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DEVELOPING MATERIALS

TOOLS FOR
ENGAGING LANDOWNERS
EFFECTIVELY

6 DEVELOPING MATERIALS

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6.1 Writing for Impact

The purpose of your marketing materials is to get your audience’s attention and touch them in a way that persuades them to take action. You can make your writing more impactful by using language that is (1) focused, (2) understandable, and (3) relatable.

1. Focused. Be economical in your writing. Remember, your audience’s time is valuable, and they are impatient. Respect their time and attention by getting to the point quickly and including just enough information to deliver the message. Make every word count. Avoid introductory text, fluff, long-winded sentences, and extraneous details. Use active voice whenever you can. Use bullets, tables, or graphs to communicate complex information.

The trick to succinct and focused writing is to be clear about your main message, and include just enough text to drive that message through. That is a lot easier when you target a particular kind of landowner ([see Section 4.1: Why Choose an Audience Segment?](#)) and develop a clear message strategy based on what will be salient to that group.

Consider the following letter designed to get landowners to talk to a service forester before harvesting trees.

FIGURE 6A: AN UNFOCUSED, UNTARGETED LETTER LEAVES LANDOWNERS CONFUSED

Dear Woodland Owner,

Our state’s woods are an important natural resource, providing homes for wildlife and clean drinking water for the community, and storing carbon for the future. Your forested land is an important piece of the overall landscape and can provide you with timber income.

The Department of Natural Resources protects and manages public lands and works with you and other landowners to help conserve our state’s forests. We can connect you to the financial and technical resources you need to:

- **prepare for a timber harvest**
- **improve wildlife habitat**
- **reduce risks from forest pests**
- **protect streams and reduce sedimentation**
- **enhance ecosystem services**

Timber harvesting is a complicated process and involves many steps, including marking trees to be cut, hiring the right logger, understanding the market, and ensuring that the woods are left in good shape. Your local forester can help you make informed decisions about how to earn income from timber sales while maintaining the health and beauty of your woods.

Contact Tim, your local service forester, at 1800FORWOOD, to get more information about harvesting your woods sustainably and getting a good price for your timber. This service is offered at no cost to landowners.

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What's wrong with this letter? It's trying to do too much. It is mixing conservation and financial values, trying to build the Department of Natural Resource's brand, and offering too many service options. Sure, the landowner is supposed to call for more information, but about what exactly? Landowners need to search the text to find a reason to call Tim and, unfortunately, many of them won't take the time to do so.

Now, suppose that you targeted this outreach to Working the Land owners ([see Section 4.3: The TELE Landowner Types](#)), a generally well-informed and savvy segment that wants to maximize financial gain while preserving long-term value and ecological amenities. You and your colleagues work through the TELE process and develop the following Because Statement ([see section 5.2: The Reason to Act](#)) to express your message strategy for this communication:

Working the Land owners will talk to a forester before harvesting, because they want to maximize their income while protecting their woods.

With this level of focus and clarity, your message can be communicated with much fewer words, as captured in the postcard below.

FIGURE 6B: A TARGETED, SUCCINCT POSTCARD GETS THE JOB DONE



Thinking about a timber harvest and not sure where to start? Talk to Tim, your local service forester, for free advice on how to get a fair price for your timber and ensure your woods stay healthy and beautiful.

Call 1-800-FOR-WOOD for free, unbiased advice on harvesting timber.

The postcard text above omits things that this type of landowner already knows and gets to the point quickly. It speaks directly to Working the Land owners' motivation to get the best income while protecting their woods and not get taken advantage of. It assures the landowner that the advice you're offering is free and unbiased, which helps them feel more comfortable about approaching you.

WRITING FOR THE WEB

Being concise is especially important when writing for the web. Your site should convey information in a way that is easy to scan. Keep it short and sweet—both paragraphs and sentences should be small chunks of information. A good rule of thumb is paragraphs of 3-4 sentences with each sentence comprising around 10-15 words.

