

The Principles of Highly Persuasive Messaging: Create Your Most Effective Messaging with These Objective Evaluation Criteria

By Michael Cannon

In the world of business-to-business marketing, messaging is the words you use, along with supporting visuals, to persuade people to buy from you. Sales messaging, a breakthrough category of messaging, is the most effective messaging you can create as measured by its ability to persuade the most people to buy from you. (Learn about [the different categories and types of messaging](#), or learn about [the difference between sales messaging and a value proposition](#).)

Numerous [research reports](#) show that the problem with most messaging is that it is ineffective. For example, in the IT Buyer Survey from International Data Group (December 2008), it was found that “58% of a vendor’s marketing content is not relevant to potential buyers and reduces the vendor’s chance of closing a sale by 45%”.

One of the main reasons for ineffective messaging is the use of subjective criteria, such as conciseness, clarity, relevance to the target audience, addressing of the prospect’s pain points, likeability, etc., to evaluate messaging effectiveness. These evaluation criteria have a different meaning to each person. What seems “relevant” to one person may not be relevant to another. It’s very difficult to create effective messaging using subjective evaluation criteria.

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What is missing is an objective set of criteria, or principles, that is clearly defined, agreeable to the majority of people responsible for creating and using the messaging, and easy to use when evaluating messaging effectiveness, prior to formal market testing or launch.

This is the gap in the current marketing approach that “The Principles of Highly Persuasive Messaging” fills. You now have an objective set of criteria to use as a checklist when evaluating the effectiveness of your messaging. Review your messaging now by asking, **Does your messaging...**

1. **Focus on One Offering.** Sales messaging is about selling a specific offering — a complete product or service — to a specific person. If you sell a number of products and services bundled together, then you can think of this as one offering. If you have many products or services that you sell on a stand-alone basis, then you must have sales messaging for each offering.
2. **Target the Buyer by Audience Type and Buyer Role.** There are numerous audience types to consider such as Customer, Channel Partner, Sales (Inside, Outside, Channel), Market Research Analyst, and Financial Analyst/Investor. There are also buyer roles such as User, Technical, Economic, Line-of-Business Manager, and Executive. You must target your messaging to your buyer by audience, and potentially by role too, so that the messaging resonates with each buyer or stakeholder’s interests and perspective.

The rule of thumb to use when deciding if you need to segment your audience messaging by buyer role is: Does that buyer segment have a similar set of business challenges and is the solution to those challenges also similar? If the answer is “no” to either of the questions, and if the buyer segment is critical to your success, then you must have messaging for each buyer segment. Or, accept that the messaging to that buyer segment will be less effective in persuading them to buy. It’s your choice.

3. **Identify and Persuasively Answer the Audience’s Primary Buying Questions.** The buying questions for each audience are fundamentally different. For example, Customers are asking, “Why should I buy your solution rather than a competitive alternative?”. Channel Partners are asking, “Why should I distribute your product or service?”. Sales is asking, “Why should I spend time selling your product or service?”. This is why you must identify and then persuasively answer each audience’s specific questions. The great way to determine the effectiveness of your current messaging is by identifying your audience’s primary buying questions and then evaluating how persuasively your messaging (collateral, sales training, and sales tools) answers these questions. Is it really good enough to win an order?
4. **Target Specific Market Segments or Sales Opportunities.** Messaging that straddles all industries and/or markets is typically so high-level that it is not very effective, i.e., persuasive, when used in an actual sales conversation. You can increase your messaging effectiveness by honing the messaging down to a specific set of prioritized customer segments in marketing terms, or sales opportunities/plays in sales department terms.

A market segment is a cross-referencing group of people that has a similar set of business challenges and where the solution to those challenges is also similar. Segments can be vertical by industry, and horizontal across industries/markets by job tasks or department and even specific geographies.

5. **Enable the Technology Adoption Life Cycle (TALC) and Sales Cycle.** In the early phases of the TALC — Early Market, Bowling Alley, and Tornado, the most important customer buying question is “Why should I change-out my current solution for a new solution?”. The answer to this question is called business-creation sales messaging, and it has little to do with your company, per se. The primary goal of business-creation sales messaging is to create demand for the product or service category by stating a compelling reason to change, convincing buyers that there is great value — Business Case — to be gained in changing from their current solution to a new or better solution.

In the late-market phase of the life cycle — Main Street, when market demand is more established, the most important customer question then shifts to “Why should I buy the solution from your company rather than a competitive alternative?”. The answer to this question is called competitive sales messaging, and it must provide clear competitive differentiation of your company and offering. The primary goal of competitive sales messaging is to create orders for your company, convincing buyers that your offering is their best choice.

