

# Wellstone

## The Organizer's Guide to the Galaxy: Message in a Bottle

When's the last time a book made you laugh out loud? Or a movie made you ugly cry in public? (happens to the best of us). Chances are you empathized with compelling characters, related to a struggle integral to the plot, or were shocked by a twist you didn't see coming. Bottom line: you were moved.

That's what good messaging is: storytelling. But when we're talking about messaging around a campaign or an issue, we're upping the ante. We're not just vying for an Oscar or shooting to dominate The New York Times Bestsellers list. We're asking people to take action.

Given all the time constraints people already grapple with between school, work and family, moving people to take action can be a tough sell. Heck, even getting their attention can be a challenge. However, if your message is concise, clear and compelling, you will be able to draw people in and allow them to care, just like your favorite authors and directors.

Let's start by addressing length. We've already discussed the complexity of many of the issues we care about. Issues are often intertwined, and frankly, it would be easy to talk about their intersections all day. However, it wouldn't be effective. Campaigns that use a 10-point plan written in size 8 Times New Roman font as their "message," fail. The extensive length is intimidating and an immediate turn off to readers. That kind of messaging is too long to be accessible.

On the other hand, a snappy slogan does not make a message. While a good slogan is helpful for grabbing people's attention, it doesn't establish inclusivity or illustrate what's at stake.

So we're seemingly at a crossroads. If your message is too long, people won't read it. If it's too short, people won't care. Fear not, fellow TFNEF-ers: this is why we established a problem statement and identified a solution during the strategic planning process. This will allow you to identify the proverbial "sweet spot" – a message that is substantive but accessible.

Now that we understand how long a message needs to be, we're tasked with developing an effective message. Although this can seem daunting, there are three steps to creating an effective message, and we're going to walk you through each part of the process so you are an official Message Creator Aficionado. Disclaimer: you're right, that's not actually a real thing. Our point is that if you follow these three steps you'll have folks grabbing their hankies and signing your petition in no time. Let's get to work.

## **Step 1: Connecting With Your Audience**

Most of us have heard the adage "know your audience." You may have even found it helpful, perhaps when preparing a class presentation for a particular professor, gearing up for babysitting all your toddler-age nieces and nephews, or queuing up a playlist for a summer barbecue.

This phrase is equally applicable when developing your campaign message. What's more, your campaign will have several audiences, since different people will respond to different stories. What does this all mean? Your campaign will have several iterations of one core message to each of your different audiences.

To see how this tactic can play out on the ground, let's look at how some recent anti-choice bills were messaged to different audiences in Texas.

Some audiences received the message: "Abortion should be available and accessible on demand for all Texans." This message was targeted to an audience that was firmly pro-choice. It was a rallying cry that moved the pro-choice base to take action.

Other audiences heard this message: "Women need access to health care, including abortion. Abortion should be safe, legal, and rare." This message was directed to an undecided or moderately pro-choice audience. It spoke to their values by framing abortion as an unfortunate but sometimes necessary medical procedure.

