates in other styles and in formats such as Adobe InDesign or PowerPoint, and more examples, please read the rest of this eBook and visit www. messagehouse.org.

> ## "Stay inside the Message House and you'll be safe."

The Message House Method is probably so popular because it is simple.

A Message House puts key messages (for a project, situation, event, the organization overall, etc.) inside the shape of a house drawn on a blank page.

(You can download templates for a variety of Message House at messagehouse.org.)

Then tell your colleagues to "stay inside the Message House and bring our message home." Or "stay inside the Message House, and you'll be safe."

The visual of the house turns the concept of using key messages from something abstract into something visual, emotional, and concrete.

If you are concerned that your colleagues (or a client) might feel too "sophisticated" for something as simple as the shape of a house

around a set of key messages, say this: "It's a tactic that will help make the messages more 'sticky', especially with colleagues who are supposed to use them but are not yet so experienced with messaging discipline."

Even skeptics will understand that it is important to not just come up with effective messages, but also use them consistently across all layers of an organization or team. That's where the metaphor of the house helps.

A structured approach to determining your key messages is the (optional) second half of the Message House Strategy.

Most often, you only need four messages. You create them by answering the the following same four questions every time you build a Message House: Why does our project matter? What do we offer? How do we pre-empt likey criticism? What do we want the audience to do?

> **A certain amount of altruism icreases the chances for our tribe to succeed.**

1.

Big Picture Message: "Why does it matter?"

To arrive at this message, gather your team and ask yourselves: "Why does what we do matter in the larger scheme of things?"

This message speaks to the vision. Why does the project matter beyond its immediate area of focus? It inspires, and gives people goosebumps. It points to something bigger than us. The Humane Society (a US-based animal welfare nonprofit) is a good example. While its area of focus is animal welfare, the larger picture and vision is a more "compassionate society" for animals and humans alike. Hence the name "Humane Society" as opposed to, say, "Animal Welfare Society".

Why do we have such a positive reaction to the sense of being connected to something that is bigger than us? It is probably a fundamental human need that has brought us evolutionary (i.e. survival) benefits. Seeing the bigger picture

means transcending your small self. Transcending your self means altruism. And looking out for others increases the chances for our tribe to succeed.

It also goes back to Aristotle's three modes of persuasion: ethos, pathos and logos. Appealing to the larger scheme of things triggers "pathos" (our emotion). Conveying value satisfies the human need for "logos" (logic and reason). And pre-empting criticism through a positive message takes care of ethos (our sense of honesty and authority).

Invoking a larger picture has the additional benefit of pre-empting a perception of being self-centered or self-serving. Let's look at a few other real-life examples. The Knight Foundation, my former employer, has a mission that is focused on creating "informed and engaged communities." But if you visit Knight's Web site, you'll see, on the bottom of every page, in large letters, this sentence: "We believe that democracy thrives when communities are informed and engaged." This ties the day-to-day mission of informing and engaging communities to something far bigger, and more important: Sustaining democracy. Your mission becomes a means to a larger end, rather than an end in itself.

Let's look at one of America's most venerable non-profits, the AARP (Association for the Advancement of Retired People). Obviously, as their name implies, the mission is improving the lives of retired people.

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> ## It's bigger than "just" retired people.

But if you look at their website's "About page", you'll find this sentence: "AARP is a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization, with a membership of more than 37 million, that helps people turn their goals and dreams into real possibilities, strengthens communities and fights for the issues that matter most to families such as healthcare, employment security and retirement planning.

No mention of retired people. It's bigger than that. It's about "helping turn goals and dreams into real possibilities."

Another example: the NAACP, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. Obviously, as the name implies, the mission here is to improve the lives of people of color. But let's see what their About Page says about the organization: "Our vision is to ensure a society in which all individuals have equal rights and there is no racial hatred or racial discrimination."

The work of the NAACP is not "just" about people of color, it's about the rights of all individuals. By invoking the idea of "all individuals", the mission gets linked to an even bigger picture: the wellbeing of all of us (it's easy to see how a society without racial prejudice and with political, educational, social and economic equality of all citizens would indeed benefit everybody).

