

THE MESSAGE HOUSE METHOD

**Craft great messages
and get your teams
to use them.**



MARC FEST

MessageHouse.org

The Message House Method

How to craft great messages and get your team to use them

Marc Fest
MessageHouse.org

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Our goal is to make the contents of this book
accessible as widely as possible.
A free eBook version of this edition is
available at messagehouse.org.

MessageHouse.org is a pro-bono project of Atlantic Point, LLC.

Written for all
who want to use messages
with good intent.

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Introduction

Message Houses make organizations and projects more successful by generating effective messages and improving messaging discipline.

The power of the Message House method lies in its visual nature. The image of the house turns the concept of messaging discipline from something abstract into something concrete.

I did not invent the Message House method. Like many evergreen practices, it has been around for a long time. Google “inventor of the message house method,” and you will come up empty-handed.

I first learned about the method from a communications firm that helped the Knight Foundation with one of our grant projects. Something unprecedented happened a couple of months later. A colleague (who did not work in communications) came to my office to discuss a new project. She surprised me by saying, “we need a message house for this.”

It was the first time somebody requested messaging guidance from our communications team (instead of pestering our colleagues to use and stick to key messages).

A lightbulb went on in my head. I realized that Message Houses do not just help with messaging discipline but improve overall communications culture and elevate the overall effectiveness of an organization.

Spreading the Message House Method is a pro-bono project. In my “day job,” I help leaders attract more interest to their causes by improving how they speak about them. I call it “Elevator Speech Training,” even though it goes beyond the proverbial Elevator Pitch situation to include situations like chatting to someone at a birthday party, for example.

The message-creation part of the Message House Method has influenced the frameworks I use for Elevator Speech Training. For example, I always encourage my clients to define their “secret sauce,” i.e., the unique approach that gives their project a competitive edge. The “secret sauce” is the equivalent of the Message House method for trying to pre-empt your listener’s most likely skepticism.

I want the contents of this book to be as widely available as possible. That is why the price is low, and a free eBook version remains at messagehouse.org.

I hope you find the Message House Method useful.

Sincerely,
Marc Fest

The Message House Method

The Message House Method is popular because it is simple.

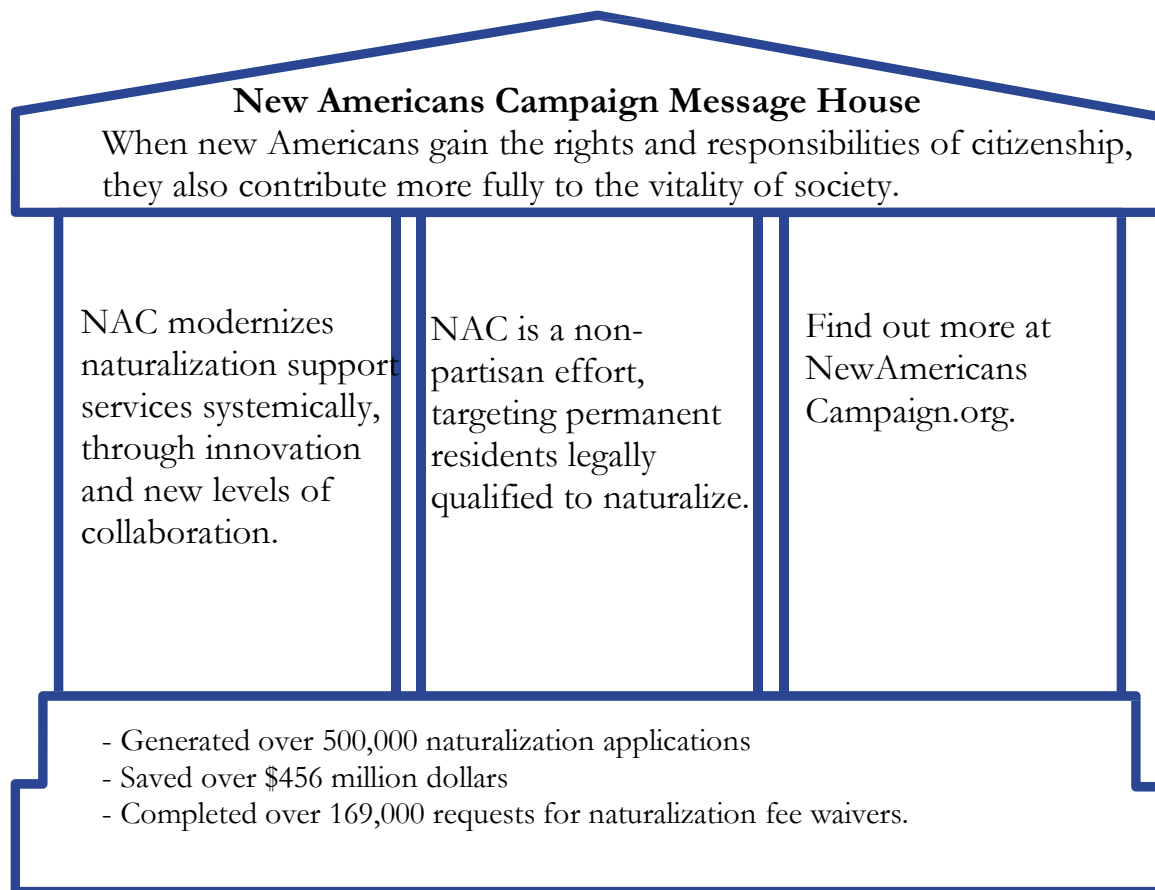
A Message House puts critical messages (for a project, situation, event, the organization overall, etc.) inside the shape of a house drawn on a blank page. (You can download templates for various Message Houses at messagehouse.org.)

