



MINDFUL MESSAGING

by

SPITFIRE 



An Introduction

From Kristen Grimm, Spitfire President:

When I was younger, my sister would get caught sneaking out of our house. She'd get grounded. There were tears. I didn't want to suffer the same fate but I did really want to meet a boy named Keith well after midnight one night. I knew from my lived experience what would happen if I snuck out. I decided to try something new. My father was fast asleep. I wrote a note detailing where I was and with whom, left it in the hallway, and walked out the front door. When I arrived home the following morning after a night of looking at stars, my father was pacing. "You snuck out!" he bellowed. "Au contraire," I replied calmly. "I went out after bed, left a note with pertinent details and walked out the front door like any respectable person. I went out. I did not sneak out." My father is a lawyer and prides himself on being a rational man. My counterargument was convincing. Despite my sister's incredulosity that not only would I not be grounded, I would get complimented on my thoughtfulness for leaving a note, I was learning important messaging techniques that I would use later.

I have applied these same skills in my day job of messaging for important causes. And I have to say, it is actually getting harder. When I started out in communications, most messaging I did focused on facts and stats. Then came the idea of using frames and master narratives. So I enhanced my messaging to incorporate that. Then I ran into the weird phenomenon of people saying they really supported something but weren't doing anything to support the cause. I wrote the [Activation Point](#) to give people ideas about how to approach messaging in that case. Many of those tenets still stand. But in the last eight years, we've learned a lot about the human brain. Behavioral economists like [Dan Ariely](#) made me think differently about incentives. [Dr. Robert Cialdini](#) gave much food for thought about what to do in pre-messaging so people are in the right frame of mind. Alexis McGill illuminated the impacts of implicit bias. [Jonah Berger](#), the [Heath brothers](#), [Jonathan Haidt](#), [Bobby Jones](#) and [Paul Slovic](#) have written book after book that have left me with one clear conclusion: **truly effective messaging speaks to your audience's values, beliefs and identity.**

The brain is a bit like a pinball machine. Messages go in. Sometimes they hit the right places and trigger the preferred response (points!). Sometimes they hit the wrong spots and people are alienated and reject the messaging. Still other times, you lose the ball altogether and have to start all over again.

This is my attempt to offer advice for people who play people pinball. At Spitfire, we call this process **Mindful Messaging**. It helps us thoughtfully consider who we are trying to engage, anticipate how their brains might process messaging we use and keeps us from making predictable mistakes that set us back rather than propel us further. It helps facilitate two-way communication so messaging leads to useful dialogue about important issues rather than dead ends.

In this guide, I'll walk through:

- **Getting to know your audiences better** by looking at six psychographic categories;
 - **Understanding what's at play** in people's minds and anticipating responses to strengthen messaging efforts;
 - **Creating a game plan** by deciding which audience insights to weave into messaging; and
- Getting inspired** by others efforts to put Mindful Messaging into practice.

Keep in mind, this is a work in progress. I'd love to say I have all the answers. At this point, I mostly have good questions. Cultivating a sense of curiosity will serve you well when practicing Mindful Messaging.



Who are you messaging for?

To get started off right with Mindful Messaging, you need to get to know who you are engaging—not only who they are, but how they view the world and their place in it.

The [Smart Chart](#) points out the importance of segmenting people. Banish the idea of engaging that mythical group called the “general public.” I love seeing groups break down their audiences into true segments. I hear about Makers building mind-boggling creations in Appalachia, urban-dwelling young adults who think owning things like cars and bikes is crazy-pants and criminal-justice reformers who see the system as the racist institution it is and in desperate need of change.

These segments are mostly defined by demographics: age, gender, race, where they live and what their educational experience was like. Important information. This will provide valuable insights when it comes time to engage them. But this only tells half the story. It is just as important to know them psychographically as it is demographically. [Harvard Business Review](#) explains psychographics as charting people’s attitudes and interests. It is the difference between knowing what they do and understanding why they do it.

For example, you may know that certain moms buy organic fruit because you can easily get that demographic information from a supermarket trade. But you don’t know why. Psychographics help you understand if they are doing it because 1) they have health concerns about pesticides; 2) they think more expensive fruit is better; 3) they buy what their friends buy; or 4) they see themselves as a certain type of mom whose purchasing behavior speaks volumes about who she is (or at least how she sees herself). Once you know what motivates your audience, you can build more compelling messaging based on this.

Getting to know the psychographics of audiences isn’t easy. Understanding it and how it applies to the audiences you want to reach is critical. Before we take a closer look at psychographics, here’s an example: A number of years ago Planned Parenthood was fighting to make sure people could get over-the-counter emergency contraception on demand. Some pharmacies weren’t going for it—including Target. Planned Parenthood reached out to its supporters and asked them to boycott pharmacies denying people emergency contraception. These supporters, who wore the badge of feminist and ran in the pro-choice tribe, balked. “Don’t tell me I can’t shop at Target,” they said. One of their many identities and behavior patterns was being a loyal Target shopper. This campaign and its messaging conflicted with that. To navigate the complexity, Planned Parenthood changed its ask to supporters from boycott to “Talk to the pharmacist about why they should make EC available to their customers.” Messaging mayhem averted.