Getting people to think about the bigger picture can sometimes be like pulling teeth because we can be so stuck in our immediate day-to-day mission. Imagine comments like: "What do you mean, isn't it enough that we rescue animals?" I love animals, and I think, of course, that rescuing them is a noble and important mission indeed. However, by linking it to the bigger picture of wanting to create a more humane, compassionate society, it becomes easier to excite even more people about this mission (and raise money for it).

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Just 4 Messages

> ## Ask the question: "What's in it for me?"

2. **Utility Message:** "What do we offer?"

To generate this message, ask yourself: "What is the immediate value we offer to our audience?"

The Utility Message will often reflect the benefit and value of an organization's work, or of a project. Often, it is the same as the mission, of an organization (although sometimes it makes sense to combine elements from your Utility and Big Picture" message to formulate your mission statement, as in the example above of the NAACP: ensuring a society in which all individuals have equal rights (big picture) and there is no racial hatred or racial discrimination (utility).

The Utility Message is the Yang to the Yin of the Big Picture Message. While the latter appeals to the altruistic wiring of our brains, the former targets its selfish, rational circuits (of which there are a lot). It's Aristotle's "logos". In that, the reason for having a Utility Messages is just as deeply rooted in evolutionary biology as the altruism of the Big Picture Message. The latter helps the tribe. The former ensures survival of the individual. If we didn't look out for ourselves, we probably wouldn't have lasted very long in the dangerous worlds of our ancestors.

Here's a good way to arrive at your Utility Message. Imagine a member from your targeted audience, put yourself in their shoes, and then ask yourself the question: "What's in it for me?" The answer is your Utility Message.

To again use the aforementioned example of the Humane Society: If you visit their Web site, you find that their Utitlity Message amounts to: "We take on the biggest fights to stop large-scale cruelties against animals." If you are somebody who deeply cares about preventing cruelty against animals, this message above will resonate.

Together, the Big Picture and Utility Messages form a two-pronged, pincer-like mental maneuver, by appealing to altruistic and selfish motives at the same time.

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Just 4 Messages

> ## "There will always be some people who will try to undermine your mission by finding some fault."

Critics Message: "How do we preempt likely criticism?"

To arrive at this message, ask yourself: "What is the most likely criticism we will face, and what positive message can preempt it?" That's your "Critics Message". For instance, if critics might say, "this is too difficult," then your positive Critics Message could be: "It's easy."

The rationale for having a Critics Messages arises from people's natural inclination of questioning whether they can trust us. It's just a reality of life.

Let's look at some examples. If you go to the Web site of the office supplies companies Staples, and head over to the About page, you'll see a big banner that says: "We make it easy to make more happen." The paragraph below that banner reads: "By expanding our product assortment and making shopping and saving easier than ever, we're helping customers make more happen every day. And it's our mission to make more happen for associates, local communities and even the planet — through programs, policies and the values we live by."

You can definitely see the big picture message shining through in the references to "local communities" and even the "planet." But let's focus on the Critics Message. Staple's Critics Message is "we make it easy". The company has even created an "Easy button" that it uses prominently in its advertising campaigns, to convey the message. It's a positive message indeed. So what is the negative criticism Staples wants to preempt? Have you ever gone to a Staples store and looked for, say, letter-sized, glossy photo paper? I've spent a good deal of time walking the isles in frustration, looking for the product I need.

Of course, this problem is not unique to Staples. But business people (Staples' core customer base) might be less tolerant of such frustration than others. So it makes sense that Staples uses the "it's easy" message to preempt that perception. Of course, they do more than just use a message. They make efforts to back up the "easy" message with convenience tools such as online reservation and in-store pickup. This is a reminder that's it's not enough to just have effective messages. They're most effective if they are authentic as well, meaning, backed up by facts.

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Just 4 Messages

"The ease of the method will cause it to "stick"."

4. **Action Message:** What do you want your audience to do? This is the call to action (sometimes also abbreviated as CTA).

Often, it will be something like: "Go to messagehouse.org to download the Message House toolkit."

Other examples for CTAs are:

- Call your Member of Congress and leave a message saying xyz.
- Donate by calling 123-456-7890.
- Visit a store today.
- Find out more at (some Web address)...
- Subscribe today.
- Mail the enclosed card.
- Get the secret now.
- Sign up and reserve your spot today.
- Save $150 now.

Calls to action should be simple and concrete, telling your audience what to do next. The more specific they are the more effective they will be. Often, the call to action will be the most prominent element of your communication. For instance, the homepage of the American Red Cross (www.redcross.org), at the time of this writing, on top of its page features two prominent visuals, asking to donate either money or blood.

