

The 3 Core Messages Every Nonprofit Needs (And How to Write Them in 90 Minutes)

MESSAGING GUIDE & WORKBOOK

WWPR Nonprofit Communications Toolkit

*This resource is part of the **WWPR Nonprofit Communications Toolkit**, a year-long series of practical guides designed specifically for small to mid-sized nonprofits working with limited staff and budgets. Each quarter focuses on a different theme, and each resource is designed to be immediately implementable without prior communications experience or expensive tools.*

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The 3 Core Messages Every Nonprofit Needs

Message 1: What We Do (In One Sentence)

This is what people will refer to as your elevator pitch. All that means is that someone asks, "What does your organization do?" You should be able to answer in 10-15 words.

Bad Example: "We're a community-based organization focused on empowering youth through educational enrichment programming and wraparound support services."

Good Example: "We help low-income high school students in DC graduate and get into college."

Why It Works: No jargon. Specific about who you serve and what happens. It's memorable, and someone can easily repeat this to a friend.

Your Turn:

We help _____ [who] do/achieve _____ [what].

Pro Tip: Make sure both the WHO and the WHAT are as specific as possible. Not just "students," but "low-income, high school students in DC." Not just "graduate" or "apply to college," but "get in."

Ideas/Notes

Message 2: Why It Matters (The Problem You Solve)

This is where you connect your work to a real problem or need people care about. Why should anyone pay attention?

Bad Example: "Education is important for society."

Good Example: "Without a high school diploma, students are three times more likely to live in poverty and earn \$1 million less over their lifetime. We're changing that."

Why It Works: Specific data. Real consequences. Creates urgency.

Your Turn:

The problem: _____

Why it matters: _____

One stat that proves it: _____

Ideas/Notes

Message 3: What Makes Us Special (Your Unique Value)

Why should someone support YOU instead of another organization doing similar work? This isn't about being the biggest or oldest—it's about what you do differently or better.

Bad Example: "We have a holistic, trauma-informed approach with evidence-based practices."

Good Example: "Kids who go through our program are 85% more likely to graduate than kids who don't."

Why It Works: Concrete and specific. Easy to understand why this matters.

Your Turn:

What makes us different: _____

Why that matters to our audience: _____

Ideas/Notes

How to Develop Your Messages

Individually, each of the following steps shouldn't take more than an hour or so. Collectively, they are priceless.

Step 1: Brain Dump

Gather 4-6 people who know your organization well (staff, board members, long-time volunteers, a satisfied person who has benefited from your program). Separately, have each person write down:

- What we do
- Who we serve
- What problem we solve
- What makes us special

Pro Tip: Don't be afraid to stretch yourself and get input from people whose answers you can't necessarily predict.

Step 2: Find the Patterns

Look at what everyone wrote. What words or ideas keep coming up? What's different between each person's answer? Where's the confusion?

Step 3: Draft Your Three Messages

Use the templates above. Write them out. Read them aloud. If you stumble over the words or have to explain what you mean, simplify.

Step 4: Test Them (Ongoing)

Share your draft messages with:

- Someone who knows nothing about your organization (Can they repeat it back?)
- A board member (Do they find it compelling?)
- A donor or volunteer (Does it match why they support you?)

Refine based on feedback. Then commit.

Avoid These Common Mistakes

Avoid Using Jargon or Buzzwords. Words like "holistic," "empower," "leverage," "capacity-building," and "systemic change" mean nothing to most people. Use plain language.

Avoid Talking About Yourself Instead of Impact. "We were founded in 1987" is not a message. "We've helped 10,000 students graduate" is.

Avoid Being Too Broad. "We serve the community" tells me nothing. "We serve single mothers in Southeast DC," tells me everything.

Avoid Having Different Messages for Different People. Everyone in your organization should be saying the same thing. If your board says one thing and your staff says another, you don't have a message; you have confusion.

Once You Have Your Messages, Use Them Everywhere

- Website homepage (first thing visitors see)
- Social media bios
- Email signatures
- Fundraising appeals
- Media pitches
- Board presentations
- Volunteer orientations
- Grant applications

The rule: If someone visits your website, scrolls through your Instagram, or talks to your Executive Director, they should hear the same three core messages.

Quick Self-Check

- [] Can someone outside your organization repeat your messages after hearing them once?
- [] Are your messages free of jargon and acronyms?
- [] Do your messages focus on impact, not just activities?
- [] Is everyone on your team saying the same thing?

If you answered "no" to any of these, keep refining.

What's Next?

Once you have your three essential messages, you're ready to:

- Identify your key audiences
- Audit your current communications
- Start building your story bank

But don't skip this step. Clear messages are the foundation for everything else.

Your Three Messages Worksheet

Message 1: What We Do

Message 2: Why It Matters

Message 3: What Makes Us Different

Tested with:

- ☐ Someone unfamiliar with our work
- ☐ A board member
- ☐ A donor/volunteer
- ☐ Our team

Date finalized: _____

Next review date: _____

(Revisit annually or when your work significantly changes)

About the Author: [Christina Crawley](#) is a Washington, D.C. based strategic communications leader with 20 years of experience helping nonprofits, government agencies, and mission-driven organizations translate complex issues into compelling public narratives. As Founder of Virtuosa, she advises social impact organizations on brand positioning, stakeholder engagement, and executive communications. She serves as Pro Bono Co-Chair for Washington Women in PR and has led communications strategies for major foundations, nonprofits, and government agencies throughout her career.