While there are many psychographics to pay attention to, there are a few that are especially important when working on public interest issues. Let’s take a closer look at six of them. They’re all equally important, so don’t fall for the trick that the first in the list is the most significant. Each of these will give you insights into audiences you want to engage and help cultivate respect for their points of view, which you need if you’re going to move them with your message.



A worldview is how people interpret their experience or the information they see and hear. The old proverbial phrase, “Is the glass half empty or half full?” sums up how someone might see the world. I was reminded of the importance of worldview as Hurricane Matthew was churning up the Florida coast. Matt Drudge, a conservative commentator, sent some tweets.

The deplorables are starting to wonder if govt has been lying to them about Hurricane Matthew intensity to make exaggerated point on climate
 – MATT DRUDGE (@DRUDGE) October 6, 2016

Hurricane Center has monopoly on data. No way of verifying claims. Nassau ground observations DID NOT match statements! 165mph gusts? WHERE?”
 – MATT DRUDGE (@DRUDGE) October 6, 2016

Matt Drudge has a certain worldview and many of his followers share it. They don’t trust government. They don’t trust the information the government shares. And while some may think saying NASA/NOAA are exaggerating about this hurricane is outlandish, using information from NASA/NOAA may backfire if you want these folks to evacuate and get to safe ground. Interestingly, many in this same group that listen to Drudge have high levels of trust in their local weather forecaster. I know what you are thinking. Don’t the weather forecasters get their info from NOAA? Yes, but don’t tell the Drudge people.

Another recent [example](#) comes from Republican-controlled states that are banning life in prison without parole for juveniles. The reason? In a *Washington Post* article about states like Utah abolishing the practice, a worldview was on display when Representative Rep. Lowry Snow explained why the legislature took action. As quoted in the article, he said: “Utah is very prone to a recognition that there can be redemption and people can be given a second chance.” In this case, advocates had worked for years to make the case that evidence shows youths’ brains are still developing. They don’t have the same impulse control as adults. They are not the same people at 16 as they are at 45, the article said. Socializing this research among conservative audiences has helped this issue gain traction by reinforcing a strongly held view that redemption is possible.

David Sleeth Keppler has more on worldview if you want a [fast video primer](#). Another outfit that will give you plenty to think about is the [Culture Cognition Project](#).



Badges and Tribes

If worldview is how people see the world, badges are how people see themselves, while a tribe is who they run with and follow. You’d think these would align exactly, but they don’t. Environmentalists are also road warriors with a huge carbon footprint. Pro-life Republicans are also supporters of the death penalty. Vegetarians eat fish. Figure out which badges and tribes matter to people and which ones might compete with one another, and then you can figure out which ones they value most in which situations.

Badges are attributes of a person’s identity that they publicly proclaim. Some people are environmentalists, thrifty, feminists, animal-lovers, gearheads or foodies. You can generally figure out a person’s badges by seeing what they post on social media, which bumper sticker adorns their car or what T-shirt they wear around on the weekend.



The important thing about badges is that they are earned. If you appeal to someone in a way that will reinforce the badge, you have a better chance of engaging them successfully. But be careful not to confuse badges with labels we might put on people. Ever tried calling a Millennial a Millennial? Not all of them identify with what is basically a marketing label and calling them that can annoy them right out of the gate and turn them off of your message.

As for tribes, we all have them: the groups we belong to. Study after study shows the mental mind tricks we’ll employ and the lengths we will go to in order to stay loyal. We’ll use our scientific knowledge to argue political points, even if it means undermining scientific integrity. For example, [conservatives who know a lot about science](#) but want to align with conservative views that climate change is naturally occurring and not man-made, will use their scientific knowledge to support this point and side with the political views of conservatives rather than agree with the overwhelming consensus of scientists. We are all inclined to have an over-inflated sense of our group and its intentions compared to those we see as “other”—people who are outside the group and therefore suspicious. This tribalism was in full force when Georgia introduced a religious freedom bill that would allow businesses to discriminate and deny services to LGBT people. Many members of the entertainment industry weighed in with Georgia leadership including the Governor. As Georgia is known as the “Hollywood of the South,” this was an influential group to have weigh in. Their reason for speaking out? As they note in the letter sent to Governor Deal: “We pride ourselves on running inclusive companies, and while we have enjoyed

a positive partnership on productions in Georgia, we will plan to take our business elsewhere if any legislation sanctioning discrimination is signed into state law.” The tribe in this case is “inclusive business leaders” and doing business with partners who discriminate would violate their custom.

[According to Chelsea Schein and Kurt Gray](#), when trying to understand how a tribe decides to accept or not accept something, it’s important to understand what they find harmful. Evangelicals may fear burning in hell and that is why they will not accept gay marriage. Liberals may believe harm comes when denied the opportunity to marry who you love. Both groups are asking the same question—what is harmful?—but coming up with very different answers.

