

PART 3: MESSAGING

What to say and how to say it

Messaging is how you tell the world about your product. It answers the question: WHY should I buy this? It bridges the gap between: (1) positioning, where you define what you sell, who you sell it to, and the value they get; and (2) demand generation or advertising, where you tell the world about your product.

If you have a tightly defined audience and a clear value proposition, you're in a good place to develop great messaging. Great messaging:

- Tells your target audience what you do and why they should buy you
- Uses the language your target audience uses
- Surfaces the problem your audience has, and drives action to solve it
- Communicates the value you provide

You want to build a messaging framework that gives you both the flexibility to play in multiple channels and across campaigns, but still stays laser-focused on solving the problem you've defined. Your messaging framework should also work to positively build your brand equity.

One question I get a lot is: "Why bother with all of this? Our sales team knows what to say and who to say it, too!"

It's a good question. Building a messaging framework is time-consuming and can feel a little bit redundant. But the reality is that without a framework,

your messaging will drift off course as you run different campaigns, produce different pieces of content, and hire new sales reps for your growing go to market team. To keep your product and your company moving in lock-step towards your objective, you need to keep everyone on message, all the time. And a messaging framework is the best tool to do that.

The process I outline for building a messaging framework in this chapter is based on the Pragmatic Marketing Framework and the positioning book *Obviously Awesome* by April Dunford. I've used it to build messaging frameworks for complex B2B products, and it works wonders for keeping your messaging focused.

In what follows, we're going to walk through the 6 steps you need to go through to build a great messaging framework.

Once we have those 6 steps down pat, the rest of the chapter will focus on copywriting. This is the other side of the messaging coin: If your messaging framework helps you to work out *what to say*, copywriting is all about figuring out *how to say it*. The copywriting section of the chapter offers a few essential rules of thumb that will help you communicate effectively with your target audience.

Building your marketing framework

Building a messaging framework can seem like a mammoth task. But it can effectively be broken down into 6 manageable steps:

1. Find the features your audience cares about
2. Find the advantage of your selected features
3. Link your advantages to value
4. Group the benefits you offer by themes
5. Map values to personas and build use cases
6. Build the framework

In this section, we take a deep dive into each of these steps, looking at why they matter and how to execute them effectively.

1. Find the features your audience cares about

Your product has dozens of features. You need to list them all out, then select the ones your audience cares about.

For instance, say you sell TVs. Your product has lots of features, including:

- A black stand
- A power cord
- Plug and play software
- A remote
- 4K resolution

Of these features, it's pretty clear that the 4K resolution is the feature that the target audience is going to care about. Having a remote probably isn't going to convince anyone to buy.

At the end of this step, you should have a refined features list of things your product does *that your audience actually cares about*. There are a few ways to get this information:

- Talk to your existing customers (if any) about what features they love about your product or competing products.
- Review old support logs or call transcripts. Are there consistent requests to address a problem that your new product solves?
- Talk to your product owners. Why did they recommend building a feature in the first place?

2. Find the advantages of your selected features

Now that you have your features, you need to define their advantages. An advantage is why you included a specific feature. It's the positive outcome that your feature creates.

If we go back to our TV example, the advantage of 4K resolution is crystal clear picture quality. Advantages should be relatively easy to come up with, since you presumably built the product in a specific way for a specific reason.

3. Link your advantages to value

People don't buy features or advantages, they buy the value, or benefit, that they get from your product. Value is the "so what" of your product features and advantages, and if you can clearly communicate the value of your product—and do it in the language of your target audience—you're legions ahead of most go to market teams.

Most messaging stops at advantages. That's because linking your features to value and benefits is extremely challenging. It requires deep customer knowledge, as well as empathy to understand what they're struggling with.

What makes this doubly challenging for go to market teams is that they know the product so well—and when we know a product, we’re generally very good at describing what it is and what it does, but not so good at describing why someone should care. It’s so ingrained in us that it’s hard to put into words. We lose the forest through the trees.

The result is that most teams go to market with features and advantages, and make the consumer create the value themselves. But it doesn’t need to be this way. By forcing yourself to clearly delineate between advantages and value, you can chip away at your product to get to the core reason that someone would buy it. So how do you make this important distinction between advantages and value?

The best way to move from advantages to benefits is to look at each advantage and ask, “So what? Why does our audience care about this?”

Let’s go back to our TV example. The feature is 4K resolution. The advantage is crystal clear resolution. So what? Why should I care about the resolution? Well, the benefit is that you’ll feel transported to whatever you’re seeing on the screen.

