Best Practices for Creating Marketing Assets

Vision/Mission Statement

This "standards book" was created to serve as a basic set of guidelines for State agencies and departments in order to help develop effective marketing and creative assets— whether they are producing the assets internally or working with vendors or consultants.

The idea behind this tool is to ensure consistency and excellency in all forms of communications, so that your audience can better connect with your programs and initiatives.

Keep in mind that these guidelines can be customized and built upon to suit your individual needs, including for any other state, government organization, or public service organization.

Copy

Tone and Manner

The copy tone of voice is an integral part of any marketing asset you develop. It varies according to the target audience you are trying to reach, which is why it's important to consider who you are speaking to in order to make sure the copy truly resonates.

For instance, the tone of voice for marketing material directed towards high school students will be different from the tone for material directed towards business people, as you can see in this example: *(insert examples)*

Depending on your target audiences, your copy tone **should be**:

- Authentic
- Respectful
- Empathetic
- Approachable
- Human
- Aspirational
- Informative
- Helpful

However, there may be instances where your copy tone requires a more nuanced approach, due to the sensitive nature of what you are writing about. That's why it's important to approach copy tone on a case-by-case basis.

Please consider these copy tone suggestions as a starting point and understand that it may need to be reconsidered and tweaked depending on your audience's needs.

The tone of voice shouldn't be:

- **Overly Prescriptive-**It's important that the audience never feels as though anyone is "telling them what to do." Word choices matter.

- **Condescending-** Be mindful of the way you speak about the audience. Language should never be used that might make people feel "less than." While this is not something that would ever be done intentionally, it's important to be aware of words used so that no one feels slighted by the copy.

- **Flip-** While marketing and advertising copy sometimes uses a sarcastic, flip tone of voice, this is generally not appropriate for communications coming from the state. Social media posts may have some opportunity to use humor, which often attracts the attention of the audience. But it is important to make sure the audience does not feel the state is making light of their situations.

- **Technical-** All assets should feel as though they were written by a human, for a human. It's vital to avoid the use of technical and/or overly complicated terminology—when in doubt, use less words, not more.

Language Usage

In terms of overall language usage, it is important that the style of communication is always simple, clear, and concise, even if describing complicated government initiatives.

- **Residents Usage**
  Whenever possible, please use the word specific to your state to describe who lives there. For example, the State of New Jersey uses the word "New Jerseyans."

  The words "residents" or "people" can also be used to describe your audience. However, the word "citizens" is not typically used in assets due to the fact that it sounds formal, and also because some of your audience may not be citizens.

- **State Usage** When referring to your state at first mention, please capitalize the word "State" and spell out the name of your state instead of abbreviating it. However, if space doesn't allow (for instance, in a social post) then it is acceptable to use the abbreviated version. At second mention of your state in an asset, it is appropriate to abbreviate it.

Here is an example: *(insert example here)*

- **Third Person Vs. First Person** There will be times it may be preferable to use third person in communications. However, some marketing messaging (particularly when the tone is more empathetic) may call for using the first person plural (the "we" form). *(Insert example here)*

- **Inclusive Language** As a practice, language used in messaging should be respectful of all groups, and avoid any terms that may be perceived as offensive. This includes being aware of using gender-neutral terms and being mindful of using gender-neutral pronouns, where applicable.

- **Inclusive Language** Inclusive language should be used in all government communications.This includes language appropriate for those with disabilities or those who speak English as a second language.

  Do not use phrases that those with disabilities cannot experience, for instance "*See* what this can do for you."

  It's important to use person-first language, for instance, use the phrase "people with disabilities" instead of "disabled people."

  In addition, avoid outdated terms that may be construed as offensive, such as "handicapped" or "special needs." Instead, emphasize abilities or tools, such as "wheel chair-enabled."

  Whenever describing places with accommodations, emphasize abilities, not limitations. Focus on words that focus on accessibility, rather than words like "handicapped" or "disabled."

  Use neutral language. Never use language that portrays a person as passive, for instance, words like "birth defect" or "brain damaged."

  It's important to use language that portrays people with disabilities in a balanced way, not as heroic.

- **Spell Out Acronyms** There are many acronyms used across government agencies, so it's important to spell out the acronym at first mention and then use the abbreviated acronym after that. For example, at first mention use "Department of Labor (DOL)" and then it may be referred to simply as DOL after that.

- **Numbers** As a general rule, numbers from zero to nine should be spelled out, while any numbers that are 10 or above should be written as numbers. The only exception to this rule is SMS language or digital marketing, where there may be character limitations.

Punctuation

Overall, the purpose of punctuation should be to keep communication simple, readable, and easy-to-understand, especially when explaining potentially complicated concepts.

- **Ampersands** Ampersands should only be used for proper names but should not be used in place of "and."

- **Apostrophes** It is appropriate to use an apostrophe to indicate possession. However, an apostrophe should not be added to a word that ends in the letter "s." In that instance, the apostrophe should be added after the letter "s." It is never appropriate to use an apostrophe to make words plural.