It is important to note that there can be tribes within tribes. When discussing Latino voters, the media—and even groups seeking to engage this segment—often talk about this as one homogenous block. Latinos are from different countries, they’re different races and occupy various economic strata. While immigration is often viewed as a unifying litmus test for the Latino vote, these other factors dictate voter priorities in these segments. [As Lisa Garcia Bedolla from UCAL-Berkeley points out](#), some within this voting block have a mobilizing identity. Bedolla describes these people as having a “sense of group worth.” They may hear insults about them, like those hurled by Donald Trump, and mobilize. But for those in this same segment who feel marginalized, Bedolla argues that insults lead to further despair and disempowerment. This is an important insight for cause efforts that assume a group under fire will mobilize. They may just see it as one more proof point that makes them less likely to engage. Bedolla emphasizes this: “If you have been raised to believe that you have no power to improve your circumstances, especially through politics, a national party candidate reiterating racial hatred will not automatically lead you to act. It could just reinforce your sense of exclusion and result in deep and destructive feelings of despair.”

Badges and tribes played out in an amazing effort to get kidney donors signed up. There are many reasons to be a kidney donor, including the fact that this is a life-or-death situation. And yet there are always more people on the waiting list for a kidney than those waiting to give one. [Poynter](#) details a story of two journalists, once strangers, who connected—with one ultimately agreeing to become the kidney donor for the other. The story is touching from start to finish, but what’s interesting is the call for help that facilitated the connection. It was addressed to “news nerds.” A number of people from different news organizations heeded the call. They deeply identified with being a news nerd, both under the badge “nerd” and the tribe “newsies.” If news nerds were getting called on, that meant them.

One more point on alignment and, in some cases, misalignment: Sometimes foodies eat Slim Jims at a gas station, rural Catholic farmers vote pro-choice and environmentalists drive SUVs. People may be made up of conflicting identities and people aren’t perfect. The salience for each identity waxes and wanes based on what is going on in the world around us. Hillary Clinton discovered this in her 2016 presidential campaign when [white women voted](#) more along culture and class lines than gender. Knowing people’s badges and tribe affiliations will help you get insights, but these are simply hints, not hard-and-fast rules.



Polarization

Related to tribes is the idea of polarization. This is where one group thinks they are 100% right and the other is 100% wrong. Oh, and the other group is evil. This is not agreeing to disagree. This is vehemently disagreeing and taking it really personally. And in some cases, people compound this thinking by creating a bubble to live in. You can take this quiz to get a [bubble rating](#).

This certainly happens online, where people consume media that reinforces their beliefs and join social media networks where they only hear from others who think like them. Have you ever de-friended someone because they posted an opinion you just couldn’t tolerate? It even happens based on where people choose to live in the real world, surrounding themselves with like-minded people. David Blackenhorn writes in [The American Interest](#), the polarization effects are harmful in part because, “They produce social echo chambers in which people increasingly rarely befriend

or even personally encounter someone who disagrees with their political views, and in part because ideological segregation is the proven ally of ideological certitude and extremism.” He goes on to say polarization both increases mistrust of government and magnifies mistrust of each other. It also decreases empathy, he says: “Polarization in general, and affective polarization in particular, are enemies of empathy.” If the cause you are working on is subject to polarization, keep that top of mind. People will feel intensely about the cause, be less willing to listen and consider counterpoints, and will label those who think differently as wrong, morally bankrupt or worse. When considering messaging, find ways to decrease polarization rather than stoke it.



Implicit Belief and Bias

Explicit beliefs are what people say they care about aspirationally. Implicit beliefs often drive how people actually behave in their day-to-day life. For those working on causes, explicit beliefs are what people say in focus groups. Implicit beliefs drive what they do in the grocery store, when walking down the street and when entering the voting booth. For instance, someone can say they believe in fairness, but then you can observe them in their daily life and see where they may discriminate against others because of pre-conceived notions. According to [The Conversation U.S. and authors Melissa Ferguson and Clayton Critcher](#), “The ordinarily hidden-from-view, implicit associations in our mind offer new insights about many everyday decisions and behaviors ... including intergroup behavior, first impressions and voting behavior.”

[The Perception Institute](#) defines implicit bias as, “When we have attitudes towards people or associate stereotypes with them without our conscious knowledge”—and why it matters: “Multiple studies have also found that those with higher implicit bias levels against black people are more likely to categorize non-weapons as weapons (such as a phone for a gun, or a comb for a knife), and in computer simulations are more likely to shoot an unarmed person.” We all have biases. They come into play in our daily lives and influence what we think, who we trust and with whom we empathize. Because of them, we stereotype people and have attitudes toward life that impact how we act. Bias comes up when working on issues like getting girls into science or math, changing up bathroom signs or hiring. [The New York Times](#) published an article exploring a social reflex, that when any group feels threatened by another group they both close ranks and it heightens bias. This phenomenon is playing out among African Americans who are coming together across regional and economic divides as a means for survival against a common threat, and law enforcement is becoming more “blue” in response. Professor Kimberly Rios, who is quoted in the *New York Times* article, explains the consequences: “When identification with a group is coupled with perceptions of threat, that’s a particularly dangerous combination. That’s when you start to see a lot of biases, and a lot of negative feelings.”

If audiences you are trying to engage hold implicit biases (and chances are they do), then messaging will need to take this into account. You’ll need to examine current behaviors rather than ask for opinions to suss this out. For example, people may say they want to save money when they buy drugs. If behavior assessment finds that they always pay more for name-brand pain relievers rather than buying just-as-effective generic pain pills. This could show an implicit bias that people think lower-cost drugs are lower in quality.