The sales cycle has distinct phases that follow the customer buying behavior in the TALC. For example, let’s say you’re selling a product in the early phases of the TALC.

At the beginning of the sales cycle, the primary customer buying question to answer is “Why should I meet with you?”. Once you have a meeting, the next phase in the sales cycle is answering “Why should I change-out my current solution for a new solution?”. The final phase of the sales cycle is then answering “Why should I buy your solution rather than a competitive alternative?”. Great sales messaging must persuasively answer and enable each phase in both the technology adoption life cycle and sales cycle. (Learn more about [aligning messaging with the TALC here.](#))

- 6. Make the Right Comparison.** A lot of messaging does not manifest this comparative principle. When you are developing *business-creation* sales messaging, it’s not about the value of your solution. It’s about *the value of the difference between your solution and the customer’s current solution*. The reference point for comparison is the customer’s current solution.

On the other hand, when you’re developing *competitive* sales messaging, it’s not about the value of your solution. It’s about *the value of the difference between your solution and the competitors’ solutions*. Here, the reference point for comparison changes to the competitors’ solutions.

Only the difference, or delta, has real value to the customer and the bigger the delta the more likely you are to create a business opportunity and get the business. The underlying assumption is that if you can clearly communicate how your product can help prospective customers solve their problems or reach their objectives better than their current solution and/or better than the competition, then you should win the business.

- 7. Use Strong Comparative Language.** In order to help the buyer see the difference between the old way and the new way or the difference between your solution and the competitor’s solution, you must use comparative adjectives such as *more, easier, faster, less, reduce, increase, etc.*, in your messaging.

Numerous neurology studies (used as the basis for Neuromarketing) have proven that the old brain is the true decision maker, and that the best way to communicate to the old brain is to present it with clear comparisons between opposites such as *black and white, best and worst, fastest and slowest*. That’s why great competitive sales messaging must include superlative adjectives such as *most, easiest, fastest, least, greatest, only, etc.*, where appropriate, to create the highest level of comparison possible.

Another strategy to provide greater comparative contrast is to quantify the difference. For example, you can change “reduces costs” to “reduces costs by 15%” and “unmatched performance” to “3x better performance” to create crisp contrast that is easily understood by the old brain.

- 8. Define Clear Capability Advantages.** This derivative of the “Make the Right Comparison” principle is used mostly for competitive messaging. Most companies’ competitive messaging is a list of the company capabilities and product features. While these capabilities and features are fine for descriptive company or product messaging, they’re not effective when you need to create highly persuasive sales messaging.

This is because a capability or feature by itself has little real value to the customer. Only the difference between your capability and the competitor's capability has value. The greater your capability advantage and the clearer you can communicate that advantage, the more likely it is that your company will win the deal.

The best way to communicate your capability advantage is to summarize the difference and then provide the capability comparison, for example, "Best Service: 4-hour mean time to repair versus 5.5-hour mean time to repair" and "3x Better Performance: 300 rev per second versus 100 rev per second".

9. **Communicate Value in the Customer's Context.** Having clear capability advantages is necessary but not sufficient. What's missing is the "so what?": What does this capability advantage mean to the customer? The best way to communicate the value of your capability advantages is to put it in the context of the business problems you can solve better than the current solution or competition (Customer Benefit), and the business value you can deliver, over and above the current solution or competition (Customer Business Value).

For example, a petroleum company is in the market for a new drilling rig. One of your capability advantages is "3x Better Performance: 300 rev per second versus 100 rev per second". The business problem solved for the customer (Customer Benefit) is that your rig will drill 22% faster than the competition's. The Customer Business Value is that you can reduce the customer's overall drilling cost by 11% or by \$560M.

10. **Incorporate Lots of Proof Points.** Most buyers do not immediately believe your messaging claims. So, the more evidence or proof points you offer to support your claims, the more credible your claims, and the more your buyers will believe you. The best proof points are customer testimonials, case studies, etc. The second-best proof points are independent third-party organizations such as market research firms (Gartner, Forrester, etc.), standards boards (ISO, IEEE, etc.), and trade associations (Chamber of Commerce, American Management Association, etc.). The next-best proof points are a demonstration or proof-of-concept implementation, followed by support data such as an ROI summary, charts, graphs, etc.

Your proof points must also provide direct support for your messaging. You must provide proof that your capability advantages are true, that you can solve the customer's problems better, and that you deliver greater business value.

11. **Employ Multiple Differentiation Themes.** There are five important differentiation themes that you can include in your messaging: Time, Money, Risk, Strategic, and Personal. The more of these differentiation themes you use, the more likely you are to attract and create buyers. Examples of strategic differentiation include increased productivity, return on invested capital, faster time to market, etc. Examples of personal differentiation include peer recognition, promotion, bonuses, etc.