Once you create a Message House, you 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 original Message House design features a roof, three columns (or “rooms,” depending on your imagination), and a foundation. The roof contains your primary message, the three columns each have a supporting core message, and the foundation includes ancillary information such as proof points, statistics, anecdotes, and testimonials.

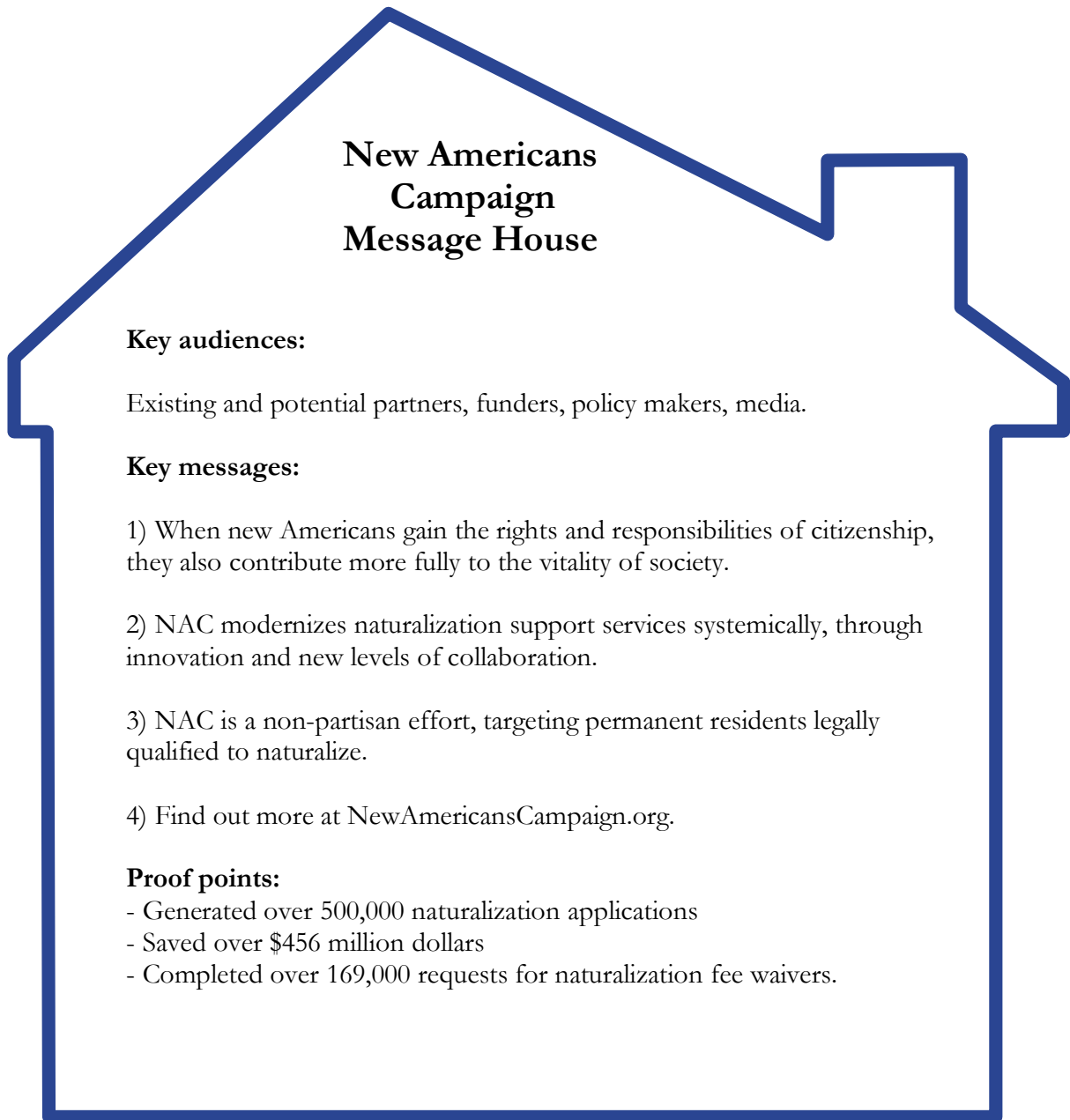
As an example, let’s use The New Americans Campaign (NAC), an umbrella for nonprofits working together to help green card holders (“legal permanent residents”) become American citizens.

The following page shows NAC’s Message House. Please note that the organization may have updated its messaging since as of this writing.



Message House for the New Americans Campaign (NAC):

As I was using Message Houses like the one shown on this page, I began using them so frequently that I developed a desire to make it even simpler to whip one up. Specifically, I was looking for a more straightforward house that could hold all the messages in just one room instead of spread out over different spaces in the roof, pillars, and basement. The following page shows the simpler Message House version I developed and eventually preferred for all my Message Houses.



The Message House Toolkit (freely available at messagehouse.org) contains ready-to-use templates for both versions of the Message House, i.e., the original one using separate “compartments” for the roof, three pillars, and foundation, and the simpler one containing just one “big room.”

