

5

# DESIGNING MESSAGES

TOOLS FOR  
ENGAGING LANDOWNERS  
EFFECTIVELY

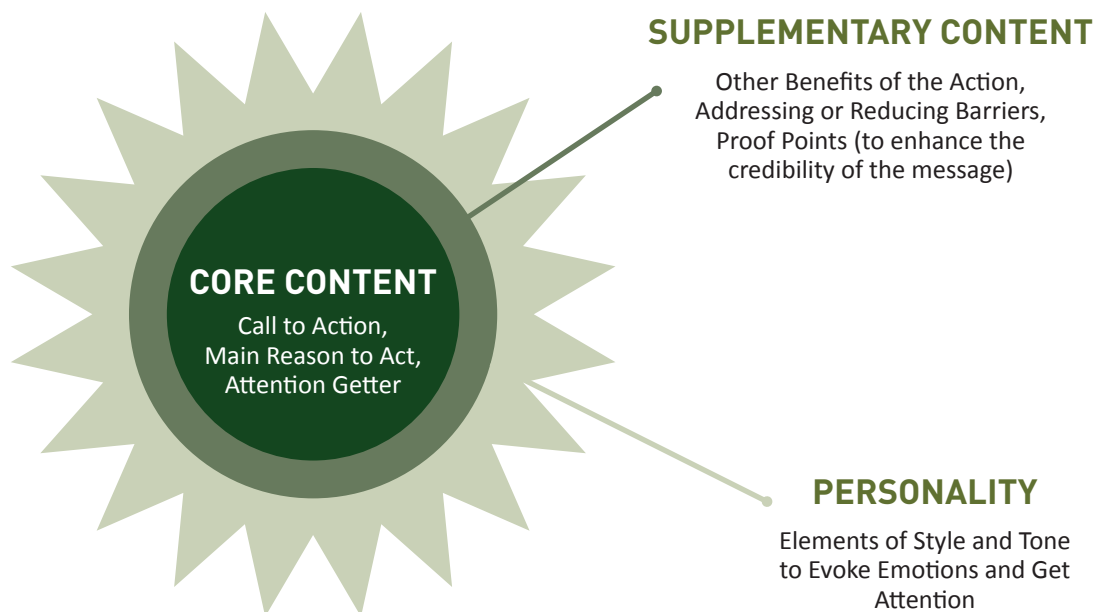
# 5 DESIGNING MESSAGES

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## 5.1 Components of an Effective Message

Before you can develop any materials, you must have a good sense of the main ideas you want to communicate and how you'll do so. The figure below shows the key components of an effective message.

THE MAIN COMPONENTS OF AN EFFECTIVE MESSAGE



All communications must have a clear and specific call to action and one strong compelling reason for audiences to take that action ([see Section 5.2: The Reason to Act](#)). Other benefits and arguments can be used as supporting elements, as can ideas that directly address or undermine barriers to action.

Effective messages also have something that attracts the target audience's attention ([see Section 5.3:](#)

[Messages with Personality](#)). This attention-getter can be an element of the text (such as a shocking statistic or unexpected endorsement), a visual or graphic, or the style and tone of your message. The style and tone of your materials also contribute to the impact of the message by evoking the right emotion to drive action. Just like a picture frame can greatly enhance or detract from the art, the personality of your materials can enhance or undermine your message.

Whether you're designing a postcard or an entire presentation, your communication should be organized around two or three strong, interrelated ideas to drive home a single, compelling reason to take the desired action.

## 5.2 The Reason to Act

A good message is organized around a central theme—the main reason why landowners will take the desired action. All the visual and verbal elements of your message should be pulling in the same direction to reinforce the ideas and emotions associated with the main reason to take action.

The Tools for Engaging Landowners Effectively (TELE) process uses a tool called the Because Statement to help identify and clarify the essential elements of the message. The format for the statement is as follows:

**[Landowner Audience X]  
will take [Action Y] because  
[Compelling Reason to Act].**

If you used the Stick Person Tool and Pain/Gain Chart (see [Section 4.5: How to Develop an Audience Profile](#)), you already have the raw material to identify the main reason landowners will take action. Take another look at the benefits you identified in the Gain column. Can you identify one or two important themes in those benefits? Can any of those be developed into a compelling reason to take action?

Once you've written a Because Statement, evaluate it from the landowners' perspective. Does the reason to act outweigh the costs of and barriers to taking action? If yes, you have a compelling reason for landowners to take action. If not, try again. Sometimes, the main reason why landowners will take the desired action is easy to find, but often it takes a few tries to get it right. If you still can't find a strong reason for landowners to take the desired action, you may need to change the action itself or reduce key barriers to make the decision dynamic work in favor of taking action.

A clear, compelling reason to take action is fundamental to effective marketing messages. From the landowners' perspective, the motivation to act needs to be powerful enough to overcome costs and barriers, including inertia and other demands on their time and resources.