- **Asterisk** Asterisks are used when a piece of information requires further explanation. If an asterisk is used, it is important to add a footnote explaining the clarifying piece of information.

- **Bullet Points** Bullet points are useful in helping call out and simplify large amounts of information. Here's an example of how it's been used successfully: *(insert part of an email that uses bullet points successfully)*

- **Capitalization** All sentences should start with a capital letter. Initial caps except in cases when it serves as the title of something. For instance, initial caps would be correct in this email instance: *(insert part of email that uses initial capitalization)*

- **Colons** In most cases, a colon is used before bullet points or as a way to insinuate more information is to follow. Occasionally, this is used in a sentence if a list is to follow.

- **Commas** When listing out a series of items, the Oxford comma is used for clarity. For instance, "The flag is red, white, and blue."

- **Dashes/Hyphens** There are three different types of dashes.
    - A hyphen is the shortest dash and is used sometimes in compound words or adjectives, for instance "up-to-date."
    - An en dash is used to indicate a range between numbers, for instance "the 2025-2026 calendar."
    - The em dash is a long dash and it is used for emphasis. For instance, "The State of New Jersey is a great place to live—as most people would agree."

- **Periods/Question Marks/Exclamation Marks**
  - For most messaging, periods are the appropriate way to end a sentence. This includes using bullet points—periods are still the appropriate way to end a sentence/phrase.
  - However, when it comes to messaging for digital banners, punctuation is left off the end of the sentence, unless that sentence is a question. Any and all questions should end in a question mark. In addition, if the digital banner requires a comma in the sentence, it should be included for readability.
  - Exclamation marks should be used sparingly and with caution, since they are not tonally correct for most messaging.

- **Quotation marks** Periods, commas, and question/exclamation marks should be placed inside of quotation marks, always.

- **Spacing** All sentences should have one space between sentences, not two spaces which was previously the norm.

Audio

Audio Casting
When casting for voiceover talent, It's important to ensure that the voices sound natural and authentic. The goal is to choose talent that does not sound like an announcer nor an actor. Ideally, the accent should be as neutral as possible.

In addition, it's vital to ensure the talent does not sound robotic in its delivery, since then it could be mistaken for an AI generated voice.

Visuals

Design Accessibility

The following guidelines are drawn from the principles of inclusive design and Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG):

- **Visual Content**
  - Provide descriptive alt text for images and infographics.
  - Ensure sufficient color contrast between text and background—check contrast ratios.

- - Avoid using color as the sole means of conveying information. Instead, use a combination of color, texture, and pattern to differentiate elements and communicate meaning.
    - Use clear and consistent typography.

  - **Video and Audio Content**
    - Provide accurate closed captions for all video content.
    - Include transcripts for video and audio content. This text alternative can be accessed by screen readers.
    - Offer audio descriptions for visually complex content.

  - **Social Media Marketing**
    - Add alt text to images and graphics on social media platforms.
    - Use accessible hashtags for readability.
    - Avoid using non-standard fonts as they are often not compatible with screen readers.
    - Include captions or transcripts for video content posted on social media.

  - **Email Marketing**
    - Provide text alternatives and descriptive alt text for all images.
    - Use email templates with clear layouts and readable fonts.

Casting
In New Jersey, our first choice for talent is to cast actual residents. This adds a level of authenticity and credibility to our campaigns. Casting is always diverse in age, sex, and background.

In the event that actual residents cannot be used for casting, all photography/video choices should be equally diverse.

Photography
The overall style of photography should feature natural lighting, without being overly bright nor overly dark. Since most photography will feature people, it is important to capture them in the most authentic way possible—it should never feel forced or staged. Photographs should not be cluttered in the background, in order to focus on the people in them. While original photography is preferred, the use of stock photography is acceptable, provided it adheres to the same standards.

At this time, AI generated photos are not to be used as a photography option, since the goal is to capture real residents.

Color Palette

In most cases, using your state's color palette is preferable. However, depending on the project, some government agencies have their own specific color palette that is being used on their website. In that case, it might be appropriate to fold in some of the colors from their website.

Logo Usage
It is most appropriate to end messaging with "Brought to you by the State of _____" as a sign-off. Many state agencies also have their own logos, which may be incorporated as well.

Here is an example of a State logo and a state agency logo being used as the official sign-off: *(insert example here)*

Typography
When it comes to typefaces, Public Sans is the ideal primary typeface to use across creative and marketing materials. It's clean, accessible, and designed with government communication in mind. Use it consistently across all assets: digital, print, and social.

Type should always be easy to read. Do not use decorative or stylized fonts.

All typography must meet accessibility standards for size and contrast.

Here is an example of Public Sans being used correctly: *(insert example here)*

Closing
The goal of this best practices guide is to serve as a basis for your work, which you will most likely continue to build upon. As you continue to develop new campaigns, the contents of this best practices guide may evolve as well.

Like so many things in government (and life), the story continues to be written.