In my experience, the simpler version was just as effective at helping my team remember to “stay inside the house” and made it easier for me to whip up a Message House. It also made it easier to quickly copy and paste its text contents into an SMS text message.

But there is no right or wrong here. The templates in the Message House Toolkit make it easy to use whatever version you prefer. They come in various software formats, including Microsoft Word, PowerPoint, and Adobe Illustrator.

Now, let’s talk about the messages in the NAC Message House.

A primary message combines a project’s main objective, mission, and vision.

With NAC, its primary message is:

“New Americans gaining the responsibilities of citizenship” relates to the mission of NAC, i.e., its day-to-day work. “Vitality of society as a whole” speaks to the larger vision, i.e., the larger-picture positive outcome if we achieve the mission.

This message is an excellent example of combining aspects of mission and vision.

The three supporting core messages are:

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

“NAC is a nonpartisan effort, targeting permanent residents legally qualified to naturalize.”

“Find out more at NewAmericansCampaign.org.”

Notice how each of the supporting messages has a different angle.

You can see how the first supporting message speaks to the “immediate usefulness” of NAC’s effort to its primary audience.

The second message speaks to a “special way” of how NAC works to increase the odds of success (nonpartisan, focused on legally qualified permanent residents).

The third message speaks to the action desired by our audience.

The foundation of the house includes ancillary information, for example:

- NAC was launched in July 2011
- Generated over 500,000 naturalization applications
- Saved over 456 million dollars to Legal Permanent Resident communities through reduced fees and fee waivers

The Message House Method

The Message House Method uses the visual nature of the house metaphor to make it more likely that members of an organization will remember and care about using key messages. However, it traditionally has not included a mechanism to help you determine effective messages.

The following chapter, “Crafting effective messages,” offers a systematic approach to generating key messages that you can then place inside your Message House.

The Messaging Framework

The “Messaging Framework” you are about to learn complements the Message House Method with a step-by-step approach to creating compelling messages. Many people have begun to view it as a part of the Message House Method.

“Key messages” are the messages you want your audience to remember. Since humans have a limited ability to remember what is said, you must have less than a handful of key messages.

The Messaging Framework derives your critical messages from the answers to four fundamental questions:

1. Why does your project matter? (Big Picture Message)
2. What do you offer? (Utility Message)
3. How do you pre-empt likely criticism? (Critics Message)
4. What do you want your audience to do? (Call to Action Message)

Before trying to answer the questions, you must first define your audience. It is essential to first define your audiences before creating your key messages because different audiences often require different messages. For example, a call to action for a potential partner might be “join us.” For a policymaker, the call to action might be, “vote yes on so-and-so house bill.”

Media, funders, investors, potential customers, and existing customers are other examples of audiences.

Now to the questions:

Big Picture Message: “Why does it matter?”

To arrive at this message, gather your team. Then ask yourselves: “Why does what we do matter in the larger scheme?”

This message speaks to the vision, the “bigger picture” (hence the phrase “Big Picture Message”). It inspires and ideally 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. Hence the name “Humane Society” as opposed to “Animal Welfare Society”.

Why do we have such a positive reaction to the sense of being connected to something bigger than us? It is a fundamental human need that has brought us evolutionary (i.e., survival-related) benefits. Seeing the bigger picture means transcending your “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. When we appeal to the larger scheme of things, we invoke “pathos” (our emotion). Conveying value satisfies the human need for “logos” (logic and reason). And pre-empting criticism and doubt through a positive message takes care of ethos (our sense of the importance of “keeping a promise”).

Invoking the 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 respective organizations may have updated their messaging since this writing).

The Knight Foundation, my former employer, has a mission that focuses on creating "informed and engaged communities." But if you visit Knight's Web site, you'll see this sentence in large letters at the bottom of every page: "We believe that democracy thrives when communities are informed and engaged." This statement ties the day-to-day mission of informing and engaging communities to something bigger and more critical: Sustaining democracy. Your mission becomes a means to a larger end rather than an end in itself.

One of America's most venerable nonprofits is the AARP (Association for the Advancement of Retired People). As their name implies, the mission is to improve the lives of retired people.

But look at their website's "About page" (as of this writing, the page may have changed). 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: is the NAACP, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. 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. The idea of "all individuals" links the mission to an even bigger picture: the well-being of all of us. It is 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 be like pulling teeth because we often only see 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 rescuing them is a noble and essential mission. However, linking it to the bigger picture of wanting to create a more humane, compassionate society makes it easier to excite even more people about this mission (and raise money for it).

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 project. Usually, it is the same as the mission of an organization. Sometimes it makes sense to combine elements from your Utility and Big Picture" message for your mission statement. The NAACP is an example: Ensuring a society where all individuals have equal rights (big picture) and where there is no racial hatred or 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 is Aristotle's "logos ."In that, the reason for having a Utility Message is just as deeply rooted in evolutionary biology as the altruism of the Big Picture Message. The latter helps the tribe. The former ensures the 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 is an excellent way to arrive at your Utility Message. Imagine a member from your targeted audience, put yourself in their shoes, and then ask yourself: "What's in it for me?" The answer is your Utility Message.

To again use the example of the Humane Society: If you visit their Web site, you find that their Utility Message amounts to: "We take on the biggest fights to stop large-scale cruelties against animals." If you are somebody who profoundly 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 simultaneously appealing to altruistic and selfish motives.

xxx

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," your positive Critics Message could be: "It's easy."