Lived Experience

What people have seen with their own two eyes overrides facts and figures every time. This plays out in climate change. A [Rutgers study](#) showed that before a hurricane, whether the voter believed in climate change predicted their vote for or against a green politician. After a hurricane like Sandy, people were much more likely to vote for green politicians because of their experience with the hurricane. Lived experience can have a positive influence as well. For gay-marriage advocates, the fact that many people have friends and family who are LGBTQ helped to humanize and personalize the issue and make it more likely that people would support equality measures, including getting rid of gay-marriage bans. It is also important to realize that in a world of virtual reality (VR), people don't always need to have lived an experience in real life. As recounted in this [New York Times story](#), President Reagan watched the movie War Games, which led him to grow intensely concerned about people breaking into computers and he promptly signed the directive called the National Policy on Telecommunications and Automated Information Systems Security. So what people observe in real life or on screens impacts what they are concerned about and what they think.



Habits

We all have them. And most of us wish some of them were better for us. If you want to engage people to turn off the lights when they leave a room, install a baby seat correctly in the car or not take up two seats on the subway, then you need to understand why they behave as they do in the first place. Chances are it is a habit. If it is, you need to acknowledge that and know that to change it, your messages will have to not only convince them to do something new, but also break a well-established habit. If you think keeping a New Year's resolution is hard, this will be harder.

In his book, *The Power of Habit*, Charles Duhigg notes that many times people do things not because it is what is right or what is best for them, but because it follows a predictable pattern of cue, routine and reward. When you feel sad (cue), you eat a piece of cake (routine) and you feel better (reward). Unfortunately, following this habit will lead to gaining weight. If you want to change this, you need to look at both the cue and the reward as possible places to disrupt what is becoming a not-good habit. Let's say you want to get people to stop texting and driving. You may notice that they start when they are at a stoplight. At the red light (cue) they check their texts (routine) and they get the satisfaction of seeing that a friend has texted (reward). Unfortunately, the light turns green and they want to respond, so now they start driving and texting at the same time. If you want to disrupt this unsafe behavior, you'll either need to message around the cue—for example, what else should they do at the stoplight—or elicit a different reaction to the reward, such as “Put down your phone so you live to talk to your friend again.”

Psychographics are important for understanding not only who the audiences are that you are trying to engage, but how they think and behave. The more time you spend getting to know them, the more likely you are to engage and motivate them. Pay attention to what is going on in the world, as it will help you know which of these beliefs, values and ways of being will take precedence. For example, when you poll people, many will say they like parks and we should have more of them. However, they are also likely to say they don't want property taxes to rise, which might happen if we have more parks. Which of these is most salient will matter, because both may be in play when you are trying to get more parks. You can suss out salience by asking deeper questions. How important is this issue to you, given all issues; how much time have you spent talking to friends about the need for more parks; have you written a

letter or attended a public meeting in support of more parks; how much attention have you paid to the debate over parks? If the answer to the above is none, property taxes may be more salient when people make a decision about more parks.

Here are some questions to ask and places to look to help you get to know your audiences:

- 1. What media do they consume?** People may try to create a bubble of news and opinion that reinforces their worldview. You may want to pop that bubble, but first see what bubble they've constructed. You can track this by their viewing habits, the articles and videos they forward to friends and family and what sources they use when explaining an issue. You can also track what TV and films they gravitate toward for hints as [this article shows](#).
- 2. Whose truth have they embraced?** As we enter the post-facts era, the truth is harder to decipher. Are they fans of science? Think government is good? That diversity is our greatest strength? Or are they acolytes of personal responsibility, freedom and doing their own thing with little interference?
- 3. What's on display on social media feeds or what issues do they publicly associate with?** What badges pop up, e.g., what causes do they support? What company do they keep or organizations/networks do they belong to?
- 4. Why do you think they do the things they do?** Is it to fit in, for status, because of something they saw or heard or because it is easy? Asking why people do certain things may unveil motivations and you can figure out if you are dealing with badges, lived experience, habits or something else.
- 5. Who do they follow and listen to?** Who are their role models? Who do they look to about what is socially acceptable or desirable? Who tells them what is right and wrong, cool or uncool, worth it not worth it?



What's At Play?

Anticipating responses for stronger messages.

Now that you know more about who you are trying to engage, you need to figure out what is going on inside their brains that will make your message successful or a complete disaster (or somewhere in between).

I often run meetings. Inevitably, I have to give people breaks or they will die. So I do. Now, I know if I say, "Back in 15 minutes ready to roll," I will easily be missing half the group in 15 minutes and we'll get behind schedule. I need to understand how their brains will respond to my direction and what they are seeing their peers do. This is where understanding what is at play might help. Some people will not immediately go check email or use the restroom. They will start networking. That means when I call the room to order, they will then dash out to take care of business. Some people wait until most other people sit back down before they join. So the sooner I get the majority seated, the better my chances of restarting. And last, breaks are more fun than work. People naturally want to stay on them longer. Knowing all this background and what is likely to play out helps me think through my messaging. I could give them a shorter break—say 10 minutes instead of 15—knowing it will take me five minutes to corral everyone back for the reasons above. I might offer them an incentive that makes them want to be back in their seats at the right time and not miss something compelling. I could offer a disincentive like, "I am locking the doors at a certain time so we stay on track." I could designate a few colleagues to round up the participants as I know people like to comply with polite requests from peers. I have many options. But I definitely need to employ one or more of these. Otherwise, when I send people on break, we are going to be late getting started again.