The first visual states: "Help people affected by diasasters big and small. Donate now."

The second one states: "It feels good to give. You don't need a special reason to give blood. You just need your own reason. Donate blood."

Note how the language on the second slider combines several messages: "It feels good to give" (a utility message that spells out what's in it for you). "You just need your own reason" (a critics messages preempting the notion that giving blood needs some kind of special reason or occasion). And "donate blood" – the call to action.

Bottom line

By introducing the Message House Method you will not only get high-impact messages for a particular project or for your organization. The ease of the method will cause it to "stick". It will make your colleagues create a habit of integrating communications into projects at earlier stages. You will have changed your communications culture and contributed to an across-the-board performance increase.

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Which Version?

> There is the classic approach, and then some newer tricks.

The original Message House design features a roof, three columns and a foundation (see bottom left). The roof contains your primary message, the columns contain three ancillary messages, and the foundation contains supporting information such as proof points.

At MessageHouse.org, we also offer a download for a simplified Message House design that contains just one "room" (bottom right).

In addition we recommend the structured approach to identifying core messages explained on the previous pages. That approach entails speaking to the vision of a project or organization, explaining its immediate usefulness, pre-empting a likely criticism and spelling out a call to action.

We recommend these optional add-ons to the original method for the greater simplicity of the house itself and the more systematic generation of core messages. Of course, you can combine the systematic messaging approach with the "three-column" version, if you want.

The free Message House download contains customizable templates for both styles, in various formats (Word, Powerpoint, InDesign, Illustrator).

It is at www.messagehouse.org.
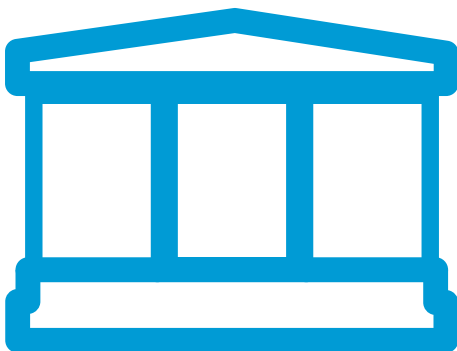
CLASSIC

SIMPLIFIED

> ## It is best to create your Message House together with your team.

Here're some concrete steps for using the Message House tools:

1) Download a Message House template from www.messagehouse.org so you can easily create a professional-looking Message House. Having a template at hand will make it more likely that you will actually get into the habit of creating Message Houses. So go ahead and download it now.

2) Identify something you're working on that will benefit from great messaging; it can be your organization as a whole, a specific project (including internal ones), an event, an interview – basically anything that's important.

3) Once you've made your pick, create your first Message House, but ideally, not alone by yourself but together in a team.

4) Assemble your team; tell them you want to try out a communications approach you've learned about; you may want to play the one-minute Message House videos at messagehouse.org/videos to give everyone a quick introduction.

5) Begin by having a conversation about who your most important audience(s) is / are. This will prepare the next step.

6) Use the questions "What's the most likely criticism and a way to preempt it?", and "What do you want your audience to do?" to have a conversation with your team; take a brainstorming approach to coming up with the answers; they form the four messages that make up your Message House (see the "Just 4 Messages" section above); you'll be pleasantly surprised how the four Message House questions make it easy to have an productive conversation with your team.

7) Once you've arrived at your messages, use the template to create your actual Message House and distribute copies to everyone whom you want to use it; if needed, you can tell people to watch the videos at www.messagehouse.org to learn more.

8) Ask your team to pin their Message Houses to their office or cubicle walls.

9) Encourage them to use the Message House to inform all communications; remember that context matters: sometimes you'll just use the critics message; at other times you might only use the vision message; yet other situations may require using all messages.

10) Also remember that you don't have to use messages verbatim; a tweet requires a different style than a 30-minute speech. Context matters.

11) Re-read the FAQ in this eBook or on messagehouse.org for additional pointers for using the method in your daily work.

Getting Started & Rollout

Rollout

How you roll out your Message House matters. For a new Message House to be effective, it needs to be rolled out in ways that:

- Make your team members understand its benefits
- Get them excited
- Keep it on their radar, and
- Make it easy for them to access their Message House anytime and anywhere.