The rationale for having a Critics Message arises from people's natural inclination to doubt whether they can trust us. It's just a reality of life (and, again, explainable through evolutionary psychology).

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 see the Big Picture message reflected 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 letter-sized, glossy photo paper? I have spent much time walking the aisles in frustration, looking for the product I need.

Of course, this problem is not unique to Staples. But businesspeople (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 use that message. They try to back up the "easy" promise with online reservations and in-store pickup tools. The bottom line is that it is not enough to have effective messages. They are most effective if they are also authentic, i.e., backed up by facts.

Action Message: What do you want your audience to do?

The "Action Message" is the call to action (sometimes abbreviated as CTA). Often, it will be something like this:

"Go to messagehouse.org to download the Message House toolkit."

Other examples of CTAs are:

The Message House Method

- 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 (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. The call to action will often 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 disasters 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 Message preempting the notion that giving blood needs a particular reason or occasion). And “donate blood” – the call to action.

The bottom line is this: The Key Messaging Framework discussed in this chapter helps you draft great messages. The Message House Method lets you ensure your teams use those messages. Together, the Message House Method and the Key Messaging Framework give you all you need to put all your communications on a solid footing.

Getting Started

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

- 1) Download a Message House template from www.messagehouse.org to create a professional-looking Message House easily. Having a template at hand will make it more likely that you will 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, a specific project (including internal ones), an event, an interview – basically anything 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 discussing who your most important audience(s) is/are. This step will prepare for the next one. Defining your audiences always comes first because your messages flow from who your audiences are.
- 6) Use the following two questions to have a conversation with your team:

What's the most likely criticism and a way to preempt it?
What do you want your audience to do?

Take a brainstorming approach to come up with the answers. They form the four messages that make up your Message House (see the "Just 4 Messages" section above). You will be pleasantly surprised how the four Message House questions make it easy to have a 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 who should 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 will use the Critics Message; at other times, you might only use the Big Picture Message. Some situations may require using all messages.
- 10) Remember that you don't have to use all the messages verbatim. For example, a tweet requires a different style than a 30-minute speech—context matters.
- 11) Read the FAQ in this book for additional pointers for using the method in your daily work.

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.
- Make them feel like they have skin in the game.
- Keep it on their radar.
- 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: Customize your Message House to include 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 brand your Message House (www.messagehouse.org) easily.

Tip 2: Create your access location.

Enabling your team to access all your Message House easily facilitates their usage. If your company has an intranet that your team members use 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 is also good to have 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 shared access location (see tip #2 above). The Message House 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 or something like Slack). 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 have created. The download also contains a "question and answer" document that helps you answer questions you may get from your team.

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

All good habits need re-enforcing over time. The Message House habit is no exception. Regular team meetings are an opportunity to say something like, “And please remember to stay inside our Message Houses. They’re at [URL].” 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.

Examples

The examples here only focus on the core messages. They do not include the supporting information that goes inside the foundation of a Message House.

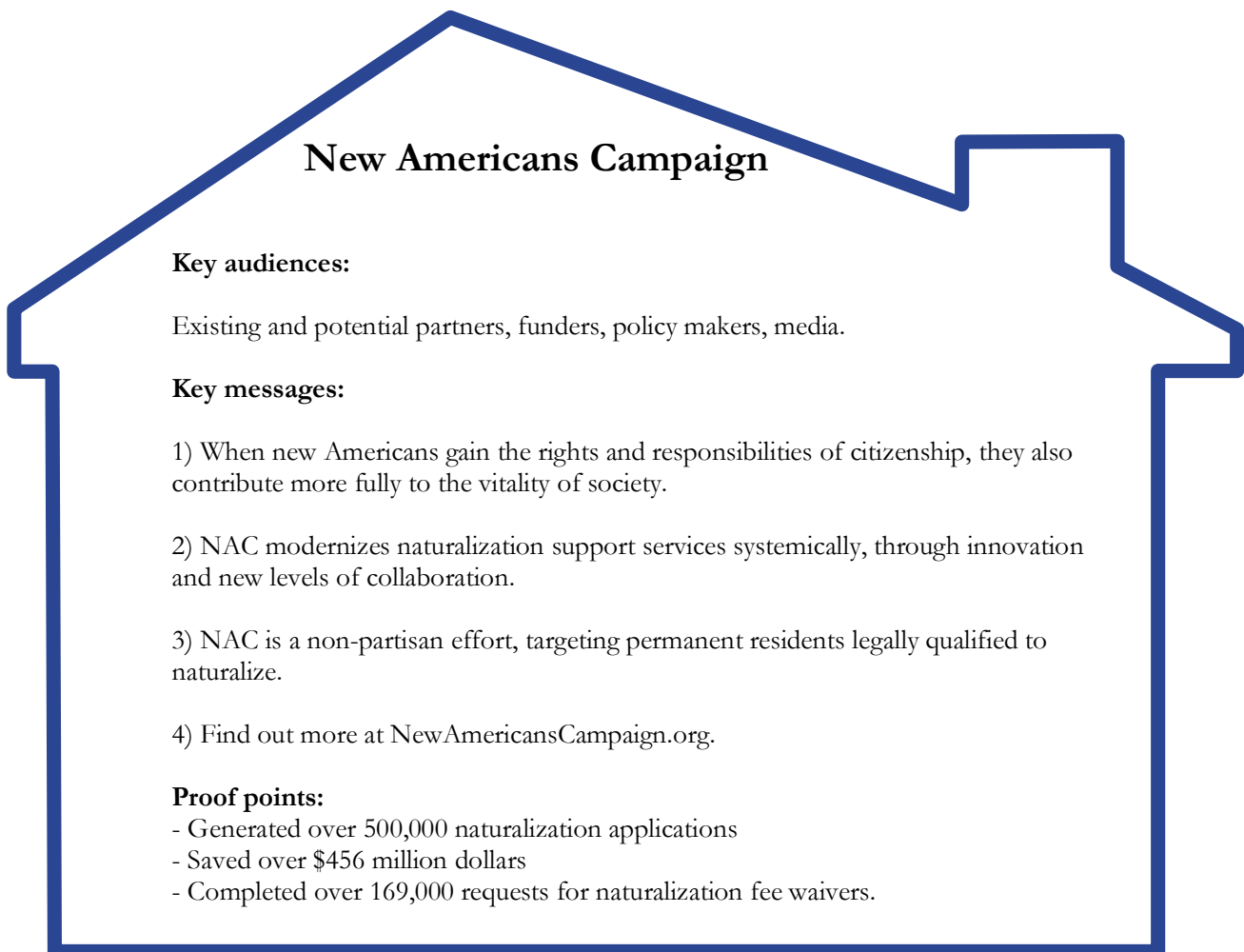
The examples also use the “one room” version of the Message House image instead of the one using three “pillars” to house messages. We find that the one-room version achieves the same “stickiness” effect while offering an even simpler visual and making it easier to copy and paste the text of its messages, for example, for communication via email and texting.