For some products—particularly heavily commoditized products with lots of competition—you might be able to rely on your audience to convert the advantage into a benefit themselves. That’s why we often see ads for consumer tech products like headphones, cameras, and TVs that simply spout features as though they’re clear advantages. For instance, a TV ad might just say “4K resolution in your living room,” or a camera ad might just say “the new iPhone has a 12MP camera!” These products don’t have to explain the “so what” because consumers have enough context that they already know.

However, relying on this is a dangerous game:

- It makes it harder to differentiate your product as competitors copy your feature and advantages, so it can leave you vulnerable to alternative providers
- Your audience might only translate your features and advantages in one specific way, whereas you might be able to think of more (and more compelling) value

One of the best ways to get from advantages to value is to talk to your target audience. Listen for what they complain about, don't like, or struggle with. What do they wish was different in their professional or personal lives, and where do those wants overlap with your solution? These sorts of discussions can give you the insight you need to get to your product's "so what's."

At the end of this stage, you should have a table that looks like this:

Feature	Advantages	Value ("so what?")
What does the product do?	What's the advantage for our target audience?	So what? Why does our audience care?

4. Group the benefits you offer by theme

As you build out your benefits, You'll likely see some themes emerge. That is, multiple advantages and features usually lead to similar benefits, or benefits tie together neatly into a package.

Therefore, the next step is focused on codifying lots and lots of values into a few major buckets. As you begin to go to market, you'll see which segments of your audience respond best to which theme, and can tailor your campaigns

accordingly.

5. Map values to personas and build use cases

You need to map everything you've done to your target personas (if you didn't build target personas, simply map them to the relevant people in your buying committee — the group of titles usually involved in your deals).

Take your themes and see where they fit most effectively. Naturally, this matching will change as you go to market and learn what's working and what isn't, but it's good to have a starting point.

It's also valuable to create use cases that map to your personas. If you know the value you deliver, how is the use case of that value different for different personas?

Take our TV again. The value is that it transports you to whatever you're seeing on the screen. That's a great start, but it's pretty generic.

To make it more compelling, you can tailor it to personas with use cases for each one. For instance, if a segment you're targeting is sports fans, the use case might be "transport yourself to the big game".

It's essentially the same value, it's just reframed to suit the audience.

6. Build the framework

Your final step is to put all of this in a framework, which you can use to understand what you say, why you say it, and to whom.

It's also helpful at this stage to create short summaries of your product. I like a 1-sentence summary, a 2-sentence summary, and a 5-sentence summary.

These summaries are surprisingly useful, both as an exercise to condense all the work you've done down into something very small, but also as an asset to have on hand. They always come in handy: reps can draw on them when they're practicing their elevator pitch; you can drop them into bios of executives if you're featured in the news; and they can even act as a functional anchor to keep discussions about your messaging tight.

At the end, you'll have a framework that looks a little bit like this:

The audience			
Who are you targeting? Who loves your product?			
1-sentence summary			
The value of the product in 1 sentence.			
2-sentence summary			
The value of the product in 2-3 sentences.			
5-sentence summary			
A short paragraph explaining the product and how it helps your target audience solve their specific problems.			
	Values theme 1	Values theme 2	Values theme 3
Persona 1	Use case	Use case	Use case
	Benefit	Benefit	Benefit
	Advantages	Advantages	Advantages
	Relevant features	Relevant features	Relevant features
Persona 2	Use case	Use case	Use case
	Benefit	Benefit	Benefit
	Advantages	Advantages	Advantages
	Relevant features	Relevant features	Relevant features
	Use case	Use case	Use case

Persona 3	Benefit	Benefit	Benefit
	Advantages	Advantages	Advantages
	Relevant features	Relevant features	Relevant features

You might be thinking that this is a lot of work to end up where you already are. But building your messaging framework—and putting it down on paper in this concrete way—is critical. It not only makes your messaging a lot easier for other internal teams to consume and understand; it also forces you to confront your thinking about why a specific benefit is important, and what feature-set best tells the story of that benefit.

It’s also worth noting that although you’ll *build* your framework from features down to use cases, your framework should *operate* in the opposite direction. So when you put your framework into practice, you should be focusing on the granular, specific value that you bring to your customers first, before diving into how you do it (advantages) and what you actually sell (features).

Once this final step is complete, you’re ready to tackle copywriting. Your messaging framework has successfully set out *what to say*. Now, it’s time to figure out *how to say it*. That’s where copywriting comes in.

Copywriting

It's impossible to talk about messaging without talking about copywriting. Copywriting is how your messaging makes its way out into the world.