2. Understandable. Make sure that what you are saying is written in a way that your audience can understand. Simple language signals inclusion and builds trust. On the other hand, if folks don't know what you're talking about, they won't want to talk to you. Most marketing materials should be written at about an eighth-grade reading level. You can check the readability of your materials or website using free online tools (such as readabilityformulas.com and [readability calculator](http://readabilitycalculator.com)). Most of these websites also offer suggestions for making the text simpler and more readable.

Many words and phrases that are commonly used by natural resource professionals are not understood or are misunderstood by landowners. These words also signal a condescending, top-down attitude that can intimidate or annoy your target audience. Avoid jargon and overly technical language, except in rare cases when you are speaking to an audience that wants to feel as though they are “in” with the experts—in that situation, using a few technical terms (with explanations) can help.

3. Relatable. Use language that resonates with your target audience and signals that you are talking directly to them. Not surprisingly, this is much easier when you are, indeed, talking to a specific audience segment. Then you can use language that is likely to appeal to them (even though it may be less effective for other landowner types).

Consider this text for a flier tailored to Woodland Retreat Owners.

Your woods are home to all kinds of wildlife. Join us Saturday, September 15, to see what local woodland owner Jane Wilson has done to provide homes for a variety of woodland creatures. Jane will walk us through her property, showing us the different ways she's enhanced her woods to benefit a variety of wildlife. After the walk, we will enjoy a picnic lunch from Claire's Kitchen. We will be joined by local wildlife specialists and foresters there to answer your questions. Call 555-555-5555 to reserve your spot today.

This message uses words like woodland creatures and woods to relate to Woodland Retreat Owners. Instead of talking about management practices, it talks about the “ways” that Jane cares for her land. The event itself—a walk in the woods with a local landowner, followed by a picnic lunch—is likely to appeal to folks who enjoy being in the woods but who may feel bored or intimidated by a lecture about creating early successional habitat.

Good writing communicates the main points of your message in the clearest, most compelling terms, and in a style suited to your audience. All the words in your communication materials should be carefully considered. They should either contribute to landowners' motivation to act or increase their ability to do so.

6.2 Imagery to Support Your Message

We live in a visual world and smart use of images and graphics can greatly increase the impact of your materials. Images are not simply for decoration. A picture can increase the impact of your message in many ways, and thinking carefully about what purpose you want an image to serve can help you select the best image for the job.

1. Pictures can be great attention-getters. Generally speaking, images that are relevant and specific to your audience and their environment work better than generic landscape pictures or clip art. Similarly, close-up pictures that show people's faces get the audience's attention better than wide-angle shots of groups or scenery. Images that are somewhat unexpected or surprising also cause people to look twice and attend to your message, if only out of curiosity. And it goes without saying that vivid, high-quality images have a positive impact on the attractiveness and credibility of your message, while blurry or distorted images do the opposite.

LESS ATTENTION-GETTING



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MORE ATTENTION-GETTING



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10. Willamette National Forest, Trapper Creek Outdoor School, US Forest Service, Pacific Northwest Region, 2011.

Retrieved from: <https://www.flickr.com/photos/forestservicenw/34726967562/sizes/>

11. Free Fish Day, Deschutes National Forest, US Forest Service, Pacific Northwest Region, 2011.

Retrieved from: <https://www.flickr.com/photos/forestservicenw/36275562444/sizes/>

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2. Pictures and graphics can help communicate your message or support your argument. Sometimes, a picture or a smart graphic can really drive home a point faster and more powerfully than a thousand words. For example, this picture of a controlled burn is a nice contrast to the news images of massive wildfires, and can help landowners who are afraid of prescribed fires to see that they aren't so scary.



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3. Pictures can also help to evoke a mood that enhances your argument. Consider the two images below. The first one would be a good candidate for a flier that seeks to tap into landowners' community spirit. The second would be better for a flier that seeks to motivate landowners by evoking pride in their individual landholding.