Here is some roll-out advice, in addition to the information above:

Tip 1:   Custom-make your Message House to fit your brand.

Use the Word (or Powerpoint, Indesign, or Illustrator) templates from the free Message House download (messagehouse.org) to customize your Message House with your brand's colors. The branded look and feel of your Message House will add a sense of ownership. The Message House toolkit contains a 3-minute video showing how to easily brand your Message House, (www.messagehouse.org).

Tip 2:   Create your access location.

Enabling your team to easily access all your Message House facilitates their usage. If your company has an intranet that your team members are in a habit of using frequently, that might be a good solution.

Tip 3:   Make the reminder poster.

The Message House download contains poster templates in Powerpoint, Illustrator and Indesign format so you can use whatever program you're comfortable with to customize them. Customizing can include matching the colors or our company's brand. It's also good to include a reference to the access location you set up. So the text for your reminder poster could read like this: "Let's always stay inside our Message Houses. Access them at [URL here]"

Tip 4:   Set it all up.

Place the files for your Message House, the reminder poster and the "How to use Message Houses" one-pager inside your access location (see tip #2 above). The Message Houe download contains a draft one-pager in Word format that you can customize to your needs, for instance, by including your organization's name or adding your logo.

Tip 5:   Announce the Message House.

So how do you announce the new Message House? Ideally, you use an in-person team meeting (less ideally, you will do it by email). The free Message House download contains talking points you can customize to announce a Message House and, if needed, explain the method, and the particulars of the Message House you've have created. The download also contains a "question and answer" document that helps you answer questions you may get from your team.

Getting Started & Rollout

Rollout

Conclude your announcement by saying something like this: "Let's stay inside the Message House and we'll be safe."

As all good habits, this one needs re-enforcing over time. An opportunity are regular team meetings where you can say something like

"And please remember to stay inside our Message Houses. They're are at [URL here]." You can also hand out the Message House reminder posters.

If you roll out your Message House like this, your team members will not just use the Message Houses you create, but they will also start requesting Message Houses for new projects on their own. And that is transformational.

Customizable Message House reminder posters like the one above are included in the free Message House download.

Examples

Example 1. New Americans Campaign

The New Americans Campaign is a coalition of service providers aiming to modernize and streamline the delivery of naturalization assistance to legal permanent residents in the United States (also known as greencard holders).

Note that the Big Picture Message conveys that naturalization is good for the country as a whole, not just for the individuals who become citizens. The Critics Message emphasizes the nonpartisan nature of the project.

New Americans Campaign Message House

Big Picture:
When new Americans gain the rights and responsibilities of citizenship, they also contribute more fully to the vitality of society as a whole.

Utility:
NAC will modernize naturalization support services systemically, through innovation and new levels of collaboration.

Critics:
NAC is a non-partisan effort, targeting permanent residents legally qualified to naturalize.