The free toolkit at messagehouse.org includes templates for both versions of the Message House visual.

Example 1: The 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 green card holders).

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



Example 2: The John S. and James L. 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 example (and the following ones) does not include the proof points section, creating a less cluttered Message House. There is no right or wrong here. If you want to focus on the key messages, please provide the proof points in a separate document.

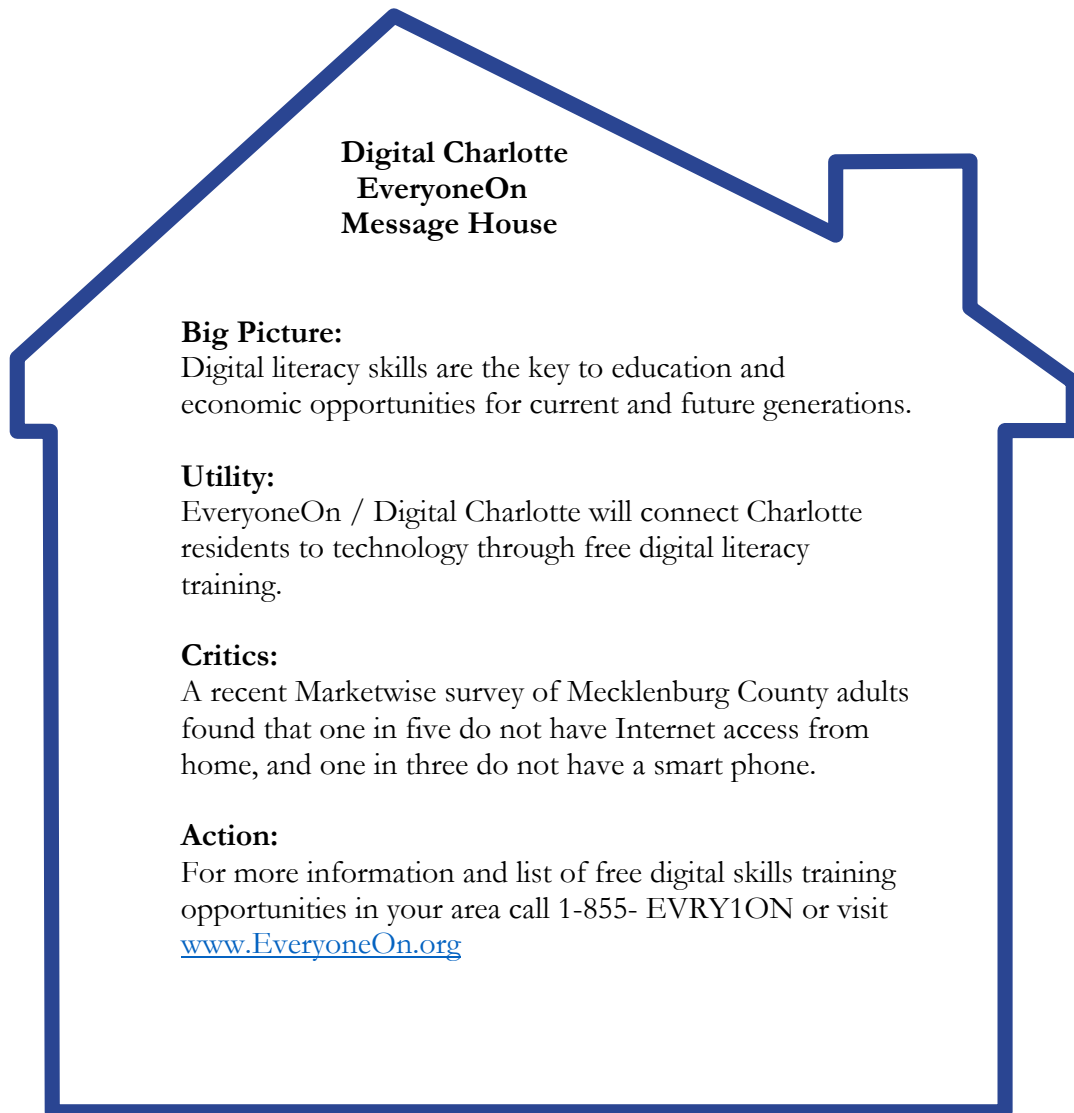
An “overall” Message House for an organization may often, as in this case, not include a list of intended audiences because it is for everyone. As you use a Message House in specific situations and projects, it is advisable, however, to always consider whether your audience requires you to adjust or change some messages.