You need to do this level of analysis any time you want to ask people to do something. Anticipate responses in order to get the outcomes you want. Start with understanding what's at play.

Know what's at play

To know how your messages might land, you need to know who your audience is and respect that (see above about psychographics). You also need to know what is at play in people's minds and what obstacles you might trigger when you engage with them. As behavioral sciences evolve, the possibilities grow. Here are some likely responses you can plan for.

Let's say you want to make a **big change**. Think Obamacare, massive education reform or banning fossil fuels. You can anticipate some of the reactions audiences you want to engage may have. For instance, it may start off positive. People often have **optimism bias**, which means they overestimate that something good will happen and underestimate that it won't. This is why, despite the fact that a majority of restaurants close in the first year, people still open new ones. But people will also embrace the **status quo**. Research shows that people often make the leap from what is and equate it to what ought to be. This is how we still have child labor or child marriage in some places. People believe this is how it was meant to be. And before you start shaking your head since we don't have child labor in the U.S., think about the shirt you are wearing. Chances are it is made by people, possibly children, who get paid pennies in dangerous factories. You know cheap labor has ethical problems but perhaps you rationalize that, "They wouldn't get jobs otherwise" or "You can't know where everything you buy comes from." Whatever the excuse, you are rationalizing the status quo. When considering change, people will also see if it fits with their worldview, reinforces a badge they wear and if their tribe is following suit. Let's take bike shares. This is a big change. We used to buy our own bikes or walk. Now there are communal bikes. For Millennials who are growing up in a sharing economy, this fits their worldview that we should have access to things when we need them without owning them, it reinforces

some of their badge of being urbanistas and resisting car culture, and they see many people who are just like them coasting around town on bikes. With big change, you'll also encounter **loss aversion**. [Loss aversion](#) happens because when there's change, people worry too much about what they'll lose instead of considering what they'll gain. In the case of Obamacare, they worry more about possibly having to change doctors than the fact they might save a lot of money on their healthcare. Your benefits messaging may fall on deaf ears if you don't mitigate the loss aversion a proposed change will trigger, as well as the biases your audience brings to the party including a tendency to embrace the status quo.

Let's look at another one. Imagine you are working on a big, intractable problem like poverty, climate change or the refugee crisis. The first psychological force you may encounter is what Steven Pinker in his book *Better Angels of Our Nature* calls **compassion fatigue**. As a [New York Times article](#) exploring this says: "The public has a similar reaction to mass joblessness and starving countries alike: the problems sap the imagination in part simply because they are daunting and have not responded well to previous efforts. We have already pumped billions into each, with little visible effect. If only they would cancel their next emergency." Paul Slovic studies a similar but different effect he calls "psychic numbing." His studies show that when people see one child suffering, they are likely to care, donate and give money. Once you start showing lots of children, the interests and actions drop off because of psychic numbing. It is people's response to seeing too much and feeling too much and is a survival instinct. Unwittingly, your messaging may lead to more fatigue or numbing which will make it harder to mobilize people.

You may also encounter **short-termism**. This is where people over-value that which they see as closer to them in time and space. When dealing with people and climate change, this is what happens when you use polar bears. For most people, polar bears are very far away. This makes the issue seem distant, less personal and less immediate. When you show a city similar to the one they live in that's been devastated by a recent superstorm, they are much more likely to see the issue as close, personal and one they should pay attention to.

