



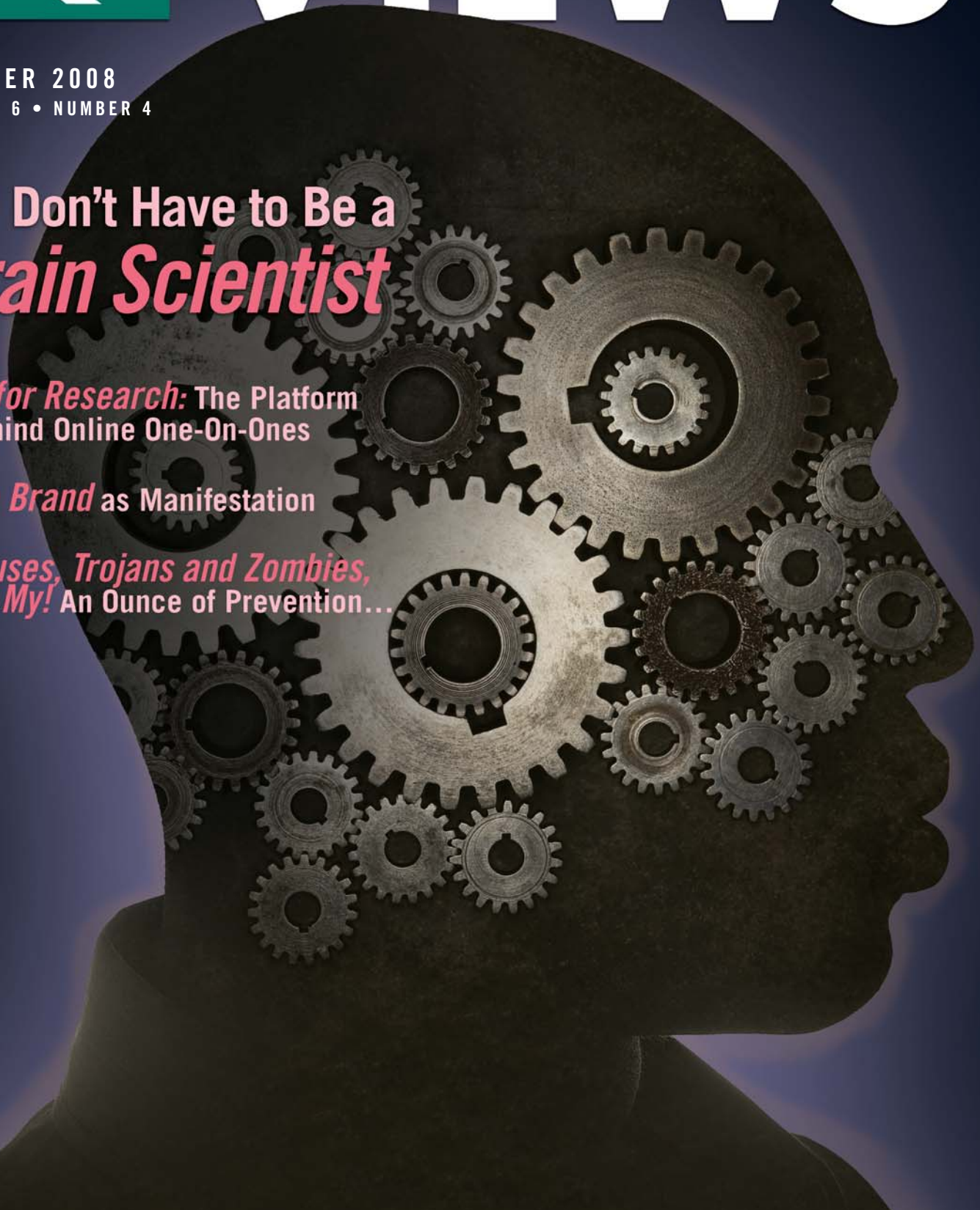
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VIEWS

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You Don't Have to Be a *Brain Scientist*

- + *IM for Research: The Platform Behind Online One-On-Ones*
- + *The Brand as Manifestation*
- + *Viruses, Trojans and Zombies, Oh My! An Ounce of Prevention...*





BY JENNY SCHADE

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Even the highest quality, most professionally produced communications program and materials will fall flat if their contents are not meaningful to their intended audiences.

Do our communications messages hit a bull's eye with our target audiences?

While testing messages in focus groups for a large retail chain that wished to improve its image as an employer, we reviewed themes identified as important by the communications department. These included the fact that the organization sponsored a sporting event to raise funds for a major charity each year.

"That's very nice of them to do," noted a prospective employee. "But it doesn't make me want to go work there. What's in it for me?"

It was an "aha" moment for the communications department — the most meaningful messages for their target audiences went beyond "nice to know." The most compelling messages were those that directly impacted current and potential employees. For the retail chain, these messages involved providing employees with flexible work hours and formal on-the-job training.

Are your messages compelling? What, if anything, do they mean to your key stakeholders? Even the highest quality, most professionally



produced communications program and materials will fall flat if their contents are not meaningful to their intended audiences.

Testing messages through focus groups or interviews allows us to explore the core values and motivations that drive how employees and consumers respond to corporate positioning and branding. On a practical level, we can also test the message language. Is it clear? Is it believable? Is there a better way to say it?