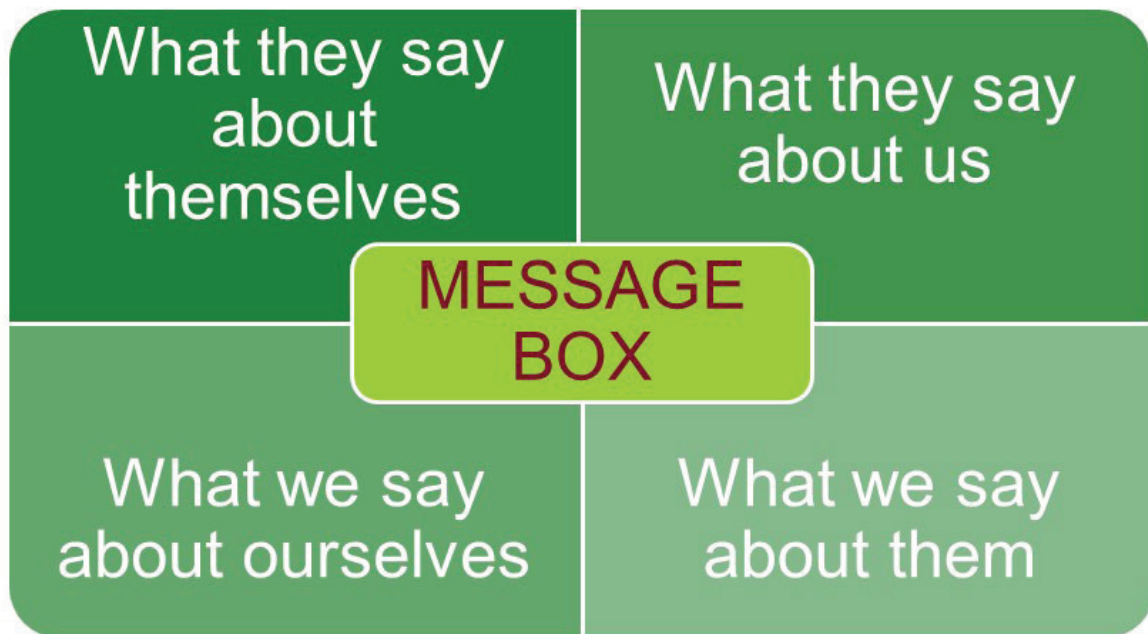
The core message was consistent throughout: vote against this measure that would restrict women's access to abortion. However, each version of this message built upon that foundation and tailored the dialogue to resonate with particular audiences and their values.



## Step 2: Contrasting with Your Opposition

Behold: this is one of the most powerful tools you can utilize when developing an effective message.

### CONTRAST with your OPPOSITION



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Known as a Message Box, this tool allows you to anticipate the way public messaging is likely to unfold around your issue. This empowers you to predict messaging your opposition is likely to use against you and preemptively counter that negative messaging by getting out in front of it. It also enables you to draw a sharper contrast between your solution and the opposition.

The upper right-hand corner of the Message Box is comprised of what the opposition says about their cause. This is their positive message. The upper left-hand corner is what the opposition says about your cause. This is their negative message. This is what the opposition will use to try to defeat you.

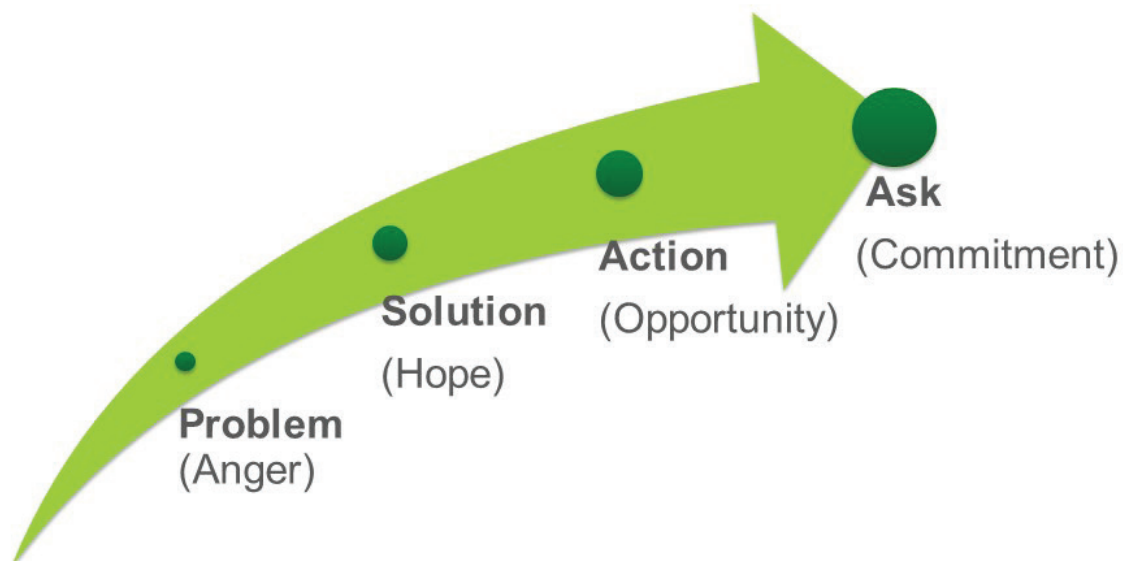
Similarly, the lower right-hand corner of the Message Box contains what you say about your cause. This is your core positive message that establishes what you are seeking to achieve. The lower left-hand corner lays out what you say about the opposition. While this by no means needs to be a negative “smear campaign,” this is your opportunity to tell people why your solution is necessary by drawing a clear contrast between “you” and “the opposition.”