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12. RxCADRE research plot, US Forest Service, Pacific Northwest Research Station, 2012.

Retrieved from: https://www.flickr.com/photos/usfs_pnwrs/36449810445/sizes/l

13. Green River clean-up with Lindsey Wilson College cross-country team, Louisville, US Army Corps of Engineers, 2012.

Retrieved from: <https://www.flickr.com/photos/louisvilleusace/8071976003/sizes/l>

14. Jim Chew, Forever Grateful Ranch, US Department of Agriculture, 2018.

Retrieved from: <https://www.flickr.com/photos/usdagov/39968670233/sizes/l>

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4. Pictures can help you connect with your target audience by demonstrating that you understand their needs and their lives, and that you're speaking directly to them. The easiest way to do this is to use visuals that feature something that you know audience members value, something that makes them go: "I want that." Another option is to feature people or environments that look familiar, so landowners can see themselves and their lives reflected in your materials.



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Images are not just for decoration—they can help you get attention, bolster your arguments, evoke emotions, and help your audience know that you understand them and their lives, thereby making them more likely to listen to you. Make sure to think carefully about each image you include and how it is contributing to the effectiveness of your materials.

FREE STOCK PHOTOS

As much as possible, try to use real photographs from your landscape and community in your materials. They are much more likely to ring true and signal inclusion and relevance to your audience. Until you build up a nice photo library, online stock photo libraries can meet your needs. Websites such as [Flickr](#), [SCX](#), [Pixabay](#), and [Shutterstock](#) are good sources for images of people and landscapes. For more forestry-specific images, try [Bugwood.org](#), [ForestryImages.org](#), and the [Forest History Society's photo database](#). Always check licenses to see how you can use an image and how the source should be cited. Images licensed through Creative Commons are usually available for use without a charge, and their website provides detailed information about what is required to use the image—restrictions often require that credit is given to the photographer or organization posting the image. There are also plenty of no-restriction public domain images, covered under the Creative Commons Zero (CC0) license.

15. Wounded Warriors Turkey Shoot, Lancaster, Tennessee, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, 2011.
Retrieved from: <https://www.flickr.com/photos/usacehq/5658143051/sizes/l>

6.3 Useful Design Tools

There are a lot of free, easy-to-use online software packages for developing professional-looking fliers, posters, and presentations. Examples include Canva, Vectr, Venngage, and Piktochart. Most of these websites offer a good selection of templates for the beginner and an ever-growing collection of tools to customize these templates or develop your own formats.

Most of us are familiar with Microsoft PowerPoint for presentations, but this program can also be an effective tool for creating materials. You can change the size and aspect ratio of the slide to match the type of material you are creating (e.g., 4X3 postcard or 8X11 trifold). From there, it's a simple matter of inserting text boxes, charts, and pictures to bring your postcard, flier, or poster to life.

Microsoft Publisher is a bit more sophisticated than PowerPoint but still has the relatively familiar user interface of all Microsoft offerings. If it's your first time using it, you may want to play around a bit or check out some YouTube tutorials, but you'll soon get the hang of it. You can do a lot with Publisher when you get used to it, and it plays nice with other

Microsoft applications. This makes it easy to import and manipulate data from Excel or polish up materials originally created in Word.

Adobe's Creative Suite of products is versatile and powerful and is the go-to software for many designers. The cost of these products could have been prohibitive for small shops in the past, but the new line is fully accessible online through a subscription model called Creative Cloud. These tools can do a lot, but they also take a solid time investment to learn. Luckily, Creative Cloud has great tutorials and many community colleges have reasonably priced introductory classes for the software.

Building a website has gotten a lot more straightforward than it used to be. There are now a wide variety of do-it-yourself options that don't require you to be a wiz at coding. Options including Wix, WordPress, and Squarespace allow you to populate existing templates with your content. If you take some time to go through tutorials and instructions, you will soon be able to customize these templates to reflect your vision for your materials and/or the direction provided in your style guide.

