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The Power of Messaging

At SW&A, we think of January as “keynote month” when company leaders are focused on setting the stage for the year ahead. From sales conferences to all-company meetings, it’s the time of year that strategies are set, initiatives are launched and great messages will be remembered.



At this point, our input is complete and about half of the company meetings have taken place. Will your meeting be successful? It will be, if you’ve taken the time to ensure that the message and storyline beneath the strategy are as well-thought-out and compelling as the strategy itself.

This is the time of year when your role as a communicator is most influential and potentially most impactful. Because what you say could influence what employees do every day. It’s the clean start to a year that gives you a chance to reset direction and reenergize your team.

And, the most telling sign of success is...will it stick? At the start of the year, every employee should be able to say:

- I believe in what we want to do as a company and why we want to do it.
- I understand how we’ll define success this year and how we will measure it along the way.
- I know what the company needs from me and how I can impact results.

That’s a tall order! The start of the year brings many priorities, and sometimes having a compelling keynote doesn’t make the top of the list. I’ve worked with many leaders who feel their storyline is “good enough.” But, this is the communication moment where you shouldn’t settle for OK. It takes time and effort, and many say blood, sweat and tears to get it right.

Randy Donaldson, a member of SW&A's new coaching bench, has seen the power of messaging as it takes hold in a business. And he agrees, it takes time and effort to get there. “Communications that make a difference don’t just happen,” Donaldson noted. “The most successful communicators I’ve ever seen would seem effortless on the stage in front of an audience, but only because time, focus and energy had been put into preparation beforehand. Successful communicators make the effort to understand their audiences, craft a message that will resonate and then invest the time to deliver the message in a powerful way.”

So, what can you do to strengthen your storyline and takeaways? If your meeting hasn’t taken place, use the following guidelines to evaluate what you plan to say. Every great keynote should have: a compelling storyline, memorable sound bites and stories, and a clear takeaway or call to action for the listener.

Storyline: Your storyline maps out the flow of ideas for your employees. It should start with the broadest points about your marketplace, your competitors and high-level strategies for what you believe the company can do to impact those factors. Then, over the course of the presentation, you have to lead employees to the personal impact they can have on reaching those broad strategies.

To test your storyline, talk through your keynote without notes, visuals or supporting materials. See if it's easy to hear the big concepts that lead the listener from the start to the finish of the keynote.

Sound Bites & Stories: Strategies lead to initiatives, and in the middle of the keynote, leaders talk more about how things will happen. It can be challenging to make tactical points seem relevant to everyone because they are often narrower by division or group. Stories help employees understand relevance, and sound bites often ensure that they can repeat stories as they share ideas with customers or other employees. Make sure you have easy sound bites linked to initiatives. Stories help a presenter transition from telling a listener about something to illustrating something through discovery in a story.

Takeaway/Call to Action: The storyline has to lead every employee to a clear takeaway and call to action. Every listener wants to know what's my role in this? What's your ask of me? Review your keynote and make sure that every listener feels involved and invested with clear takeaways. It often helps to transition your language toward the end of the keynote from what "we plan to do" to what "you can do." "It's important to take this step," Donaldson said. "It's important that your teams understand the big picture and the key strategies. But they also need to see themselves in delivering them as well."

If you've already delivered the start of the year keynote, here's what you can do to measure success.

Feedback: The earliest meetings of the year were the second week of January, so it's only been three weeks or less since your meeting. Ask for feedback now, and you'll have good information about lasting impact. Send out a survey to a small group of employees who attended the keynote. Ask about key messages and takeaways with questions like these:

- What were the most compelling things you heard in the keynote?
- Have you shared anything from the keynote with anyone else? If so, what was it?
- What, if anything, was missing or confusing to you?
- Since the meeting took place, what have you thought more about or tried to implement?

Repetition: If your message wasn't as strong as you think it should be, you can strengthen it before you use it again. The messages set at the start of the year should be repeated throughout the year. We find that even compelling messages become tiring to leaders toward the end of the year. But, it takes a while to pull others along, and repetition is the only way to ensure that your message is having impact. We work to keep messaging fresh and interesting and yet still consistent to what was said at the beginning of the year. That's why many leaders use themes or taglines to bring ideas to life. "Great taglines can be very effective," Donaldson said. "In fact, they are often copied or leveraged by other leaders across a company, and that's the ultimate measure of successful communication."

If you want to drive impact, let Randy and I help you create a compelling storyline. Because the first of the year messages can't just be OK, they need to be memorable and repeatable throughout the year.

Call us when you need us!



Randy Donaldson is part of SW&A's new coaching bench. View his profile at <http://sallywilliamson.com/executive-coaches>.

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