Action:
Find out more at www.NewAmericansCampaign.org.
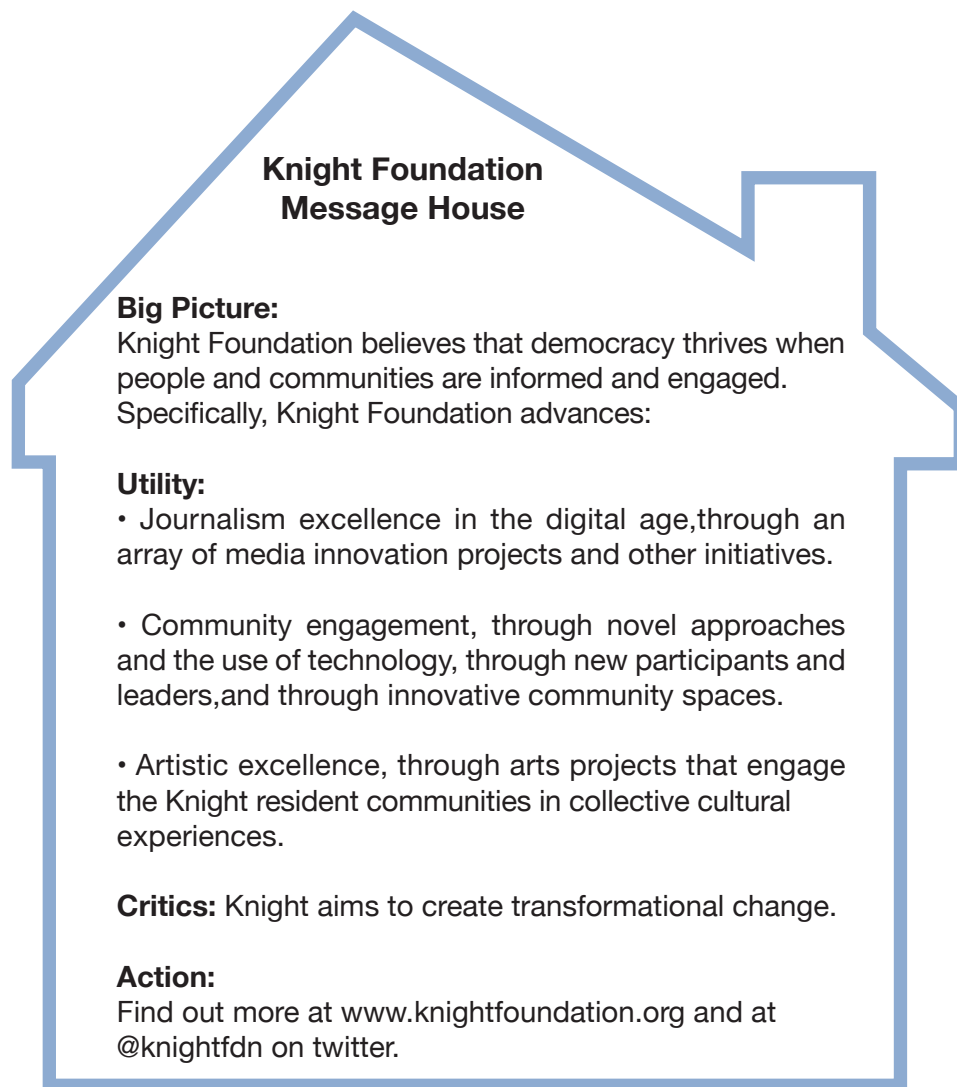
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Examples

Example 2. Knight Foundation

Below is an example of a Message House for an entire institution. Can you tell which are the big picture, utility, critics and action messages? Hints: "A thriving democracy" has to do with the big picture. Information about the kind of projects Knight advances constitutes the Utility Message.

The aspiration of aiming for transformational change disarms critics who might say it's impossible to move the needle for something as big as democracy. (This Message House guided Knight's communications in 2011; messages may have changed since then.)

**Knight Foundation
Message House**

Big Picture:
Knight Foundation believes that democracy thrives when people and communities are informed and engaged. Specifically, Knight Foundation advances:

Utility:
• Journalism excellence in the digital age,through an array of media innovation projects and other initiatives.

• Community engagement, through novel approaches and the use of technology, through new participants and leaders,and through innovative community spaces.

• Artistic excellence, through arts projects that engage the Knight resident communities in collective cultural experiences.

Critics: Knight aims to create transformational change.

Action:
Find out more at www.knightfoundation.org and at @knightfdn on twitter.

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Examples

Example 3. Digital Charlotte / EveryoneOn

Digital Charlotte was a digital literacy effort launched in conjunction with the nationwide EveryoneOn campaign in the United States. Note how the Big Picture Message evokes the well-being of future generations (goosebumps!!!).

The Critics Message makes the case for why digital literacy training is needed (since some may think even economically not so well off people may already have sufficient access via cell phones). The Utility Message explains what residents stand to gain immediately.

**Dig. Charlotte / EveryoneOn
Message House**

Big Picture:
Digital literacy skills are the key to education and economic opportunities for current and future generations.

Utility:
EveryoneOn / Digital Charlotte will connect Charlotte residents to technology through free digital literacy training.

Critics:
A recent Marketwise survey of Mecklenburg County adults found that one in five do not have Internet access from home, and one in three do not have a smart phone.

Action:
For more information and list of free digital skills training opportunities in your area call 1-855- EVRY1ON or visit www.EveryoneOn.org

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Helping Universities Collaborate

Barbara McFadden-Allen is executive director of the Committee on Institutional Cooperation (CIC), a consortium of 15 research universities, including the members of the Big Ten athletic conference and the University of Chicago.