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



The Magic Phrases Framework

The Magic Phrases Framework builds on the four messages of the Key Messaging Framework. It provides a structure you can use for almost any speaking situation, including conversations, two-minute remarks or longer-form speeches.

This chapter is reprinted from the book “Elevator Speech Frameworks” with permission of the publisher.

The Magic Phrases Framework uses a skeleton structure of core phrases that help you in any speaking situation. They serve as prompts for key pieces of information that we should always convey, for example, the value proposition, the higher purpose, something to overcome skepticism, and the call to action.

The core phrases are printed below in blue. If you were to learn the ten blue phrases by heart, you would be equipped to deal with any speaking situation, whether prepared or caught off-guard. In that sense, the framework is like a magic spell. You do not have to use the blue phrases verbatim. For example, instead of saying “Here is why it matters” you may say, “let me talk about the importance of this.”

So, here are the steps of the Magic Phrases Framework. To use them to build a script for things that you want to say, keep the sentences in blue and fill in the rest.

The Magic Phrases Framework

STEP 1 (State the subject)

“I’d like to talk about X.”

Fill in your subject for “X”.

Example: “I want to talk about how to attract more interest when we speak about what we do.”

STEP 2 (Say why it matters – this is related to the Big Picture Message of the Key Messaging Framework)

“Here’s why it matters.”

Pause for a bit. When you pause, it gives you gravitas. Then say why your subject is important.

Example: “Let me first say why it matters: How we speak to get interest often decides whether we will thrive, muddle along or fizzle out. Speaking is the passageway through which all our efforts must go if we want to succeed.”

STEP 3 (Say what is at stake)

“At stake is A and ultimately B.”

Make B bigger and broader than A. Try to create goosebumps.

Example: “At stake is our individual success and, ultimately, our collective ability to improve our troubled world.”

STEP 4 (Say what you do – this relates to the “Utility Message”)

“So, what I’m / we’re doing falls into three buckets.”

Pause a bit after this sentence. Then say “First, ... Second,... Third...” Describe each item in just a few words.

Example: “My work falls into three buckets: First, I help my clients figure out what to say. Second, we practice how to say it. And third, I encourage them to develop a habit of recording and listening to themselves.”

STEP 5 (Showcase your special approach – this relates to the Critics Message)

“But let me tell you about my / our secret sauce / superpower / secret weapon.”

PAUSE briefly. Then say what it is.

Example: “But let me tell you about my secret sauce: It’s a sequence of 11 sentences that make up the Magic Phrases Framework. They form a skeleton for speaking about anything. They are the distillation of thousands of Elevator Speech Training sessions. Using them is as easy as painting by numbers.”

STEP 6 (Tell a story)

“Here’s a story that shows the usefulness of the framework.”

Tell a brief but concrete story about how the secret sauce saved the day for someone in distress.

Example: “Here’s a story that illustrates the usefulness of the Magic Phrases. A while ago, a former client named Sally faced an unexpected challenge when the host of a Zoom call suddenly asked her to talk about her new project. The stakes were high because many potential investors were on this call, and she was entirely unprepared. But instead of panicking, Sally spoke eloquently for three minutes, using the structure of the Magic Phrases Framework. Afterward, she told me that by the time she used the “first..., second..., third...” part of the framework’s sequence, she was sure that all her listeners perceived her as prepared and highly confident. Long story short: She secured several investments. This story illustrates what the magic Phrases Framework can do for you.”

STEP 7 (Provide validation)

“This approach has worked for me / us many times.”

Pause. Then briefly list three successes. Use numbers or quote credible people or entities.

Example: “Sally’s example is not a one-off. The other day, a client emailed me to credit her training with securing an investment from Morgan Stanley. At www.est.io, you can browse more than a thousand client testimonials. 85 CEOs and Executive Directors publicly endorsed the framework.”

STEP 8 (State the gist)

“The gist is that...”

Example: “The gist is that this framework approach works.”

STEP 9 (Gain trust)

“This work is personal for me...”

Pause. Then say something candid or confessional right. It will make your listeners trust you. End on: “But it’s not about me—as I said, at stake is....”]

Example: “This work is personal for me. I struggle with anxiety about things from climate change to nuclear war. But when I work with clients who are trying to make a positive difference in this universe, I feel better and calmer afterward. In a way, my work is like therapy for me. But it’s not about me. As I said, it’s about our collective ability to make the world a better place.”

STEP 10 (Call for action – the same as the call-to-action message)

“So, here’s what I recommend you do.”

Pause. Then be uncommonly concrete about the next steps to show how much you really mean it.

For example: “So, here’s what I recommend you do: Check out www.magicphrases.com.com. Tell others about the website. Scroll to the bottom of the page to download a one-pager with the framework.”

