

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



"Crying out" evokes emotion

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

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.

Creates time urgency

Creates anxiety

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.

8. Northern hardwood forest, Monroe County, PA—Nicholas A. Tonelli, 2015. Retrieved from: 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/>