"At the CIC, we help our universities work together so they can accomplish things better, faster and cheaper than they can by acting on their own.

It's a tool for them to organize their thoughts and be more effective in their interpersonal communications.

When I came across the Message House method, it just made so much sense to me that we've built it into the curriculum of a leadership program for university executives that I'm involved with. Now my colleagues in the consortia world of higher education have become familiar with it, and use it to craft messages for their organization.

But, interestingly, I've heard from institute fellows saying that they use the method also in the day-to-day work that they do in terms of communicating with their consortium colleagues or as a way to manage meetings and projects. It's a tool for them to organize their thoughts and be more effective in their interpersonal communications.

For example, one of my colleagues at my office, Charity, says that she now routinely thinks before she gets on a conference call with a committee, "What's my Message House?" It's a good framework for thinking.

I've also used the Message House method to help train university administrators in China. Our goal was to help them understand how to build intricate institutional contracts or agreements for working together. The method was wildly successful with this Chinese audience. They loved the idea of Message Houses and were putting it to immediate use in terms of identifying possible areas for action among the U.S. universities and Chinese Universities. They used the Message House to frame what they wanted to accomplish.

I find the Message House method useful, both for organizational and individual communication purposes. I've found that not every person to whom I explain the method plays a role where they will actually drive the organizational communication strategy. Often they're hungry for a way to be influential. They use the Message House method in their organization to have a personal impact.

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Helping Universities Collaborate

> ## "Message Houses have changed how we talk about our work."

The method also helps build unity and community within an organization. At least in our experience, our staff is grateful for quick messages, quick sound bites that they can use in their communications with their colleagues, and with people they're trying to influence. The Message House technique is useful for generating these sound bites.

Message Houses have changed how we talk about our work. For instance, until we stumbled upon the technique, it would take us three paragraphs to explain why we have invested in a fiber optic network that our universities co-own and operate. We would go to great pains to explain that the telecom industry was deregulated, so there was dark fiber available to purchase, and bla-bla-bla. People were looking at us like "What? What are you even talking about?" We realized we had to become much more disciplined with our message. We wanted people to feel proud of the network and see its value. We realized that no one cares how we got the network. The important thing is that we co-own and operate it, and that it allows us to share research data faster and cheaper than any other group of universities. Since this is a multi-million dollar project, critics might ask: Why don't you spend this money on developing courses for students? So we say, yes, we've made an investment of $20 million, but we're saving $5 million a year, and that money is available for curriculum development and instruction.

The Message House helped us modify our message and the verbiage.

I think the method works, first and foremost, because of its simplicity, elegance and construction. I think the method works, first and foremost, because of its simplicity, elegance and construction. It grabs people and focuses their attention. The image of the house is deeply compelling. Also, because there are only four steps to generating messages, the approach is really easy to remember.

> ## "I believe that good leaders have to be powerful communicators."

I believe that good leaders have to be powerful communicators. They have to over-communicate, But something that's not often talked about is the need to for messaging discipline. And I think that's why Message Houses are so powerful. They make it easy to stay disciplined and focused."

Barbara McFadden-Allen is executive director of the Committee on Institutional Cooperation (CIC), a consortium of 15 research universities, including the members of the Big Ten athletic conference and the University of Chicago.

19

This "in-the-first person" case study has been edited and condensed.

Frequently Asked Questions

1.   Is a Message House the only communications document I need?

Think of your Message House as the foundation for all other communications materials, such as FAQs, proof points, Q&As, fact sheets. All of them derive from the core that is your Message House. Your Message House is not your only communications tool. But it's the most important one, and the one you create first.

2.   Do you need different Message Houses for different audiences?

In many situations you will need different Message Houses for different audiences. Communication is dependent on the audience you're trying to reach. Just think of the "utility" message: Different audiences may have different forms of self interest. Also, the same call to action may not work for all audiences. Be clear on what audience you have in mind when you develop your Message House. In practice it is often sufficient to have only one Message House – but do first consider your audiences. Specify on your Message House who the intended audience for it is.

3.   Do I have to use the messages verbatim?

You may often use the messages verbatim, but it's important that you consider adjusting what you say to each situation. A speech is different from a tweet or a blog post. Think of the

the Message House setting your direction, but not your exact words. Also keep in mind that you may need different Message Houses for different audiences (see the FAQ items above and below).