### Step 3: Compelling Your Audiences To Take Action

By now you’ve identified your audiences and have used the Message Box to create effective messages that resonate with your targets while anticipating and countering opposition attacks. But you’re not finished quite yet. You still need to put this message into full effect so it motivates people to take action. Wellstone Action has fine-tuned a process that accomplishes precisely that – the PSA tool. This tool is particularly helpful when writing “scripts” for conversations you may have with people while tabling on campus, block-walking, or phone-banking. The PSA tool will help you craft a message that hits on the problem you’re addressing, the solution to that problem, the action that you’re taking, and the ask to get involved in your campaign.

## COMPEL to ACTION

### The structure of a mobilizing message:



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Like in all aspects of life, the most meaningful conversations occur when you're able to meet someone where they are. We don't mean this in the literal sense (although if you're tabling or block-walking you will in fact be meeting people where they literally are). Rather, we're referring to initiating a conversation by asking someone about the issues that concern them. In other words: what keeps them up at night?

Asking this question allows the person you're speaking with to identify a problem that matters to them. They'll most likely express anger or frustration when sharing their concerns with you. This is an opportunity for you to pivot from their agitation and give them hope by providing a broader solution to their problems through taking collective action. You're offering them an opportunity to act – to address and correct the problems they're facing – so you need to ensure this opportunity is fueled by a sense of urgency and credibility.

On the surface, this tactic may seem naïve, or even foolhardy. Think of all the times you've been minding your own business, commuting from place to place, and are suddenly ambushed by an earnest clipboard-clad volunteer spewing information at you at about 100 words a minute. Chances are you've politely declined and continued on your merry way.

We don't blame you. In fact, that's exactly why we advise you to initiate this conversation by meeting people where they are and asking about their individual concerns. Once you understand their frustrations and are able to offer a broader solution, people will recognize that it is in their own self-interest to take action. And self-interest is an incredibly powerful incentive. When you present an action people can take immediately – like signing a pledge card to vote in November, for example – chances are people will leap at the opportunity because they know doing so benefits them and the people they care about.

Let's put this approach to the test by using an example. Imagine you're tabling on campus outside the cafeteria around lunch time. It's a beautiful sunny day, there's a slight breeze, and you're asking fellow students to sign pledge cards to vote in November. You approach a passing student and ask her if she's worried about how issues are being handled on campus or in the larger community. She shares her concerns about the rising cost of higher education. She's barely able to afford college while working two part-time jobs and maintaining a full course load. She has three younger siblings and knows her parents can't afford college for them at this rate. You've now established a connection with her and have identified a problem she's concerned about – the first component of the PSA approach.



Now it's your job to pivot to the broader solution – the second element of the PSA process. While every person you speak with will have a different concern, your solution will consistently offer them hope and illustrate there is a meaningful action they can take to address their problem.

You respond to this student – let's say her name is Mayte – by sharing that you, too, are troubled by the escalating cost of college tuition, and that we need and deserve elected officials who are committed to making higher education affordable for everyone. The only way to ensure that public officials who care about college affordability are elected is by voting for them. You can then give her an opportunity to take action – the third component of the PSA approach – by asking her to sign a pledge card to vote in November.

Since you've taken the time to understand Mayte's specific concerns and offered her an immediate action to help rectify her problem, she will be very inclined to seize this opportunity and sign a card pledging to vote in November. With her signed pledge card in hand, you now have her contact information and will be able to reach out to her with opportunities to learn more about candidates' and their stances on college affordability. Most importantly, you'll be able to help her register to vote and encourage her to vote in the upcoming elections.

You've successfully made the transition from developing and communicating your message to putting your message to work by organizing your campus. But before we make the leap into community organizing, let's examine the other ways you can make messaging work for you. That's right, folks: it's time to talk about the potential – and avoidable pitfalls – of social media.

