Blow Their Minds

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MARCOMMS CAN SEED AND CULTIVATE INCREDIBLE CHANGE IF THEY TEND THEIR WORDS WITH CARE.

BY THOMAS MARCETTI
“W
hat you think, you become.”
This profound Buddha quote is an excellent example of the power of words to lead change. Not just because it captures the essence of the idea so well, but because Buddha didn’t say it. Yet on dream boards and inspirational posters around the world and on the internet, it is attributed to him — all because, one time, someone said it was him.

To be clear, I’m not advocating misquoting or misleading people. But it shows how even a few words can cause significant change, and yet marcomm professionals sometimes set that part of their work to the side.

Communicators often think their role is limited to maintaining an organization’s message through enforcing brand guidelines, editing and reworking copy, and finding fresh ways to boost the message through new channels or products, says Scott Steen, executive director for the American Physiological Society. What they don’t consider, he says, is their ability to change that message to create or encourage change in their membership and audience.
As an example, he recalls his time at American Forests. It was the oldest environmental organization in the country and had done amazing things, but it needed to be brought into the 21st century.

“We ended up using communications first to basically reset people’s expectations of who we were,” Steen says. “The strategy was almost communications before the substance of the work. We really started to lay out through words and images and stories a vision of who we wanted to be, how we saw ourselves, and how we wanted the world to see us.”

As other staff members began to see the organization in a new light, the communication strategy ended up driving, in many ways, the bigger organizational strategy. Steen says the resulting organizational shift and new perception from the public resulted in the nonprofit tripling membership and doubling its budget within 5 years.

“When you suddenly look, sound, and are talking like you have a vision and you’re going somewhere, people start acting different. People start thinking differently about who they are,” he says.

When people start thinking and acting differently, they in turn spread the seeds of change that can take root and fundamentally change an organization.

**Words in Action**

Robb Lee, chief strategy officer at ASAE, says the past several years have drawn into sharp focus that underneath the surface, everyone is evaluating their value proposition and their values. People are constantly asking themselves where to spend their time, their energy, and their resources. It is more noticeable in times of major upheaval, but it is happening all the time.

“You’re telling your members where you stand on issues,” Lee says. “You’re telling them where you stand, and they are going to decide if they stay with you or not.”

The greatest intentions and initiatives aside, it’s up to communicators to show people what an association is, what change it wants to see in the world. (Shout out to Gandhi for that paraphrase.)

“Ultimately, stakeholders come to associations because they are looking for community, support, and professional development, and they are looking for leadership,” Lee says. “Leadership means showing the way forward. You don’t want to go too far ahead that you leave people behind, but if you don’t push ahead, you’ll be left behind.”

If you’ve made it this far, I’m guessing you haven’t said, “My team has nothing to change and no plans to make any changes that we need to communicate.” If you have and you’re still reading, thanks.

“We ended up using communications first to basically reset people’s expectations of who we were. We really started to lay out through words and images and stories a vision of who we wanted to be, how we saw ourselves, and how we wanted the world to see us.”

SCOTT STEEN, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR FOR THE AMERICAN PHYSIOLOGICAL SOCIETY
However, as communicators, we don’t need to be talking about major organizational changes or social issues. Whether we like it or not, our world is always changing, and adapting your message and therefore your organization’s voice to meet those changes is crucial.

Which all sounds great, but what does that actually mean? How do we go from marcomm to agents of change?

Drawing inspiration from some change management best practices, I came up with a plan that could serve as a starting point for just about any size organization looking at just about any size changes.

(Editor’s note: Emphasis on “just about.”)

Start by Assessing the Situation
It’s hard to go wrong with a people-first approach to just about anything. In this case, we want to look at the people, the channels, and the needs that would change and those that would be affected by changing.

For example, everyone on the project group is excited and onboard for a new initiative they are going to roll out. Who is going to need to do extra work to create the collateral for the initiative? What support will they need? Who is the target for the project? What is their reaction likely to be?

Work with members of affected teams and the intended audience to ensure you are taking into account critical information for planning your strategy. Be sure to consider:

- **Who in your audience will be most affected?** What is the appropriate approach or customized communication that you will need to address them? What touchpoints are already in place, and are any new ones needed to address the project?
- **What exactly is changing and why?** This may seem a little obvious, but the why component is especially important for when a member is unhappy and vocal about it. The why can be the difference between a staff member feeling unprepared and uncomfortable or feeling capable to deal with member concerns.
- **How does this reflect and advance the mission of the association?** The change or project is happening for a reason; be sure it’s clear that it’s because of its role in the overall vision. Keep this clear of any C-suite jargon. You should not be explaining blue sky synergies. Put this together like you are talking to a friend.
- **What is the difference between before and after?** How will people’s jobs change within the association? What will members see? This step has the added benefit of ensuring initiatives are not just performative statements. Being able to explain what the difference is in a granular way will also help provide a road map for the teams who will actually implement the program.
Human beings have been telling stories since before we had words.

And yet, many marketing and communications professionals forget the power that has made stories such a long-lasting and important part of all our lives. Of course, after cranking out a month’s worth of social media posts, putting together another batch of retention reminder emails, or putting together a training presentation, it’s understandable why stories aren’t always at the forefront of our minds.

What does it look like to bring storytelling back into all of our communications? Here are some ways for you to find out by doing.

1. Develop a narrative. Every story consists of a beginning, middle, and end: that is, an inciting incident and the events that follow from it. Randy Ford of First Story Strategies says this structure can help you craft your content and strategy without overloading your audience with information.

   At risk of sounding trite, change happens one person at a time. So the more your communication can connect on a personal level, the more effective it will be.

