

Developing Your Key Message

(Note: the key message is different from key summary points. For how to develop your key summary points see our article: “How to Develop an Effective Summary”.)

Content:

1. Components of a key message
2. Example
3. Worksheet (now you try).

Components of a key message

Your key message is that one main idea that you want your audience to absolutely remember when you finish with your presentation. It's the message that you want your listeners to consider or act upon. They may forget the details, supporting arguments and other related ideas. But the key message is the one thing that needs to follow your listeners out the door.

Developing your key message needs to be looked at from a number of related perspectives. First, you need to know “what” it is you really want to say – specifically. Do your best to come up with a statement (you can fine tune it later – as this is an iterative process). Next, answer “why” your talk is necessary for your listeners. In other words, what is your value proposition so that your presentation is relevant to your audience (as seen from the audience's perspective)? If you cannot make it relevant then there's a 99.9% chance no one will care what you say.

After that, you will need to answer “who” your audience is? This means that you will have to adapt your key message in a way that *the audience* can understand it. Consider, for example, how the key message about a talk on *paper-recycling technology* will need to be formulated to make sense to the Board, or to the marketing department, or to bankers financing its purchase, or to a mix of all three.

The next step is to know “what response” you want from your listeners as a result of your talk. What is it that you want your audience to think, know or do at the end of your presentation?

And finally, you will need to formulate your key message so that it's concise and memorable. It has to be concise because if it's too long – no one will be able to remember it. Your audience will simply *forget almost everything* you say during your presentation – even if it's relevant and interesting. That's because our memory is limited to a few short sentences. So the shorter it is, the easier it is to keep in mind. But what you say also has to be sticky. It needs to be memorable in a way that your audience *cannot* forget (i.e. it's relevant and compellingly formulated).

Quick review:

- **What** do you want to say specifically?
- **Why** is this relevant for your audience?
- **Who** is your audience - and how do they need to hear your message?
- **What response:** what do you want your audience to think, know or do at the end?

- **How:** make it concise.
- **How:** make it concise *and* memorable (sticky).

☞ This is an iterative process, so keep fine-tuning until you've got it.

Developing the Key Message - Example

Company: Zenith Paper Inc.

Topic: Paper Recycling Technology

Speaker: Internal corporate-strategy consultant

Audience: The Board of Directors

First attempt

1. **What:** I want to convince the board to change our current business strategy.
2. **Why:** It is a way for our company to stay competitive.
3. **Who:** The board of directors. They will need to see the “big picture” in my key message. They will also need to hear supporting arguments in the overall presentation, but it cannot be so detailed that they get lost in the details – for which board members usually have little patience.
4. **What response:** to change our current strategy within in the next year or two by adding recycled paper rolls to our current portfolio
5. **How (concisely stated):** We need to get into the area of producing recycled paper products in order to stay competitive in this business and increase our revenues in the medium and long term.
6. **How (concise and memorable):** we need to get into the area of recycled paper rolls at home as well as in overseas markets in the medium term - or we'll lose competitiveness and *we will find ourselves in big trouble* .

Second attempt (fine tuning the first attempt)

1. **What:** I want to convince the board that we need to add recycled paper rolls in our portfolio to meet a fast-growing trend (at home and overseas) in this industry.
2. **Why:** Currently we are not in this area at all. Our current strategy is to expand our export market for our existing products: non-recycled paper rolls. This will lead to a decreasing market, shrinking revenues and competitiveness in the medium and long term.
3. **Who:** No need to change this time.
4. **What response:** No need to change this time.
5. **How (concisely stated):** No need to change this time.
6. **How: concise and memorable:** To stay competitive we need to add recycling technology and products to our portfolio within the next 3 years – or we'll end up being recycled ourselves.

Developing Your Key Message

(Now you try)

- 1) What do you want to say? (Just get something down – and fine tune it later.) Try to formulate it in one - or maximum two - sentences.
- 2) Why do they need to know this? (What's the value for them in listening to you?)
- 3) Who is your audience and how will you need to formulate your key message so that it speaks to them?
- 4) What response do you want from your audience after listening to you?
- 5) Now formulate this message as concisely as you can.
- 6) How can you formulate your message (under number 5) in a way that is memorable, in a way that sticks?

Try again (and again and again) if necessary

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.
- 6.