Subtle nuances can make all the difference in message development. For example, when we tested messages among first- and second-graders for a youth organization, kids responded negatively to the idea that the club offered them a chance to do things they had not known they could do. "That sounds scary," a young boy explained, "I might

get hurt." However, when the message was revised to convey that kids could try activities they did not usually get to experience, focus group respondents responded positively: "Awesome!"

The overriding benefit of message testing is ensuring that all communications reflect messages that we know are meaningful to key constituents.

For seven- and eight-year-olds, the world can be a daunting place. Feeling competent — and

Telling Your Story in the Most Meaningful Way: *Reframing Communication Messages*

Carolyn Plum, human resources director for a national retail chain, had a problem. "The turnover rate for our retail stores is ninety-five percent," she says. "Replacing almost every employee annually is costing this company billions of dollars. What can we say to attract good people? What do they want from us?"

"Let's ask," I replied.

In focus groups of current employees as well as separate groups of potential employees, I asked for feedback on four marketing messages that this company was considering, including in advertising and recruiting materials:

- "Our national foundation has awarded more than \$100 million in grants to cancer research."
- "You will receive the best training in leadership, teamwork and customer service in the retail industry."
- "We promote from within. Half of our store managers and a third of our home-office employees started in our stores."
- "We have the country's largest corporate employee family."

The responses of employees and potential employees were direct and consistent:

- "It's very nice of them to give out those grants, but it doesn't make me want to go work there."
- "Leadership, teamwork, customer service... I'm interested. You need those skills for just about any job you might want in the future."

- "I like the idea of promoting their employees. Still, I'm not sure I want to work there long enough to become a manager. I am more interested in the skills I can take with me to other jobs."
- "I don't like the part about 'We have the country's largest corporate employee family — it sounds kind of conceited.' They should say, 'We care about our employees. Come join our family.'"

This feedback was quite illuminating. The most compelling messages were those that directly impacted current and potential employees. The respondents evaluated each message based on their own personal situation. In other words, "What's in it for me?"

Candice Bergen as Murphy Brown put this idea quite succinctly when she said, "When are you going to realize that if it doesn't apply to me, it doesn't matter?"

In the last respondent comment listed above, the employee actually engaged in message reframing. He took the idea in the message and framed it in the "What's in it for me" context. By understanding key stakeholders' frame of reference, we can develop and adapt communications so that they clearly see how what we have to say is relevant and applicable to their situations. This kind of insight allows us to stop pursuing — and start attracting — our target audiences because they are actually drawn to our communications.

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looking cool in front of peers — can make all the difference when it comes to choosing which after-school organization to join. This subtle difference was an “awesome!” finding for a youth-organization client team as they developed their marketing materials.

We have tested messages among audiences that include corporate staff, company employees, customer groups, children, parents, retirees, physicians and nurses. While our techniques are often tailored to specific audiences, we note similarities across groups that can be very useful in the development of impactful messages. Following are 10 guidelines for developing meaningful messages, based on findings from hundreds of focus groups.

1. Use examples or stories, whenever possible.

They improve credibility and put a human face on the organization conveying the message. For example, if a bank says it provides opportunities for advancement, describe the former teller who is now vice president of commercial lending.

2. Focus on benefits to the end user.

Do you have a focus on safety? Explain how this focus has increased workers' or customers' well-being.

3. Don't overlook the value of heritage.

Have you been selling turkeys for 50 years? Bourbon for 200 years? Talk about it. Being in business for a significant length of time tells customers they can count on you. “They must be doing something right,” we frequently hear in our focus groups. “This lets us know they’ll be around if we need them.”

4. Avoid superlatives, like “the best” or “the only.”

People are suspicious of these claims. Use stories to demonstrate leadership. Back up claims with data and examples.

5. Use specifics in communications to bring the message to life.

For example, explain that “unique work-life benefits” means a four-day workweek, a corporate nanny-finder service or an



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optional “work at home” day when children are ill.

6. Tailor messages to your audience so that they can see themselves in the message.

This might mean localizing examples to a regional area, such as “Here at the Madison plant,” or offering examples that resonate for a particular profession or business unit.

7. Bring your corporate vision, mission and values to life for employees.

If your vision is “Count on us,” tell each business unit specifically what customers are counting on them to do. Move beyond the wallet card that states the vision to highlighting what employees are doing to implement corporate initiatives in their daily jobs.

8. Keep in mind that external audiences often define words differently than employees.

In internal publications, it is fine to refer to hotel employees as guest consultants, but the term may be confusing in outside media. Be as clear and concise as possible.

9. If your audiences include ethnic groups, test messages in those languages and cultures also.

This should go without saying, but it is often overlooked or cut when budgets are an issue.

10. If your organization is global, be aware of potential anti-American sentiments outside of the U.S.

It is easy to come across as boastful and omnipotent in message content. Gear your message language towards focusing on how your organization benefits local citizens.

Parting Thoughts

The overriding benefit of message testing is ensuring that all communications reflect messages that we know are meaningful to key constituents. In other words, the resources that you devote now to message testing will pay off in spades when you move forward with producing communications programs and materials that hit the mark. Identifying how stakeholders respond to what the corporation has to say is the lifeblood of designing communications that attract and retain both customers and employees.

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