### BECAUSE THEY WANT TO LEARN

What is the main reason that landowners go to workshops, trainings, and other educational events? If you answered, "Because they want to learn about ... [insert topic]," you're not alone. But you are only half right. Yes, the people who come to the workshop want to learn about the content you'll present, but they usually have deeper reasons for wanting that information. They have an idea about how they'll use that information and how it'll advance their goals. This deeper motive is what you need to highlight in marketing materials directed at motivating more landowners to come to your workshop.

For example, if you're offering a workshop on making woods more resilient to fire, ask yourself why this matters to landowners. Is it because they don't like looking out at dry, dead trees? Do they fear for their lives and homes? Or is it because they are concerned about loss of timber income? Although the educational content of your workshop might be fairly similar in all these situations, your marketing materials should focus on why that information matters in the first place.

## 5.3 Messages with Personality

Giving your message a strong personality serves two purposes: (1) it helps draw and keep the audience's attention, and (2) it helps take the audience from intention to action.

Every day, your audience members are bombarded with thousands of “messages” asking them to do something. Whether the desired action is buying a particular brand of soap or adopting a healthier lifestyle, all these messages compete for your audience's time, attention, and resources. In this context, your messages have to work hard to draw and keep landowners' attention. One way to do this is to give your materials a personality that encourages people to interact with them. This personality—whether it is scary, humorous, homey, distinguished, smart, or sad—touches the audience before they have read the first word. And it can make them more likely to attend to the rest of the message.

The same things that give your message personality work double time to evoke emotions. Research shows that our actions are primarily motivated by emotions. True, rational thought guides what we will do. But whether or not we act at all is driven by emotions—either pleasant emotions that we seek to engage or unpleasant ones that we seek to avoid. (The similarity of those two words—“motivation” and “emotion”—is not accidental. They share the same root.)

The strong role emotion plays points to an important truth: to evoke action, your messages must evoke a motivating emotion. Furthermore, if you can be clear about the emotion you wish to evoke—i.e., how you want landowners to feel when they read, view or hear your message—you can create communications that pack a stronger motivational punch.

So ask yourself: How do you want audience members to feel after they receive your message?

Once you know that, virtually all components of your message can be used to elicit emotions—the language, the images, the design and layout, the color scheme, and even the font you use. If you have the luxury of working with a good designer, just specify the emotion you're seeking and see how the elements of design come together to convey it.

Even if you're not working with a designer, you can use the two most important emotional cues: language and images. For example, if your message is to arouse fear, you might use images of destruction and harsh words such as “ravaged” or “destroyed.” If you're trying to get people interested in a rather boring topic or trying to allay fears, some humor could lighten the mood and help get their attention. If you're getting people to act for future generations, then words and images that convey family or community ties could invoke feelings of pride and affection.

Just like people, messages that have personality are more likely to get and keep people's attention than those that are bland and dull. Moreover, messages that evoke emotions (like anger, pride, fear or love) are more likely to move people to take action.

### SAME MESSAGE, DIFFERENT PERSONALITY

Consider the two fliers on the next page. Both have the same message strategy, which we can summarize using the Because Statement format (see [Section 5.2: The Reason to Act](#)):

**Woodland Retreat owners, especially relatively new woodland owners, will call a forester to request a woods walk because they want to protect their woods from harm.**

## 5 DESIGNING MESSAGES

Despite the similarity in message content, the two fliers have very different personalities and emotional charges due to simple language differences. The first communicates the message in relatively neutral, scientific language. The second one uses emotionally charged language to get attention and make landowners feel more vulnerable and anxious, thereby creating a greater motivation to act.

### Flier 1: Less Emotional



Woodland habitats are vulnerable to a broad range of threats, from climate change and pollution to pests and diseases. It is really important to watch for potential problems so you can address them early on and keep your woods healthy.

Call 1800WDS4EVER to request a visit from your local forester. He/She will walk with you through your woods and show you what to look for. You will also come away with a better understanding of the flora and fauna in your woodland ecosystem.

### Flier 2: More Emotional



Captures what they think now and then contradicts it

Your trees may look strong and indestructible. But they are actually very vulnerable to a broad range of threats, from climate change and pollution to pests and diseases. Fortunately, you can take simple action to keep your woods healthy and beautiful. Provided you act in time.

Don't get blind-sided by changes in your woods. Call 1800WDS4EVER to request a visit from your local forester. He/She will walk with you through your woods and show you what to look for. You will also come away with a better understanding of the plants and critters that live on your land and give it its unique character.

"Crying out" evokes emotion

Creates time urgency

Creates anxiety

An image of things they may see in their woods (and not know whether it's OK or not)

8. Northern hardwood forest, Monroe County, PA—Nicholas A. Tonelli, 2015. Retrieved from: [https://www.flickr.com/photos/nicholas\\_t/21914597020/sizes/l](https://www.flickr.com/photos/nicholas_t/21914597020/sizes/l)

9. Beech bark disease—Kent McFarland, 2009.

Retrieved from: <https://www.flickr.com/photos/vtebird/4123151400/sizes/s/>