- 12. Make the Customer the Hero.** A lot of messaging repeatedly uses the company's name, and pronouns such as *we*, *us*, and *our*. It is written from the perspective of what the company or product does, or can do. Buyers do not care about your company or products, they care about themselves. So, stop making your company/product the hero of the story. Instead, turn your customers into heroes by rephrasing the messaging to use pronouns such as *customer*, *you*, and *your* as much as possible.

When you create your messaging with the customer as the hero of the story, the impact of your messaging increases dramatically. You also enable prospects to more easily visualize themselves using your company/product as a tool to become a hero in their company.

- 13. Align with the Psychographic Profile of the Buyer.** This is a sophisticated way of saying that your sales messaging must be tuned to the buyer's values and needs. For example, in the Technology Adoption Life Cycle, there are four buyer profiles. They are Visionaries, Early Pragmatists, Late Pragmatists, and Conservatives. Your messaging must be tuned to each buyer's compelling reason to buy or his/her buying theme. (Learn more about [aligning messaging with the TALC here.](#))
- 14. Avoid the Use of "GOBBLEDYGOOK" Adjectives.** Words such as *highly integrated*, *future-proof*, *scalable*, *flexible*, *world-class*, *best of breed*, *innovative*, *industry-leading*, *next-generation*, *robust*, *cutting-edge* — and the list goes on — do one thing: they reduce the effectiveness of your messaging. These adjectives are not the words your buyers use to describe what they want and are so over-used that they have no meaning. They get in the way of crisp, clear communication; give your company and product a "me too" position in the mind of the buyer; and encourage commoditization.
- 15. Pass the Substantiation Test.** If you had to prove that your messaging is accurate and truthful, could you do it? If you cannot substantiate your messaging, then you should not use it. Using unsubstantiated messaging will, sooner or later, cause you to lose credibility with the customer, and with the sales teams delivering your message. It's a poison pill with a devastating impact on the effectiveness of your marketing and sales investments.
- 16. Pass the Sales and Customer Validation Test.** Since a lot of messaging is developed without Sales or Customer input, it's critical that we do a reality check with these key stakeholders. Do they agree that the key buying question you are answering is the right or most important question to answer? Do they agree with your answer? What do they like? Dislike? Why? These simple validation tests can be done over the phone, in less than an hour each, and will help you ensure acceptance from prospective customers and adoption by the sales team.
- 17. Differentiate You in the Market.** In order to have truly effective messaging, especially for competitive differentiation, no other company should be able to make the same claims as your company. The buyer must perceive that your company is different from all the other competitive options and vendors. If you took your messaging and replaced your company name with one of your competitor's names, would the messaging still be true? If yes, then your messaging is not going to be very effective.

18. **Use Highly Relevant Visuals That Appeal to the Buyer's Emotions.** Some common adages are “a picture tells a story” and “people buy on emotion and justify rationally”. Thus, it's important to include visuals (pictures, graphs, diagrams, charts) that align with your messaging and amplify the buyer's emotional reasons to buy.
19. **Summarize in Three Key Points.** It is a proven fact that people remember things best when they are presented in groups of three, and certainly no more than five. Since the brain works this way, you can best optimize your sales messaging for maximum impact by organizing your sales messaging into three to five key points...or Silver Bullets, as we like to call them.
20. **Fit on One Page.** Less is more. Buyers do not have the time or the inclination to read multiple pages that list extensive reasons why they should buy your product or service. Also, comprehension and retention are increased when information is presented in easily digestible amounts. One page is a good rule of thumb. This helps your sales team remember and articulate your great sales messaging, and your buyers are more likely to understand, remember...and buy too.

The more of these principles your messaging incorporates, the more effective it is. Moreover, since messaging is “the fuel” on which all your marketing and sales engines run, it will also have a big impact on the effectiveness of all your marketing and sales investments. [Typical results from companies that implement great sales messaging](#) include:

- ✓ An increase in sales leads and sales pipeline growth of 10% to 20%
- ✓ An increase in win rates of 15% to 30%
- ✓ An increase in market share of 5% to 10%
- ✓ A reduction in the amount of time Marketing spends supporting Sales by 40% to 50%

Better messaging means better results. It's truly a silver bullet to help you increase market success and gain a more sustainable competitive advantage.

Recommended Resources to Improve Sales and Marketing Effectiveness

- Read free articles about sales messaging at SBG's [Resources Center](#).
- Learn a methodology for implementing great sales messaging with the 10-page eBriefing, [Best Way to Increase Your Sales](#).

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