4.   Are there many different Message Houses?

It is advisable to have Message Houses for your organization as a whole, for events, for a media interview, for a crisis, etc. In short, for anything important that communication can help succeed.

5.   What if someone says a Message House is too simplistic?

For effective communication it is essential to make your message simple. However, Message Houses are not the only tools to be used in communications. You will probably also need detailed fact sheets, q&a's, proof points, etc. Your Message House should inform all these other documents.

6.   Do you ever change a Message House?

Message Houses are not written in stone. As a matter of fact, using Message Houses almost automatically causes you to revisit them and rethink the messaging as a project evolves.

7.   Does it matter whether a Message House is created by a team?

Effective Message Houses are almost always created by a team. As a matter of fact, its four basic questions provide an useful and engaging way of structuring a team conversation. It's amazing how they almost always produce great results.

8.   Does it matter in what order you use key messages?

It usually makes sense to end with the call to action, and to begin with the "What's the big picture" message to set the stage and prep an audience emotionally (remember, ideally that message will induce goosebumps). However, there may be situations where the "utility" or the "critics" message make better leads. Just rely on your common sense.

9.   Are Message Houses for everyone in the organization?

It's a good idea to create a central place for Message Houses that anyone inside your organization can access. An Intranet, for instance. Certain Message Houses might be confidential and not for everyone in the organization. Others, like the Message House for the organiza tion as a whole, are for everyone. You might even want to encourage staff to print them out and pin them up on a wall inside their office or cubicle.

10.   How do you present a Message House to a new client or to your team?

Whether it's colleagues who should use a Message House, or a client of yours — simply show them a printout, and begin by saying something like "if we stay inside this Message House, we'll bring our message home" (or, if you deal with a person who's a bit anxious about communication, say "if we will stay inside this Message House, we'll be safe"). It's important to begin the conversation with the house. Its concreteness will get attention. It also begins the conversation with an emotional and visual concept. Then explain what the different messages are for.

11.   Do the messages have to be honest?

Truly effective communications is rooted in authenticity. You may sometimes be tempted to bend the truth, but this will often backfire. In the long run, honesty works best.

12.   Does a Message House need to stay confidential and internal?

A Message House is usually an internal document. It makes sense to share it with a reporter if disclosing your internal messaging will nurture your relationship with the reporter. However, only share it if you will be comfortable with the reporter's possibly mentioning your internal Message House in his or her story. Do remember: A Message House is not a news release. It informs the news release.

message house

About Marc Fest

Messagehouse.org creator Marc Fest is the founder of Elevator Speech Training (www.est.io), a coaching service rooted in the Message House Method that helps professionals communicate successfully in speaking situations that are important to them (for example, when they raise money, interview for a job, or talk about their project or organization).

Clients include foundations like Carnegie, Ford, JPB, and Knight but also businesses like Axel Springer, an international media company.

From 2007 to 2012, Marc was vice president of communications for the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation, the world's leading foundation for innovation in communications and media.

From 2004 to 2006, he served as vice president of communications for the New World Symphony, an orchestral academy based in Miami.

While he did not invent the original Message House Method (its origin is unclear), Marc has refined it by adding an optional step that uses four simple questions to help devise key messages. He created MessageHouse.org, a free communications tool used by businesses, non-profits, governments and individuals around the world.

For more information, check out the Message House Story.

Marc does his coaching work from a remote farm in the Everglades where he lives with his Belgian shepherd dog Zeus.

Testimonials about Marc's Elevator Speech Training

A Message-House-based One-Hour Communications Crash Course to Win Supporters and Funders

"In just an hour, Marc helped me distill complex institutional language."
Joshua David, Co-Founder, The High Line

"I have never experienced a more streamlined, to-the-point, and helpful one-hour training session."
Ben Strauss, CEO and Chief Scientist, Climate Central

"If only all my one-hour meetings were so productive!"
Priya Jayachandran, CEO National Housing Trust

"I had no idea so much could be done in just one hour, total game-changing work!"
Heather Ferguson, Executive Director, Common Cause New Mexico

"Elevator Speech Training is truly exceptional."
Anne Evens, CEO Elevate Energy

"Marc's training was like hitting a re-start button on our usual framing."
Gladys Limon, Executive Director. California Environmental Justice Alliance (CEJA)

Click here to browse more than 500 testimonials from other leaders.

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