A STYLE GUIDE FOR CONSISTENCY

Brands become recognizable and meaningful through repeated exposure. But exposure works only if there is sufficient consistency across all materials, events, and activities, so people link them to each other and to your program or organization.

A style guide can be a useful tool to help you and your partners communicate consistently, thereby raising awareness and recognition of your work over time. A style guide is a set of standards for the writing and design of your organization's publications. Depending on your program and materials, a style guide could include:

- Key language (dos and don'ts) for describing your program and the coalition.
- Visual rules for maintaining your organization's image and imparting a consistent tone and style to your materials. These include rules about the colors that communicate your organization's identity and how to use your logo. You might start with the dominant colors from your logo and, if needed, add a few accents (keeping to five or fewer).
- A selection of fonts and typography, and other graphical elements that are repeated across materials to drive home familiarity and improve recognizability.

Large companies can have style guides that are the size of small novels, but for smaller organizations, that isn't necessary. A simple page or two that outlines the visual guidelines and tone for your organization's brand can be a helpful reference for keeping materials consistent.

6.4 Working with Professionals

TYPES OF CONSULTANTS AND VENDORS

If this all seems overwhelming, there are consultants and vendors that can help you establish the look and feel of your materials and help you get the word out to your target audience. Here are some options to consider:

Your in-house communications team. This is a good place to start, because you may be able to get their expertise for free. Be aware, however, that the communications staff of many organizations is focused on brand development and public relations, which is very different from writing targeted, audience-centered marketing materials to inspire action. If you work with them, you will need to be very clear (and very firm) about your goals, target audience, and message strategy. Furthermore, since these professionals serve the whole organization, you may need to adjust your timeline to accommodate their availability.

Advertising agencies and strategic marketing firms. These types of companies usually deliver complete campaigns. You will likely work with an account representative, who will pull in researchers, strategists, and creative and media teams as needed. These firms are expensive but may be worth using if you have little or no in-house capacity to plan, design, and implement the campaign. Although the distinction is not always clear-cut, marketing and communication firms tend to pay more attention to delivering behavioral outcomes, while advertising agencies are better at designing clever, attention-getting campaigns that raise awareness of an issue.

Graphic designers. Graphic designers offer services ranging from developing a graphical illustration of your process to the complete design and layout of your poster, postcard, flier, or other materials. They will usually look to you for guidance on the desired look and feel of the materials and then deliver two to three design options. Once you choose a direction, they will implement it coherently across all campaign materials. You can negotiate a lump sum payment for materials or pay them by the hour.

Writers and editors. Everyone can write, right? But can you write in different styles, for different audiences, at different reading levels, using language that evokes different emotions? Can you communicate your ideas clearly and concisely? And can you ensure that your material has no grammatical or typographical errors? Enough said. If your budget allows, work with a writer, or at least an editor, to finalize content for important materials. Even if you have no budget, ask another person, preferably someone unfamiliar with your program, to review your materials for clarity and brevity.

Web designers. Web design requires two kinds of skills. The first is being able to design and implement the back-end functionality, informational flow, and usability of the site. The second involves the look and feel of the site—i.e., the presentation of the material. Many software developers or web hosts offer simple templates at little or no cost, and these may offer all the functionality you need. You can also pay a web designer a small amount to customize an available template, so it looks more professional. However, it is best to work with a full-service designer if you envision a multi-layered site with more complex functionality and interactivity.

You can also write your web content yourself, but it is useful to work with a writer or editor who specializes in writing for the web. Similarly, several graphic designers specialize in designing websites and/or web-friendly documents and graphics that integrate features such as scalability across formats, interactivity, and easy updates.