STEP 11 (End upbeat)

“Thank you, and I...”

Finish with an optimistic phrase like “Thank you, and I look forward to seeing you at our next meeting.”

Example:

“Thank you, and I look forward to hearing from you.”

A few comments about the above framework.

As already pointed out, if you learn the phrases in blue in the Elevator Speech Framework by heart, you will carry a structure in your back pocket that you can use to speak or have a conversation in any situation—even when you do not have time to prepare.

When you have time to prepare, this structure provides a helpful outline to start.

Note that the framework’s phrases are like prompts that nudge you to do a variety of different things, including:

- Say right in the beginning why your topic is essential (this creates a frame of relevance).
- Say what is unique about your approach and back it up with a story (this is at the core of being convincing).
- Lower your guard by saying something personal (making yourself vulnerable is the key to connecting and creating trust).
- Landing on the actions you want your listeners to take.

The Message House Method

The Magic Phrases Framework is simple so that anybody, even young children, can use it to become better at getting attention when they speak. They are available for everybody to copy and paste at magicphrases.com. Please pass it on.

Key takeaways

- The Magic Phrases Framework offers a structure that makes it easy to succeed in any speaking situation.
- You can always get to it quickly via magicphrases.com.
- Use it for preparing when you speak.

Next steps

- Save the framework onto your phone so you can always access it easily by copying it from magicphrases.com.
- Learn its blue phrases by heart to succeed even when you are not prepared.
- Ask friends, family, and colleagues to visit magicphrases.com.

Case Study

Helping Universities Collaborate

The following is an in-the-first-person account from Barbara McFadden-Allen, 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.

Message House is a tool to organize their thoughts and be more effective in their interpersonal communications.

When I came across the Message House method, it made so much sense that we built it into the leadership program curriculum for university executives. 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 also use the method in the day-to-day work they do in terms of communicating with their consortium colleagues or managing meetings and projects. It’s a tool 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 to identify 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 for organizational and individual communication purposes. I’ve found that not every person to whom I explain the method plays a role that will drive the corporate 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.

The method also helps build unity and community within an organization. At least in our experience, our staff is grateful for quick messages and 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 helps generate 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 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 learned that no one cares how we got the network. The important thing is that we co-own and operate it, allowing 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

The Message House Method

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 word we use.

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 easy to remember.

Good leaders must be powerful communicators. They must over-communicate, but something that we often need to discuss is the need 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.

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, and fact sheets. All of them derive from the core that is your Message House. Your Message House is one of many communications tools. 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 various 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. Please 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 you must consider adjusting what you say to each situation. A speech is different from a tweet or a blog post. Think of the Message House setting your direction, but not your exact words. Also, remember 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, for events, for media interviews, 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 only one of the tools to be used in communications. You will also need detailed fact sheets, Q & As, 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. Using Message Houses almost automatically causes you to revisit them and rethink the messaging as a project evolves.

7. Does it matter whether a team creates a Message House?

A team almost always creates more effective Message Houses. The four basic questions of its Messaging Framework provide a valuable and engaging way of structuring a team conversation. It is incredible how they almost always produce excellent results.

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

The Message House Method

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 makes 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 organization, are for everyone. You might even want to encourage staff to print them out and pin them on a wall inside their office or cubicle.

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

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 stay inside this Message House, we’ll be safe”). It’s essential to begin the conversation with the visual of the house. Its concreteness will get attention. It also starts the discussion with an emotional and visual concept. Then explain the purpose of the different messages.

11. Do the messages have to be honest?

Truly effective communication is rooted in authenticity. You may sometimes consider bending 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 are comfortable with the reporter possibly mentioning your Message House in their story. Do remember: A Message House is not a news release. It informs the news release.

Epilogue

How a House Keeps People on Message Worldwide.

When Andrew King realized that his colleagues at a Tanzanian accelerator for social entrepreneurs did indeed have a sense of purpose and mission but that this sense seemed different, in varying degrees, to each of them, he turned to something that looked like a page from a children's drawing book. It was a page with a drawing of a house on it. The image contained a roof section, three rooms, and a foundation.

Andrew King is the marketing and communications manager for Anza, an organization providing social entrepreneurs in Tanzania with strategic advice and support. They also conduct research projects to grow the entrepreneurial ecosystem in Tanzania.

King downloaded the house drawing as a Microsoft Word template from messagehouse.org, a site he learned about from a colleague at a Rwandan partner organization who noticed Anza's social media content was missing "thematic consistency."

"We simply lacked a simple and concise way of talking about our work as a whole," says King.

Together with his colleagues, King started filling the "rooms" inside their Message House with core ideas. They filled the roof with an over-arching key message to describe the organization's mission ("Our services assist entrepreneurs in strengthening their operations, increasing profitability, and scaling their social impact"). The team decided to increase the number of "rooms" below the roof section from three to five and filled each with a message under the headers "Belief," "Challenge," "Model," "Results," and "Growth." Then they divided the foundation space of the house into ten compartments, filling each with a proof point to support a related key message. (You can download Anza's Message House [here](#)).

The mantra became, "let's stay inside the Message House."

"On the face of it, the exercise was a simple one. Yet, this framework enabled us to capture Anza's essence and explain it consistently without having to resort to memorizing a script," King remembers. "My recommendation is for all organizations, especially those which have expanded rapidly or have multiple projects, to ask their staff to write down what they think the organization is. If people have difficulty thinking of the answer, or if the answers are inconsistent, then it's time to create a Message House."