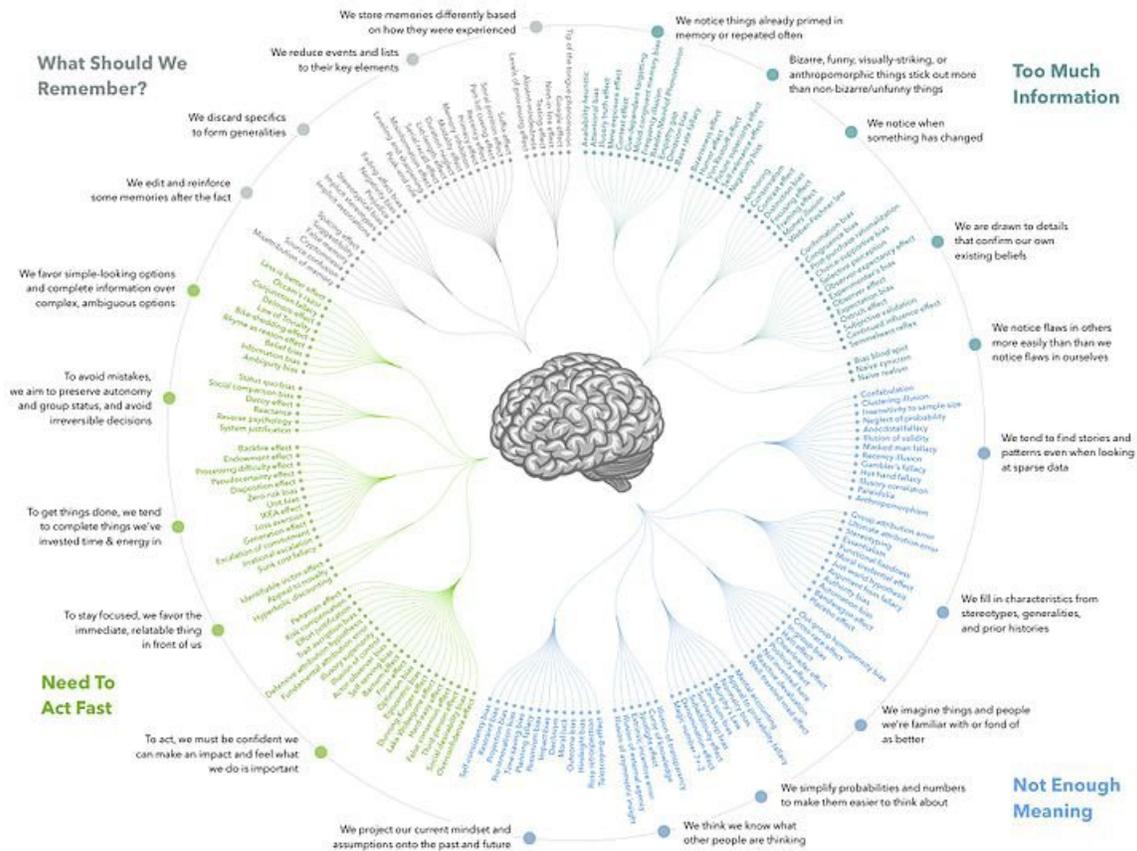
You can do this same state-of-play assessment on specific issues. Let's say you want to stop over-incarceration. First, if you talk about numbers more than people, you may encounter a lack of empathy to the point that audiences dehumanize populations. When people start to dehumanize people, they can start "**othering**" them. When we make people "others," we are willing to create different rules and accountability than we might for ourselves and the people we see as like us. We have seen this throughout history, from slavery to denying women the vote to blocking gay people's rights. You see it in criminal justice, where many states prevent former felons from voting despite the fact that they've done their time and are re-integrated into society.

When you talk about reducing sentencing for non-violent criminals, people may accept that. But when you start talking about reducing sentences for violent offenders you may trigger **moral panic**. Moral panic happens when [one person becomes a symbol](#) for everything that you fear may happen. Case in point: In August 2016, basketball player Dwyane Wade's cousin was shot and killed purportedly by two men who were out on parole, after having been imprisoned because of gun convictions. A story like this does not mean that the majority of those out on parole will commit crimes. But moral panic can set in and people wanting to stop sentence reduction efforts can use such stories to fan the flames in their effort to get the public to reject calls for reform.

You also need to carefully consider the timing of your messaging. When we combine messages with **timing triggers**, we make it more likely audiences will act. For example, if we ask people to register to vote when they are in the car driving, they are unlikely to pull over. However, if we ask them to visit an online site and register to vote for the people who will decide the city's transit options while they are riding the bus, we are using a timing trigger to remind them how important transit decisions are to their life.

So ... there are many psychological and behavioral forces at play when we engage with audiences on meaningful social issues. The important thing is to figure out what those forces are so messaging can help navigate them. You don't need to know their official name—just what the results are when they are present. If you must figure out what it means when someone can't seem to get motivated, you can check out this [mini glossary](#). It's like diagnosing yourself on WebMD for communicators. There is also a handy chart on the following page to give you food for thought.

COGNITIVE BIAS CODEX



DESIGNHACKS.CO - CATEGORIZATION BY BUSTER BENSON - ALGORITHMIC DESIGN BY JOHN MANOOGIAN III (JM3) - DATA BY WIKIPEDIA attribution · share-alike

Designed by John Manoogian III (jm3), 2016. Categorization by Buster Benson.

1. What is your relationship to the group you are messaging to? Are you members of the same tribe or do you wear similar badges? Is this a “we” conversation? Or are you an outsider and what impact does that have on the communication dynamic?
2. In the past when you have engaged with these audiences on this topic, what were some of their reactions? What seems to interest them? What concerns them? Ask them: What do people not get about this issue?
3. What questions do they ask about the issue? Do the questions suggest they are looking to see who else is involved?
4. Do they connect the issue to their own life or does it seem distant? How relevant and salient is the issue to them?
5. Do they blame someone for the problem? Do they have empathy for the people who are most impacted or do they see them as others?

A reminder: When assessing what might be at play, seek out diverse viewpoints. Different people from different backgrounds and life experiences will offer different insights and intel. You’ll get a more thorough assessment by seeking multiple perspectives.

Take advantage of the forces working in your favor and minimize those that are problematic. Stop yourself if you ever find yourself saying about audiences you are trying to engage, “Why are they operating against their own self-interest?” Why are you assuming you know better what their best interest is than they do? You are missing something important. Listen. You need to figure out what you’re missing if you want to find ways to successfully engage and not get tuned out.



Create a Game Plan

Once you know what is at play, you can catalog what your messaging needs to do. Let's review the juvenile justice issue of life without parole again.

Messaging Needs:

- Advocates want to ban this practice.
- To get the changes they want on the state level, they'll need conservative lawmakers to embrace the issue.
- These conservatives have a very strong "tough on crime" worldview that can't be violated.
- Juvenile justice advocates will need to find a competing worldview or badge that they can work with to get the change they want.