Media specialists. These are professionals and firms that specialize in getting messages out to specific audiences or via specific channels. Examples include social media and online marketing firms, traditional public relations firms, event organizers, youth marketing firms, minority marketing firms, and more. It makes sense to consult one of these firms if you are committed to getting the word out via a specific channel. There are also a few companies that have expertise in all these techniques and can help you determine the right mix of channels for your audience and message.

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Printers. Often, the type of materials being created can dictate the investment needed for printing. Sending out individual letters to landowners? You'll be fine using the office inkjet. Want to send out a glossy, high-quality postcard? You'll want to explore the printing landscape. Office supply and shipping stores usually offer online printing services at low prices. Online options have also greatly expanded—you can simply upload your materials and receive the printed copies in the mail. Online print shops are quite inexpensive and usually provide materials of

good quality, but you may not have the option to look at a test print for quality control.

Local print shops are disappearing, but if you have one in your community, it's definitely worth inquiring about available services. Small shops may cost more but offer more personalized service and experienced servicepeople. If you print frequently, it is worth developing a relationship with your local printer, so they understand your needs and preferences.

GETTING THE BEST FROM CONSULTANTS

Regardless of which type of consulting service you use, your collaboration with them will be much more successful if you get your house in order first.

- 1. Be clear about the scope of work, budget, timeline, and mutual expectations.** If you have a limited budget, it makes sense to use consultants strategically, on tasks where you need the most help. However, be realistic about your capacity. If you set up the project as a collaboration, then make sure you have the means to get your part of the project done.
- 2. Clearly communicate your overall goals and priorities for the project.** Most projects have multiple objectives, and that is fine, as long as you're able to prioritize these objectives. Also, tell the consultant about any design or technical parameters (e.g., compatibility with your organizational website, consistency with your organization's style guide, etc.).
- 3. Be clear about the audience and message strategy.** Professionals such as writers, designers, and graphic artists are trained to bring your ideas to life, but you'll need to have your message strategy worked out so you can give them useful direction. At the very least, you need to be clear about your target audience, what motivators and barriers you anticipate, and the desired emotional tone of the message.
- 4. Get multiple quotes,** but make sure that they are for a comparable level of service. The cost of professional services does not vary widely in the same area, so if you have very disparate quotes, it may be that the consultants have understood the scope of work differently. Once you have identified two or three potential vendors (e.g., online or through referrals), explain what you need, and ask them to write up a short bid. Then have a conversation with potential consultants to determine how well they address your questions, what questions they ask, and how they respond to new information. Good consultants should be able to adapt their ideas and suggestions based on your feedback. They should also be able to give you several references. For larger projects, it may be useful to write up a formal RFP, which pushes you to think through what you need and present that to bidders in a standardized way.

6.5 Testing Materials

Testing messages and materials before dissemination is one of the most important things you can do to improve your outreach materials and avoid expensive mistakes. No matter how diligent and conscientious you've been about developing your messages, you can't know how audience members will interpret them until you ask. A message test is a systematic way of getting that information.

- It lets you test and validate key assumptions about your target audience. It helps guard against assuming that you know what your audience wants to hear.
- It helps you focus and improve your materials.
- If you've generated a few ideas, message testing helps to identify the message (or combination of messages) that is likely to be most effective with your target audience.

Even for experienced communications professionals who know their audience well, message testing is a common and valued practice, because it helps to refine messages and generates confidence in the final product.

WHAT TO TEST

It's always a balancing act to figure out how "finished" your materials should be before you test them. On the one hand, you want to know how your audience will respond to your final materials. On the other hand, you don't want to spend too much time and money developing materials if you're not on the right track. And while it's great to test different options, you might not have the resources to develop and test two to three different materials.

One way to address this is to test one finished message but have some alternative key elements of the message. Let's say you are planning to use a postcard for your outreach. You would first test your best version of the postcard and then focus on testing some options for key elements such as headlines, logos, and visuals.

Make sure the materials you test are brief enough for the landowner to digest in real time, so they can give you a meaningful response. If you're testing something more detailed (like a website or a book),

then either give landowners time to read the materials (perhaps at home) or direct their attention to specific elements on which you want feedback (such as the cover page, title, format, etc.).