Of all the parts of go to market strategy, copywriting is probably the most misunderstood. Often, when people hear copywriting, they imagine Don Draper dreaming up slogans like “It’s toasted!” on the spot for clients. They picture creative agencies coming up with things like “Got Milk?” or “Wazzzzup” or “Because you’re worth it.”

In reality though, copywriting is about *communicating the value of your product, to your audience, as clearly as possible in a way that compels action.*

It might be super creative and innovative...but it also might not. Often, effective copywriting is really straightforward.

Here are five rules of thumb to help you as you communicate with your target audience.

1. Speak directly to the buyer—and do it conversationally

Some of the strongest words in copywriting are words like “you” and “your.” You want to speak directly to the buyer as you would in a one-on-one conversation, and you want to do it in language that they use everyday.

To achieve this, try to follow these four guidelines:

1. **Use a conversational tone.** This means avoiding academic, professional speech that is overly formal or grammatically correct. For example, writing “such as” might be grammatically correct when

you're about to list some examples, but in reality, most people would simply say "like." Generally, the best copywriting has a more informal, conversational ring to it.

2. **Write in the second person, as though you are speaking directly to the buyer.** For example, "Automate your accounting," is better than "Automation for accounting." It's more personal, it speaks more directly to the audience, and it's also more compelling and directive. You're telling your audience what they, specifically, will be able to do once they buy your awesome product.
3. **Write in the present tense.** This takes the abstract future benefit and makes it seem more tangible. For example, "Get a girlfriend" is better than "You will get a girlfriend" or "You will have a girlfriend." Note here the use of the imperative mood—writing in a way that commands or requests.
4. **Write in the active tense.** Technically, this means that the subject performs the action of the verb in a sentence, rather than the subject being acted upon by the verb. For those of you who aren't active members of the grammar police, this basically means that your writing is going to have a lot more impact. For example, "Get 10% off" has a lot more power than "10% off will be had by you."

One of the easiest rules of thumb is this: avoid the words "be" and "by" in your copywriting. It won't work all the time, but it'll help a lot.

2. Witty, brief headlines usually aren't effective—keep it straightforward ads that try to be clever are rarely effective. Most of the time, it's better to go with a more direct headline that communicates how your product creates

value.

There are a huge number of meaningless headlines out there that try to be brief or clever. You know the ones—maybe there’s a period after each and every word, or some abstract joke posted on a billboard. But here’s the thing that you’ve probably noticed: these ads don’t usually drive you toward a desired action. At best, they give you a chuckle and make you feel warm and fuzzy about the brand behind them.

In general, it’s better to just get to the core of how your product creates value. You can do this by focusing on the outcomes that the customer wants. For example, “Double your income in one year,” or “Save \$10,000 in energy costs.” These headlines communicate the value achieved from whatever it is that you’re selling.

When it comes to writing headlines, another thing we advise is to write in the sentence case. That is, capitalizing only the first word of the headline and proper nouns. This lets you write longer, clearer headlines. And it’ll help you avoid short, witty, and confusing ones.

3. Cheesy, salesy writing works

At the tactical level, I think most of us have lost the art of salesy copywriting. Over the past few decades, it seems marketers have fallen into the habit of producing copywriting that reads well and is even a bit formal, at the expense of salesmanship. But the truth is, cheesy salesy writing works better.

John Caples proves the effectiveness of this style in his books *Making Ads Pay* and *Tested Advertising Methods*. The modern demand generation guru Howard Sewell also demonstrates this in his article “But Wait, There’s More! Why Cheesy Copy Still Works.”

So what kind of writing is effective?

- Phrases like “But wait, there’s more!”
- Use of the ellipsis instead of proper sentences so that the reader is encouraged to keep reading...
- Short, punchy sentences.
- Incorporation of enthusiasm (many writers seem to lack enthusiasm in their writing).
- Promising quick results.
- Phrases like “announcing,” “introducing,” “new,” and “free.”
- Making specific promises such as “You will make \$100,000.”

Remember: these phrases will be different depending on what you’re selling. Being salesy only works if your salesy offer is something that your audience wants.

4. Stay on brand

Staying on brand means using language that is consistent with the brand—and this is one of the most important considerations in effective copywriting.

Many companies will have a brand guide. But if not, you may need to make one from scratch in order to keep your copywriting on brand and on message. The brand guide should outline what kind of personality your brand has, and it may even go into detail about the specific type of copywriting that you should be trying to execute.

Here’s an example where brand compliance is important. This is an ad for Metromile. Notice the funny poetry in the beginning and the use of the word “Ta-da.” This is a very casual and friendly brand. It sounds as though Metromile wants to be your friend.

