

CHAPTER 14

Crafting Your Customer Message

On April 20, 2010, the Deepwater Horizon oil rig exploded, killing 11 people and releasing oil into the ocean off the coast of Louisiana. It took nearly 90 days to seal off the well and stop the flow of oil. This event was the largest marine oil spill in the history of the petroleum industry. It's estimated that 3.19 million barrels of oil were released into the ocean.¹ During this crisis, hundreds of thousands of seabirds were killed, countless fish died, and ecosystems were destroyed. Thousands of miles of shoreline were impacted. Commercial fishing operations hemorrhaged money. After a rigorous cleanup effort, the environmental impact remains.

One of the most memorable moments in this event was the ill-timed comments of BP's CEO, Tony Hayward. When Hayward apologized for the disruption and devastation, he said, "[T]here's no one who wants this thing over more than I do. I'd like my life back."² His comments were tone deaf to the suffering of those impacted by this disaster. Hayward faced immediate backlash. After a few more missteps, BP replaced Hayward as CEO.

In tough times, messaging matters—not only the words but also the tone. People are emotional in tough times, which affects how messages are processed. Salespeople might send the right message with the wrong tone. Or they might have the right tone but cannot find the right words. A compelling message has the right tone and structure.

During tough times, sellers reduce their messaging activity. These sellers are unsure of what to communicate. This lack of communication divides the seller and the customer, creating an opportunity for the competition. Tough times force sellers to tweak their messages. Customers define value differently through tough times. Adjust your message accordingly. Customers still need

value in tough times—it's up to you to deliver. This chapter focuses on customer messaging principles and tactics.

CUSTOMER MESSAGING PRINCIPLES

Customer messaging is the initial and ongoing conversation sellers have with customers. How you act, what you say, and how you say it influence the message. Each message is unique based on the seller, buyer, and situation. Given the uniqueness of every situation, you cannot rely on a script. Selling scripts only work if the buyer is following the same script. The following messaging principles provide a general framework to communicate your message in tough times. Messaging tactics help you craft the right words, whereas messaging principles help you strike the right tone.

Communicate with Empathy

Plato wrote, “Be kind, for everyone you meet is fighting a hard battle.” This thought is especially relevant in tough times. Every person experiences tough times with a varying degree of pain. Tough times are relative. Tough times also pile up on people. Your message is created from the perspective of buyers. A compelling message must be filtered through an empathetic lens. Empathy is the key to powerful and persuasive messages. Empathy is viewing the world through the eyes of another. It's seeing as they see and feeling as they feel. Empathy provides a customer-focused view. Empathy allows you to deliver your message with the right tone.

Salespeople fight battles in tough times just like customers. Through tough times, you have more in common with your customers than you think. Viewing the world through the eyes of customers is your foolproof way to communicate your message of value. Before sending any message, empathetically proof that message.

In our training seminars, participants imagine what it's like to be a customer. These sellers enter almost a meditative state and imagine their customers' world. The purpose is for sellers to create the right mindset before reaching out to their buyers. You can do the same exercise. It only takes a few minutes.

- **Step 1.** Close your eyes and think of a customer. Write the person's name on a piece of paper.

- **Step 2.** Imagine what it's like to be that person. Use the following questions:
 - What are the person's daily activities?
 - How is this person impacted by these tough times?
 - What are this person's struggles, fears, and concerns?
 - What motivates this person?
- **Step 3.** Now that you have a better understanding of this buyer, how does he or she define value?

This three-step exercise is simple yet powerful. These questions filter your message to remove the seller-focused undertones. Before sending any message, empathize with your customers. Imagine what it's like to be them. Viewing the world through their eyes delivers a deeper understanding of how they define value.

Communicate Impact

As mentioned in Chapter 3, value is calculated using four different variables: price, cost, utility, and impact. Utility is what your product or service does. Impact is how your solution affects the buyer. Buyers care more about the impact of your solution than its utility. Yet too often messaging campaigns focus more on utility than on impact. Utility-focused messaging blends in with the competition—further commoditizing your solution. Communicating utility makes you sound like every other salesperson. Customers define value based on your solution's impact, not its utility. Translate the utility of your solution into meaningful impact for the customer.

