

Key messages: the heart of your communication



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Richard explains the difference between a key message and a key point

It is widely accepted tenet of professional communication that most acts of persuasion (such as a pitch or an important speech to stakeholders) require key messages. But whilst we may agree with this idea and therefore strive to include key messages in our professional communication, creating and delivering these elusive little gems can be tricky. So what exactly is a key message? How can we find or build them? And perhaps most importantly, how do we know if they are any good?

Let's start with the simplest bit – what are key messages? Key messages are the most important takeaways that you want your audience to receive, understand and remember. A key message is a valuable tool to maximise the capacity of your words to get what you want from your audience; that is, they can help substantially in guiding an audience to think, feel, or do whatever you want them to think, feel, or do.

Following the above definition, a key message needs to be transmitted effectively (to be received), it should be clear and simple (to be understood) and it should be 'sticky' (to be remembered). If your key message lacks one or more of these elements, it won't have the same power to persuade your audience of your point of view (i.e. "hire us", "buy this", "follow me" etc etc).

Another key element here is... well, the very idea of something being key. Your key messages are the most important things that your audience should take away. Therefore, it is unlikely (although not impossible) that you will have more than three key messages in any presentation or pitch. If you are delivering key message number four or five, you are likely to be in the realms of "nice to know" rather than "need to know".



Photo by Magda Ehlers: <https://www.pexels.com/photo/blue-red-and-yellow-stripe-surface-1329297/>

How do we find or create key messages? GPB's Fire Bell Test will help you here. The tool works like this: imagine you are about to deliver your 20 minute presentation or pitch to a client when the fire alarm begins to ring. You are informed that it is only a drill but you will need to vacate the building: you decide to seize the moment before you have to congregate outside.

"Before we head out", you begin, "can I please take 30 secs to tell you the core of our argument to explain why we are best placed to help you?" Then you clearly and concisely deliver the key message(s) that are at the heart of your act of persuasion.

Those of you who have been coached by us may have used our Fire Bell Test outlined above. We give you 30 seconds to think of – and write down – the most important key message of your pitch or presentation. Then, if you have another key message, we give you another 30 secs to think of it; and finally, if you have another message, the third one. Hey presto, as if by magic, you have some key messages.

GPB have a 'Fire Bell' test worksheet for key points and key messages; if you would like a copy, just ask!

But even this doesn't ensure that you have come up with the most impactful messages for your audience. So how can you tell if your key messages are

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Key messages: the heart of your communication (cont.)

any good? Perhaps the best way to answer this is by detailing what usually occurs when our clients have come up with less impactful key messages.

When we hear messages from our clients that need more work, one of two things has usually occurred. Either

- a) Our clients have misunderstood the subtle but important distinction between a key point and a key message, or
- b) They've used a piece of evidence as a message rather than using that evidence as data that supports their key message. (As a general rule of thumb, if you have figures or an example in a key message, you are probably trying to use evidence as a message.) In the spirit of the season, let's illustrate this with reference to



a very well-known festive story, *A Christmas Carol* by Charles Dickens.

Photo by Nadi Lindsay: <https://www.pexels.com/photo/photo-of-book-near-candle-3410287/>

If you were asked what the key points of this wonderful little book are, you could reply with something along the lines of: 1) Scrooge learns that Christmas is a time for celebration rather than isolated misery, and 2) that he is happier at the end when uses his wealth to support Bob Cratchit and save Tiny Tim's life.

Yet the key messages are ever-so-slightly different. They are the arguments that Dickens is making with these points. From this, the key messages could be:

- 1) We should celebrate Christmas as a time for giving and human connection, and
- 2) That those who have plenty have a responsibility to those less fortunate in our society. Going back to our rule of thumb above, the example of Scrooge's dramatic change for the merrier that comes about in Stave 5 of the book can be used as evidence to support the key message, which makes the message more persuasive.

Like the traditional festive season weight gain, really good key messages can stay with an audience for weeks or even months. If you have an argument to make, build it upon powerful key messages that are doing exactly the job you want them to.

Wishing you all a very Merry Christmas and a happy, healthy Hogmanay.

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