   Your plan should take into account what stakeholders will need to know and when they will need to know it. You may be noticing the trend of how a good communications plan can easily translate into the action plan for the organization. That’s by design.

   To drive awareness and engagement that result in action. Putting together a message about why something is good is easy. Crafting your webinar to make sure it supports an initiative and the association’s mission is a bit trickier.

   “We’re entrenched in giving factoids about ourselves,” says Alexis Redmond, director of career management resources for the American Speech-Language-Hearing Association. “But woven into a narrative, this allows you to demonstrate multiple dimensions and facets for communicating information.”
Secure audience participation. Your audience also plays an active role in telling your story. Based on the information you provide, audience members will fill in what they don’t know based on their past experiences. Ford advises that while you have complete control over choosing your storyteller and some control of your message, you have no control over your audience and their response because you don’t know their lived experiences.

Choose a storyteller your audience can identify with. Redmond notes her work at ASHA, which certifies speech-language pathologists. The organization’s audience of potential pathologists widely believed they must have perfect diction to become certified. So ASHA produced a recruitment video featuring a member who spoke about her journey to certification while having a speech impairment herself. To people considering speech-language pathologist certification, this video made the prospect seem more approachable and less challenging.

Tell new stories. You can also adjust your message to one that better fits your audience or fits new audiences you’re trying to reach. This is closely linked with identifying new storytellers. Redmond says this starts with figuring out who needs what information when and who would have the emotional reactions you need to engage your audience. She notes that more people telling more diverse stories increases the chances that at least one storyteller and their message will resonate with each audience member.

For internal communications, this could involve collaborating with other departments. In getting their perspective and their voices, you can create shared experiences and community. There is a reason storytelling has remained such a powerful tool for bringing people together: It works. And with a little work and deliberate focus, storytelling can transform your relationship and place in your industry or among your audience.

Abby Roberts is an editorial assistant with AIHA. When not helping publish The Synergist magazine, she enjoys Studio Ghibli movies, playing chase with her dog, and sometimes creating her own stories.

To support that, you should outline:

+ **Objectively, what does success look like?** This might be showing how it aligns with business outcomes, membership numbers, or registrations. But again, it needs to be clear and measurable to everyone, not just leadership.

+ **What do you want members or staff to do?** You’re going to launch a new, shiny advocacy campaign. Great! What does Pat in HR need to know and do? What does Remy the member need to do? Hint: “Get the word out,” isn’t the helpful direction you think it is.

+ **What are the key messages?** The overarching message is crucial, but break it down to the segments of your membership. For example, in rolling out a new certification, What is the timeline for young professionals versus veterans in the industry? What is the process for nonmembers?

+ **How and when will we communicate this?** Here is where you make sure editorial calendars and various publications and channels can cover everything. You know this part. But keep in mind the milestones and various audience segments you identified above.

+ **How would you like your feedback?** If Alex in membership hears that someone is upset by a recent email detailing the next phase of an initiative, what should happen next? Continuous communication with your stakeholders is important to ensure that projects can adapt and evolve — the best-laid plans and all. What does that feedback look like? What other departments or teams need to be involved with that discussion?
Finally, Prepare Your Key Communicators

Whatever the change or initiative is, it will not succeed if all the communication comes from one place. This part can be scary for some marcomm folks. Yes — you are going to have to give up control of part of the association’s communications, though by this point, you’ve probably realized that a lot of those pieces belong with other teams and are better coming from them or their leadership.

However, this doesn’t mean just throw them the keys and wish them well. You’re the expert.

Whether you’re turning pieces over to the CEO or to a well-known member, your help and coaching will be the difference between a flop and flourish. Make sure you are setting your key messengers up for success by:

+ Create toolkits to help them deliver critical messages. In addition to ensuring that the correct information is being disseminated, preparing people to communicate will boost their confidence and make them far more effective. Based on their specific situation and audience, provide core messages and talking points, communication tips, slides, handouts, infographics, posters, FAQs, and even communication content (e.g., email announcements) to support them. Check back in with them after the program launches to see if their needs have changed or if they’ve identified something that would help them.

“Ultimately, stakeholders come to associations because they are looking for community, support, and professional development, and they are looking for leadership. Leadership means showing the way forward.”

ROBB LEE, CHIEF STRATEGY OFFICER AT ASAE
Anytime we create content, we are the voices of our associations. How we talk about the work we do can energize those around us, refocus our efforts, and even help us make radical changes.

If we do so deliberately, thoughtfully, and in collaboration with all our colleagues, we can create real change within our organizations and among our memberships and industries. We just have to remember how powerful our words can be.

Thomas Marcetti is associate editor for Signature. He keeps thinking he’s a best-selling novelist and waiting for the Buddha to follow through on his end.

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**+ Brief them.** Again, no key throwing. This doesn’t have to be a multi-part training program; a brief sitdown, video, or audio piece can go over what the project is, what the goals are, what the toolkit is, and how to use said tools. Keep in touch with them throughout, especially any member influencers you’ve identified, and provide refreshers or additional pointers as they go. This will also provide some valuable insight into improving your overall communication strategy.

**+ Celebrate success.** As the new advocacy initiative starts gaining steam, highlight and celebrate not just the people who are taking action, but also the people who are helping spread the word. Your key messengers can help identify people who are really engaging with the program, but keep them in mind for recognition as well.

**+ Plan for ongoing engagement.** Even if it’s a single campaign, if it’s worth doing, it’s worth keeping as part of your association’s DNA. That means it’s not just a long-term effort, it’s part of what you do now. What are your expectations for key messengers — especially those not on your team?
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