Imagine sitting across the table from your toughest buyer. You know who I mean. That one buyer who is direct and doesn't mince words. Imagine making a presentation to that customer. When you mention one of your value-added extras, the buyer says, "So what?" This is a simple but powerful question. It is the key to unlocking your solution's impact on the customer. This question cuts through the noise to clarify how your solution affects the buyer. For example:

Salesperson: Mr. Customer, our new ABC 3000 system automates your manufacturing process while enhancing the quality of your widget.

Buyer: So what?

Salesperson: This will lead to greater profitability and increased market share. By implementing this system now, you'll gain a significant competitive advantage.

The so-what question clarifies the impact on the buyer. The utility is automating and enhancing quality. Impact is greater profitability and increased market share.

Your so-what response differs based on the prevailing times. Your solution impacts buyers differently through tough times. The utility of your solution remains constant, but the impact changes. In the preceding example, the ABC 3000 still automates processes and enhances quality in good times and tough times, but the impact changes. Adjust your message to reflect the impact that buyers care about in tough times. In tough times, buyers care about resources, cash flow, and protection.

Continuing with the same example, your so-what response should be adjusted for tough times. For example, "Our solution will protect cash flow and reduce labor costs, freeing up resources to invest in other areas of your business." The first example focuses on growth and profit. In the second example, the focus is reduced labor cost and protecting cash.

During tough times, utility remains the same, but impact changes. The impact changes because the customer's mind shifts from an abundance mindset to a scarcity mindset. In good economic times, customers seek to grow what they already have. In tough times, those same customers seek to protect what they have. With a scarcity mindset, customers focus on allocating resources without waste. Customers are fearful of misusing their scarce resources. We are reducing loss instead of enhancing gain. In good times, focus on enhancing gains; in tough times, focus on reducing loss.

Mitigate Risk

In the Great Recession, the auto industry faced a tsunami of change and tough times. The top American auto manufacturers required a bailout to keep the doors open. It was not a good time to be in the auto industry. But, as with any tough time, both winners and losers emerged from the crisis.

Hyundai was one of the winners. Like other auto manufacturers, Hyundai managers scratched their heads wondering why their traditional promotions were not working. These incentives had worked for decades. Why were they not working?

The company researched the issue and realized that people had money and motivation, but they also had fear. Customers could afford the vehicles but were fearful of committing to long-term payments when the future looked so uncertain. Hyundai made a bold move to mitigate risk: they created the Job Loss Protection Program.³ If a person were laid off within one year of signing this deal, he or she could return the car to the dealership without having to make any more payments. This eased buyers' fear, and Hyundai won. All it took was a little reassurance. Hyundai mitigated risk and enticed customers to buy. Hyundai's market share increased by 40 percent.

In tough times, customers value different aspects of your solution. They have different emotions that drive behavior. Tweak your value proposition to address buyers' concerns. Tough times force you to get creative and adjust your company's value proposition as your customers see fit.

In customer messaging, there are two simultaneous conversations: the conversation you are generating and the conversation in the customer's head. You are sending the buyer a message, but the buyer is receiving that message through a filter of fear, uncertainty, and doubt. A compelling message mitigates the effects of that filter.

TOUGH-TIMES MESSAGING TACTICS

Selling during tough times requires communicating the right message with the right words. These messaging tactics help you find the right words, and the above-mentioned principles help you strike the right tone. This message can be formalized as a leave-behind or one-sheet and also informally as talking points on a sales call. The first tool is the tough-times proposition, and the second tool is the tough-times value audit.

Tough-Times Proposition

The tough-times proposition is a statement emphasizing what the buyer stands to gain while concurrently emphasizing the urgency to act now. Timing is critical in sales, and tough times are no exception to this rule. Buyers are more likely to hit the pause button in tough times. This is why it is critical to establish urgency with the tough-times proposition. This statement establishes relevancy and emphasizes outcomes while at the same time explaining why there is a compelling need right now. Answer these questions to build your tough-times proposition:

- What current problems is the buyer experiencing?
- What potential outcomes could the buyer gain by partnering with me?
- Why is there a need right now for my solution?