Six-thousand kilometers away, around the same time that King was loading up his Message House with messages, New Delhi-based Navneet Anand was using the method, but with much larger companies than King's. Anand is a Ph.D. and founder/director of GreyMatters Communications, a communications-advisory firm in India. "We use Message Houses for a host of clients," he says. For example, he works with an industry association of biotech companies that includes Monsanto, Bayer, Syngenta, Dow, and DuPont. "The stakeholders were many and varied, and we had to design the messages as per their predisposition," says Anand.

And 6,700 kilometers away in London, entrepreneur Nina Goad used the Message House approach "when talking about my business to potential partners or customers, and when delivering media training to others." Goad is the founder of Fit Girl, a startup line of luxury bath and body products for women. The Message House method "is a great tool when you need to get a few key messages out in a short time, which I often have to do on radio or TV," says Goad. "Without this structure, I can easily be side-tracked and wander off-message, especially if feeling a bit nervous or intimidated by a large audience or studio lights!"

Around the world, 5,200 kilometers away in Qatar, independent communications consultant Hamish Scott-Gale first used the Message House method at Qatar National Bank. Says Scott-Gale, "I found it to be an effective way of helping senior management across the organization to understand the 'brief' and relate their narrative to the agreed core themes." Scott-Gale now works with a branch of the University College of London in "sunny Qatar," as he puts it, "across numerous stakeholder groups with several comparably complex, but unaligned, sensitivities." He says the introduction of the Message House method has brought "a much-needed simplicity to every conversation."

Marc Fest, the Miami-based communications consultant behind the website messagehouse.org, says that companies, non-profits, and government organizations in more than 90 countries from Myanmar to Mexico visited his site. Someone at Samsung in the United Arab Emirates recently downloaded the template as a "PR tool." The Malaysian Ministry of Agriculture grabbed it for "communications planning." Heineken in Ireland for "comms development." And the Dutch tax office to "make messages more powerful" – to name just a few examples. The website features more than 1,000 examples of how entities from all over the world are using Message Houses.

"I didn't expect exactly this," says Fest, who, through 2011, was vice president of communications for the Knight Foundation. This Miami-based non-profit organization gives out more than \$100 million in grants annually to fund media innovation projects. He had heard about the Message House approach, which he calls "a communications method that's been around in various forms forever," during his time at Knight. When he left the organization to return to a life as an independent consultant, he chose "Message House"—initially just as the name for his own business, with no plans to make the eponymous method a focus.

As an afterthought, Fest added the Message House template to his website as a download, but not without trying to improve the method. "I added a form field to the template to specify the audience that the messages are for," says Fest. "Communications doesn't work unless you are clear about your audience." He also encourages users to ask themselves specific questions to generate effective key messages, such as "Why is our project or organization important in the larger scheme of things?" and "What is the immediate benefit to our audience?"

It quickly became apparent to Fest that visitors to messagehouse.org were more interested in downloading the template than in his consulting services. He decided the website should be all about the method and renamed his communications-consulting business Elevator Speech Training, for which Fest created a separate website. "I now think of Message House as a kind of pro bono project to help people and organizations worldwide use smart communications to increase impact in whatever area they work in," he says.

Ernest W. B. Hess-Lüttich is an internationally known professor for his work in German Studies, Linguistics, and Semiotics, which includes studying "systems of signs" and their use in nature and culture. He currently works as a professor of General Linguistics at the Technical University in Berlin and of German at the University of Stellenbosch near Cape Town. He has taught at more than 25 universities around the world, including in London, Bonn, Bern, Berlin, New York, Bloomington/IN, Melbourne, São Paulo, and New Delhi. Asked why putting key messages inside a house helps people remember to use the messages, he says: "Iconicity is mnemonically more effective than the symbollicity of signs." In plain language, by associating the visual shape of the Message House with the abstract (and therefore hard-to-remember) concept of key messages, the idea becomes less abstract, easier to remember, and more actionable.

Fest finds it surprising that even large organizations often treat messaging as an afterthought. Hess-Lüttich says that "often organizations prioritize technical solutions and underestimate the importance of

communications." As to why people find it so hard to stay on message, he has a less scientific-sounding answer: "For some, it might simply be an insufficient ability to concentrate." Fest says that beyond helping with staying on message and generating messages, the Message House method can "profoundly change an organization's culture in terms of generally paying more attention to communications. And the beauty of the Message House is that it doesn't cost anything, is simple, and that anyone can use it to produce better results through better communication."

You can download the Message House Toolkit for free at www.messagehouse.org.

About the Author

Marc Fest is a communications coach who specializes in helping clients attract more support to their cause by changing how they talk about what they do. His Elevator Speech Training (EST) requires only two one-hour, one-on-one training sessions. It has garnered praise and testimonials from scores of CEOs and executive directors who experienced the training.

Marc is the creator of MessageHouse.org, a free messaging toolkit helping thousands of NGOs, companies, nonprofits, and governments create key messages and increase messaging discipline. He is a former vice president of communications for the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation and the New World Symphony.

He lives at and works from a remote solar-powered farm in the Everglades. When he is not coaching clients, he enjoys hanging out with his Belgian Shepherd dog Zeus and an assortment of lizards, sparrow hawks, and raccoons.