HOW TO TEST

The right method to test your messages depends on what you're testing. Generally speaking, it is better to conduct message tests in person or online, especially if you're testing images. Phone conversations can work for testing short, pithy headlines that can be easily read out.

You'll also have to decide whether to test messages with individual landowners or in a group setting. Generally speaking, it is easier to get people's honest reactions when talking to them individually. Group conversations can be very interesting and revealing but are also subject to peer influences and require greater facilitation and research skills.

Luckily, you don't have to test materials with a lot of people. Eight to 12 are usually enough. This is not an adequate representative sample in statistical terms, but based on experience, we know that responses from eight to 12 well-selected landowners will likely give you good information to validate your approach and refine your materials.

To have confidence in your findings, you must test your messages with landowners who are representative of your target audience for the program. This means reaching out to landowners beyond your immediate professional and personal circles. You can do this in many ways:

- Ask your colleagues or landowners you know to put you in touch with landowners they know. Just make sure that these aren't "model" landowners who are already converted to your point of view.
- Look at institutional records to identify landowners in the area and call them.
- Go to community events where you're likely to find members of your target audience and ask people if they'd be willing to talk with you for 10 minutes. Maybe you could offer them a small gift, like a pen or hat, to thank them for their help.

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To make sure that you're hearing from landowners that fit your audience, think of a few indicators of good fit. For examples, if you're targeting hunters, you can either recruit landowners who have hunting licenses or simply ask landowners whether they like to hunt before asking them to look at your materials. You can also include a few questions in the message test itself that help you determine whether these landowners are indeed the type of landowner that you're hoping to reach and influence.

WHAT TO ASK

A good questionnaire is precise and efficient. Resist the urge to cram in questions concerning everything you want to know about the landowners. Stay focused on testing the effectiveness of your message and the key elements that will drive landowner action.

Keep in mind:

- The most important thing in a message test is to learn why landowners said or think something. "Why/why not?" is a great follow-up question!
- Don't ask leading questions—i.e., questions that put words in the respondents' mouths. For example, instead of asking, "Does this make you feel confident?" ask, "How does this make you feel?" Make sure your questions are phrased neutrally.
- Don't explain, argue, or correct respondents, or encourage "good" feedback over "bad" feedback. Remember, it is their perceptions that you're looking for. Always be professional and neutral.
- Respondents should be asked to respond on their own behalf and not to speak for other landowners. It's up to you to make generalizations and draw conclusions.
- Avoid double-barreled questions. Double-barreled questions are two questions crammed into one statement. An example would be: "Would this be of interest to you and other landowners?"

SAMPLE QUESTIONS FOR A MESSAGE TEST

These sample questions are worded for testing a postcard, but you can adapt them to different kinds of materials.

Overall

Give respondents a copy of your postcard. Give them some time to look it over and then ask:

- On a scale of 1 to 5, where 1 means you "don't like it at all" and 5 means you "love it," how would you rate this postcard? (Follow-up question: Why do you say that?)

Text

- Please read the postcard carefully. Circle the parts that you like and strike out those that you don't like or find confusing. (Follow-up questions: Why did you circle "X"? Why did you strike out "Y"?)
- If you got this postcard in the mail, would you read it? Why/why not? (Possible follow-up question: What could we change that would get your attention so you would read it?)
- After reading this postcard, would you do anything? (Possible follow-up questions: What would you do? Why would you/why would you not [insert call to action]?)

Images

- On a scale of 1 to 5, where 1 means you "don't like it at all" and 5 means you "love it," how would you rate this picture? (Possible follow-up question: Why do you say that?)
- What do you feel when you see this? (Ask needed follow-up questions to understand their response.)

Testing Options

- If it had this [other headline/other image], would that be better or worse? (Follow-up question: Why?)
- If we added X logo, would that change your response?