Be aware of the tone of your message in your communication. Craft your message with an empathetic response to the tough times your buyer is experiencing. Here's an example of the tough-times proposition:

Seller explaining the tough-times proposition: Today's manufacturers face a unique problem. Increased demand coupled with current labor shortages is forcing companies like yours to do more with less. As the labor market thins, this problem will continue to affect profitability. We partner with organizations like yours to increase productivity and fully leverage your resources.

Tough-Times Value Audit

Who is the best resource to explain what is important to customers? Your customers, of course. The best way to understand how buyers define value is through a value audit. Value audits help you uncover all the ways you add value to your customer's business. In tough times, you bring value in ways you never would have considered.

A value audit is simply a review of all the ways you add value to your buyer's business. This includes all the value your company, your products, and you—the seller—provide the customer. This list serves as a complete menu of value-added extras you provide the customer. As you list your value-added extras, talk to other departments within your company. Thoroughly review the ancillary products and services—especially the hidden or unadvertised products. Create a list of 30 value-added extras. Once the list is completed, review it with your top customers. You're not reviewing this list to try to sell anything. Instead, you're getting feedback on what really matters to customers through tough times. This is a basic voice-of-the-customer (VOC) study. Show your buyers your list and ask them, "Which of these value-added extras are most important to you?"

Here's an example of how you can mention the exercise to your customer: "Given the current tough times, we are gathering feedback to ensure that we are providing the right level of service. Here is a list of 30 value-added extras

my company offers. Through these tough times, what are the most important value-added extras on this list?”

Take note of the customer’s selections. Leave some blanks for the buyer to share what is missing. Then reach out to your other top customers for their thoughts. As you review your notes, you’ll notice some overlapping themes. This overlap provides a deeper understanding of how customers define value. Because your best customers think like your best prospects, you’ll know what value-added extras to communicate to your prospects.

For clarity’s sake, this list is not a script to sell your value. This list of value-added extras guides a discussion around the buyer’s needs and how to satisfy those needs. This list of value-added extras is a collection of talking points to support your tough-times proposition. The following scenario will help explain how the information can be used:

Seller explaining the tough-times proposition: Today’s manufacturers face a unique problem. Increased demand coupled with the current labor shortages forces companies like yours to do more with less. As the labor market thins, this problem will continue to affect profitability. We partner with organizations like yours to increase productivity and fully leverage your resources.

Buyer: We are experiencing some of those challenges. We’ve been trying to solve this problem for several months and have heard the same thing from other providers. So how do you propose to make that happen?

Seller explaining the value-added extras: There are several ways that we help solve this problem, beginning with our technical support team. Our team has more combined experience than any other provider in their area. They will get involved early in the process to identify bottlenecks. Our depth and breadth of products cover a broad range of industries. So it appears that we’ll have a solution specific to your industry. Finally, our technical design team will customize a solution around your objectives. Before I can fully explain our value, let’s have a more in-depth discussion about your needs.

In the tough-times proposition, the seller explained the problem, the urgency to address the problem, and the outcome the buyer receives. The buyer expressed some interest and challenged the seller to explain how. The

buyer wanted to know how you can do it. The list of value-added extras explains the how.

The so-what question explains the impact on the buyer. The so-how question explains how you deliver the outcome you proposed. By answering those two questions, so what and so how, you generate a compelling message. The most persuasive message through tough times identifies the problem to solve, communicates the outcome, and explains how you make that happen.

SUMMARY

Your message matters in tough times, both the words and the tone. There are countless scenarios and dynamics influencing how your buyers receive your message. Therefore, creating a rigid script to communicate your message will not work. Instead of relying on a script, rely on messaging principles to guide your effort. Filter your message through empathy to ensure that your message mitigates the buyer's risk.

Communicating the right words begins with understanding the buyer's problems and challenges. Communicate what the buyer gains when he or she experiences your solution, and establish urgency by explaining why there is a need now. Use a value audit to support your tough-times proposition. Buyers want to know what they gain and how you make that happen.