



Strategic Communication Saves the Family Dog

How the principles that guide national campaigns were put to the test in my own backyard.

For more than a decade, I've been teaching public interest professionals how to communicate more strategically. The premise of my class is simple: there are four points of connection between you and your audience. If you know what they are and plan your outreach around them, you will have a better chance of engaging your audience and motivating them to act. I've seen many national campaigns successfully employ "the four connecting points," but I never considered using them at home...until this summer.

The call to action came when I saw our family dog, Scarlett, romping happily in our front yard. When our family is out during the day, Scarlett is free to play in our *backyard*, which is fenced in for her safety. Someone had left a gate open, however, and our curious little terrier had gotten out and was now perilously close to a busy city street. I hustled her inside and closed the gate, which bore a sign reading, "Please keep gate closed at all times." Clearly, this message wasn't getting through.



Scarlett, our at-risk dog

yelling," the reminders fell on deaf ears.

The primary audience for this message was my son Daniel, who is 21, and his friends, the most frequent users of the gate in question. In general, these are responsible kids, and they all love Scarlett as much as I do, but when it came to keeping the gate closed and latched, there was a disconnect in the most literal sense. I had tried to "reinforce the message" with verbal reminders, but as this was perceived mostly as "dad

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A true story from my own backyard

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free-range thinking is written by Andy Goodman and edited

So I decided to practice what I preach and be more strategic in my communications. If the four connecting points could change the behavior of millions, I reasoned, surely they could be used to convince a few college kids to keep a gate shut.

Connecting Point #1: Theme

Once you've narrowed the target audience for any campaign, your first task is to learn what they already care about. If you can identify an existing concern closely related to your issue, you can tap into those feelings through the theme (or frame) of your campaign.

In Texas, to cite a classic example, the Department of Transportation knew that its anti-littering campaign would have to reach young men - an audience that didn't much care about the environment or beautification efforts. What this audience *did* love was Texas, so TexDOT made state pride the underlying theme of its campaign.



As to *my* audience: I knew that Dan and his friends cared about Scarlett, but when I reflected on the first connecting point, I started to see the sign on the gate in a new light. "Please keep gate closed at all times" might have been clear and concise, but it was not speaking to my audience's concern as directly as it could.

Connecting Point #2: Words

Once you know what your audience cares about, you can develop the slogans, talking points and other language that will link this concern to your issue.

Returning to our Texas example: TexDOT took the proper first step by identifying "state pride" as a core concern, but the campaign would probably have flopped had the slogan been, "Take pride in Texas - don't



litter!" Thanks to the creativity of TexDOT's ad agency, however, the slogan "Don't mess with Texas" cleverly translated the theme into words the audience could hear and even embrace.

For my backyard campaign to succeed, I realized I would need entirely new language - words that would trigger an emotional response (love for a sweet little dog) in college-age kids (who read text messages while ignoring signs) and that wouldn't sound too authoritarian (i.e., dad yelling again).

Connecting Point #3: Transfer

Even if you have the right theme and the perfect slogan, you still have to put your message in front of the audience. I call this "the transfer," and it can be as complex and expensive as a multimedia campaign, or as cheap and simple as a sign on a door.

by Lori Matsumoto. To read back issues, download free publications, and to learn more about our work, please visit www.agoodmanonline.com and www.thegoodmancenter.com.

To reach Andy directly, please call (323) 464-3956 or send an email to andy@agoodmanonline.com.



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GOOD IDEAS FOR GOOD CAUSES

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444 North Larchmont Blvd.,
Suite 102

Los Angeles, CA 90004
323.464.3956

"Don't mess with Texas" was a traditional multimedia campaign conducted over several years, but there was always a heavy emphasis on billboards and radio advertising. That's connecting point #3 in action: transferring the message at a crucial time and place - in this case, right before (hopefully) an empty beer can is tossed out the window of a moving car.

I had been using the sign-on-the-door approach, and as I reviewed this third connecting point, I concluded the approach was still sound. The message was in the right place; I just needed a better sign, so besides changing the words, I decided to add some colors and a picture to make it more eye-catching.

Connecting Point #4: Ask

Once you've convinced your audience to stop, look and listen, you can still lose them if you don't ask for their help in the right way. But if they know exactly what you want them to do, are comfortable doing it, and believe it will make a difference, they're all yours.

"Don't mess with Texas" had an uncomplicated ask - don't litter - and the campaign reduced the amount of trash on the highways of Texas by a staggering 70% over a thirteen-year stretch.

My campaign had an equally straightforward ask - close and latch the gate - but it was delivered in a humorless manner with no connection to the four-legged beneficiary of the extra effort. So I thought it might be more effective to have the ask come from Scarlett herself.



The new and improved sign featured an illustration of a terrier saying, "Hey kids! Remember to shut this door so the latch is closed. That keeps me safe and makes the tall guy very happy!" The "tall guy" reference is for me (I'm 6' 4") and is meant to remind the audience that while the new sign may be goofy, its purpose is still serious.

Today, I'm delighted to report that the four connecting points have proven their worth once again. Ever since I posted the sign in August, there have been no more front yard romps for Scarlett, and harmony reigns once again in our household. That probably won't last, though. A campaign to convince my pre-teen daughter to clean up her room is currently on the drawing board.

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Learn more about *The Four Connecting Points* in our online classes October 8th and 15th.

If you've never heard of "The Four Connecting Points," the story above is a good introduction, but there's much more to say. In our two-hour online class ***Strategic Communications: Cutting Through the Clutter***, we'll go deeper into the four points, offer more examples from public interest campaigns, and we'll cover:

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