Roses are red.
Pay-per-mile
car insurance
could cut your bill in half.
Ta-da.

metromile
Pay-per-mile car insurance

Reference: u/cawatoons on Reddit

If you were writing messages for this brand, you'd want to be consistent and use this chummy language. This is important because consistency will help to build a strong brand position in your customer's minds. Inconsistency, on the other hand, dilutes your brand positioning.

Brand guides can get much more specific than this. They might even include some complete phrases that you can pull. Each feature might have key bullet points that have already been vetted by copywriters or executives in your company.

5. Be persuasive

We can't overstate how important this is. Think back to our definition earlier: ***copywriting is communicating the value of your product, to your audience, as clearly as possible in a way that compels action.***

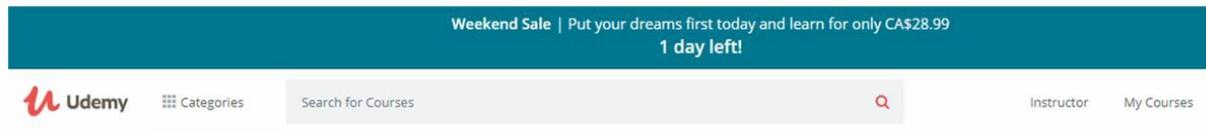
That last piece—compels action—is key, but it often gets forgotten. Copywriting is fundamentally about changing behaviour. That could be persuading prospects to buy a product, use a feature, click a button, believe in your company, or to take some sort of action.

The thought leader on persuasion is the professor Robert Cialdini, who is famous for his book *Influence*. These are his key drivers of persuasion:

- **Scarcity.** People are motivated to take action if they believe something is scarce. For example, using the phrase “Three days left!” persuades people to act because whatever you're offering is only available for three days. If it were available all the time, there's no sense of urgency. People prioritize things that are time-sensitive. People don't like missing out.

- **Consensus.** People are motivated to do things if they believe other people are doing that same thing. Social proof is an incredibly strong persuasive tactic. A good example of this is “90% of people prefer.” If 90% of people prefer this option, then the user will likely choose that action. Some people are non-conformists, of course, but the vast majority of people rely on consensus or social proof to make decisions. This is particularly true in situations where the user isn’t informed enough to make a decision on his or her own.
- **Authority.** People are persuaded if someone in a position of authority tells them to do something. Using phrases such as “Dr. Joe Stephens” or “the expert in this field” will persuade people.
- **Reciprocity** is also an important consideration. As humans, we have a compulsion to reciprocate when we are given something. Giving people something for free could motivate people to take action in return.
- **Consistency.** People want to be consistent. If they told you something in the past, they want their future actions to be consistent with what they said. You could remind people of what they did in the past by using phrases such as “Since you enjoyed...” This may prompt people to buy something or take an action consistent with past actions.
- **Lastly, people are persuaded by things they like.** Using cheesy phrases such as “You are awesome!” can give your product more persuasive power. User experiences with this type of language can be particularly pleasant. Flattery is a powerful tool for building your brand personality and giving your brand product persuasive power.

This example of Udemy’s messaging helps illustrate some of the major copywriting rules of thumb that we’ve covered in this chapter section.



Let’s start with **persuasion**. Udemy is really emphasizing a sense of urgency by using *scarcity*. “1 day left!” “Weekend Sale,” “Put your dreams first *today*.” They’re not drawing on other persuasion tactics like *consensus* or *authority*, but there are hints of *liking* here. “Put your dreams first,” for example. People tend to like it when conversations centre around them. And the *your* is also important here. Personalization itself is a useful tool for persuasion. This messaging also highlights an important point: not every message you write needs to use every tactic at once—but good messaging will usually use at least one.

The copywriting here is also **direct**. It tells the buyer exactly what they should do (put their dreams first by taking advantage of Udemy’s sale) and how they’ll benefit, and it uses all the right grammatical conventions to drive that action: it’s written in the second person and it uses the present and active tenses. It’s also fairly **conversational**. None of the language is complex or academic. It reflects how Udemy’s customers actually speak.

And finally, the headline is **straightforward and it avoids the temptation to be witty or clever**. Notice how they’ve broken the message down into two parts (“Weekend Sale” and “Put your dreams first today and learn for only \$28.99”). The first part is short, sweet, and to the point. The second is longer and more involved—and it’s written as a full sentence. Using a full

sentence here lets them write a longer, clearer, and ultimately more informative message.

Chapter summary questions

- Have you defined your feature set, linked your features to advantages, connected those advantages to your value and benefits, and grouped similar value / benefits together?
- Have you built a messaging framework to be used across your go to market team?
- Have you zeroed in on your copywriting and messaging to make sure the go to market team is telling the right story in the right way?