The game plan juvenile justice advocates came up with was to communicate the messages that adolescents' brains are not fully formed and that they don't have the impulse control of adults. Even though the adolescents may have done a very bad thing, we should consider that they are still forming into the people they are going to be and not write them off prematurely. There is still a good chance they can be redeemed. This idea of redemption is a strong worldview among some of the audiences advocates want to engage. It gives their audience a reason to reconsider their tough on crime worldview and acknowledge that it shouldn't be applied here. Keep in mind, they still hold that worldview. It is a question of whether it should be applied in these instances. The messaging approach suggests that it shouldn't be by giving them an out: different ages = different brains and different levels of accountability.

For any issue you want to create messaging for, identify what's at play and what is needed to deal with the circumstance. For example, if you know that the issue you are working on is going to trigger loss aversion, then note that the messaging will need to minimize losses and not just over-emphasize benefits. Once you have this assessment, you can make sure your messaging does what it needs to do.

Questions to help you explore what your game plan needs to account for:

- When you did the state-of-play assessment, what were some of the positive reactions and responses you believe your audience has related to this cause that you can utilize?
- What are some of the challenging reactions and responses that your audience may have—and why—that you'll need to navigate so that you don't lose them or alienate them?
- Which reactions are most important for messaging to consider (knowing that your messaging may not be able to address them all)?

You can use message testing to help inform your game plan. For some of these, you can test in a traditional focus group. For others, you'd be better off doing A/B testing to see what people actually respond to, or doing offline experiments that show real-time reactions to messaging. Keep in mind that if you are testing how people will truly react, then you need to try testing when they are most likely to be their real selves and not their aspirational selves. If you test the latter, your messaging may fall short when people revert to implicit beliefs and biases, herd instincts and inherent behavioral responses.



Seeing This in Action

We've covered how to understand your audiences better and how your messaging might play with them. Now you are ready to draft messaging that will account for people's funny mental mind maps, heuristics and quirks. Here are some examples to show you Mindful Messaging in action and inspire you and your messaging efforts.

If people are looking for tribal signals, tap **social currency**. Social currency is what we share in order to look good to others. This might mean being in the know or part of a trend. The best-known recent example of this was the [Ice Bucket Challenge](#). The organization charity: water also tapped this with their [birthday parties](#) campaign, where people use their birthdays to raise money for clean water in countries that need it.

If you want to counter dehumanization, give people an **authentic experience** to build empathy, like the real-life [refugee camp exhibit](#) at the Washington Monument does. Giving people a lived experience makes it memorable and, more important, makes them emotional about an issue. Next time they read the stats about refugees they'll remember this experience and those stats will likely take on increased meaning. Another good example is Islamic Relief. [This story shows](#) how Islamic Relief USA is countering harmful stereotypes by showing up where help is needed and making sure people know who is providing the help. More than a myth vs. fact sheet, this gives audiences an accurate picture of who Muslims living in the U.S. are.

If you want to decrease the chances of **triggering the fear of stigma**, [do what this group did](#). They changed how they ask for information from people who want waivers for fees they can't afford for children's sports. Instead of making families air their life story and talk about their personal struggles, this group accepts their assessment about their ability to pay without a lot of background. This change in messaging strategy worked and enrollment in children's sports skyrocketed

If you want to get more women to ask for raises, instead of going over the stat about how much women earn compared to men—which only reinforces the social norm that most women make less—[role model the conversation for them](#). In this example, the messaging tacitly acknowledges that this is a really hard conversation, but also that others in your tribe are cheering for you.

If the issue is too big, resulting in compassion fatigue or psychic numbing, use **telescoping**, which is focusing on a person or place to break through the fugue and get attention. Groups did this with the photo of the injured Syrian boy Omran Daqneesh in the back of an ambulance. This picture was seen around the world and groups raised funds and called for more decisive action based on the outrage experienced by those who saw the picture.

If self-doubt is sabotaging action and results, embrace what Robert Cialdini calls "**pre-suasion**" and get audiences in the right mindset before asking them to do something. Pre-suasion is central [in this article](#) by David Kirp. He offers messaging interventions that help improve math scores, and these same interventions can be used to increase performance and motivation in other instances. He walks through three experiments. The first reminds students that they'll get better the harder they work. This gets them to embrace that this is hard and to persevere rather than quit. It does what Cialdini says is important and puts them in the right mindset to do what needs doing. The second has a trusted person saying the students can do better, setting an expectation that students are motivated to strive for. The third asks students to connect what they are doing to something they value—and this reminder of their own self-worth is the most motivational.

If people are dug into their beliefs—perhaps they hate big government and don't want to expand Medicaid, or they are climate deniers or homophobes—you need to give them an "**exit ramp**." Because at the end of the day, you may

need them. In this [Harvard Business Review](#) piece, Deepak Malhotra warns of the devastating effects of letting hate sink in after the bruising presidential election between Clinton and Trump. He asks, "How can you convince someone to abandon a course of action to which they are emotionally, ideologically, or publically committed?" He then details how to create an exit ramp. Of the seven ideas he has, three stick out: help them save face by creating a safe space for them to change course, give them cover or a reason as to why they changed their mind, and make changing their mind a punishment-free zone, which means no charges of being a flip-flopper or cries of "I told you so."

