

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.

6 DEVELOPING MATERIALS

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?