Let's take a look at how many of these strategies are playing out in a campaign for a state park. The Rocky Mountain National Park had visitor problems and they engaged in some Mindful Messaging to motivate people to do the right thing. People were doing all sorts of crazy stuff. The park needed to prompt better behavior. They decided to take a "**friends don't let friends ...**" approach as a way to do two important things. One is building off the identity of "good friend," which most people aspire to be. Second, tapping the desire to be a good friend serves as the motivator to act when a person's inclination may be to mind their own business.

Here's how they messaged around one of the behaviors they were trying to change. They tapped into the friends don't let friends philosophy, as well as playing into people's desire to be seen as "in the know" when it comes to how to do the right thing:

When your very close friend indicates they need to potty, first and foremost suggest an established restroom facility. If you are on a trail and a restroom facility is not nearby then leave no trace of your activity or "business." Do not step off the trail and leave your "business" for others to see, including the park's trail and wilderness crews as well as other visitors. If peeing, recommend to your friend to "drip-dry" or if toilet paper is necessary then take the toilet paper out in a baggy, backpack or pocket. If your friend is a frequent pooper, suggest taking care of that before hiking. If nature calls, plan ahead – bring a waste bag, or re-search tips on how to poop in the woods. Friends don't let friends go to the bathroom near water sources. Just think, you might be drinking from that water source the next day!

To change another behavior, they used Cialdini's pre-suasion concept, by getting them to ask a different question that leads to a different, better answer:

When your friends ask, "**How close can I get to that elk, deer, bobcat, coyote, badger, bear, marmot ...?**" suggest they ask a different question, such as "**How far should I stay back?**" Let wildlife be wild and observe from a distance. Your friends might get closer to wildlife, until the wildlife reacts to their presence. When that happens, it's too late, they have reached the threshold. The elk, deer, bobcat ... might leave the area because of them, affecting wildlife viewing opportunities for others. Let your friends know that approaching wildlife is illegal in Rocky Mountain National Park and it doesn't matter if they are doing it to take a photograph. There are no exceptions. Recommend investing in a good telephoto lens. Do they feel it's only a good photograph if they are in the photo with the wildlife? Suggest they take a photo of Rocky Mountain National Park's entrance sign, followed by great distant photos of wildlife. Their friends on social media will realize that they are having an adventure in a national park: being eight feet from an elk is dangerous, illegal and not necessary to demonstrate an adventuresome spirit.

Here is the full [messaging](#) and it is brilliant.



Learn More

So there you have it.

Messaging. There's a lot to think about and every day we learn more that can impact messaging efforts. While I am sure you might want to close your eyes and shut your ears, you can't. This brain science and social science stuff is compelling. It unravels mysteries about how people are motivated—and most causes need motivated people in order to create change. Think of this as a gift. People are complicated. Getting them to act is hard. If you pay attention to emerging science and apply it to your messaging you'll be more successful. Perhaps if my sister had thought about this more, she'd have spent less time being grounded. One thing is sure: Friends don't let friends do Mindless Messaging. Consider these words to the wise from your good friend Kristen and the team at Spitfire.

Learn more...

Shankar Vedantam, Hidden Brain, <http://www.hiddenbrain.org/>

Frank <http://frank.jou.ufl.edu/learn/frankology/>

Charles Duhigg: [@cduhigg](#) – New York Times reporter, author The Power of Habit (<http://bit.ly/pggrlH>), about science of habit formation

Dan Ariely: [@danariely](#) – Professor of Psychology and Behavioral Economics

Dan Kahan: [@cult_cognition](#) – How group commitments shape perceptions of risk & related facts

David DiSalvo: [@Neuronarrative](#) – Writes about science, psychology and all things Mind for Forbes, Psychology Today and a few other pubs. Author of three books on the brain and cognitive psychology.

David Eagleman: [@daveagelman](#) – Neuroscientist, New York Times bestselling author, and Guggenheim Fellow.

Jonathan Haidt: [@JonHaidt](#) – Professor of business ethics, NYU-Stern. Focuses on the intuitive foundations of morality, and how to improve ethical behavior in complex systems

Matt Lieberman: [@social_brains](#) – UCLA Neuroscientist, Author of Social

Robert Cialdini: [@RobertCialdini](#)

Sendhil Mullainathan: [@m_sendhil](#) – Behavioral economics, poverty, machine learning co-author, *Scarcity*, <http://bit.ly/1g7pwZl>

Shankar Vedantam: [@ShankarVedantam](#) and [@HiddenBrain](#) – [@NPR](#) science correspondent; Author, The Hidden Brain, a book about unconscious bias.

Dr. Sunwolf: [@TheSocialBrain](#) – A university professor, lawyer, author, studying neuroscience, social behaviors, and the science of happiness.

Brain Science Ville: [@headville](#) – The best brain science reads from around the web about | augmented, brain, reality, science, research all picked by humans

Neuroscience: [@Neuroscience](#) – Neuroscience | Latest news, research, books and journal articles in neuroscience, neurology, psychology and alzheimer's disease.

Angela Duckworth: [@angeladuckw](#) Professor of Psychology at the University of Pennsylvania and founder and scientific director of the Character Lab. Author of Grit: The Power of Passion and Perseverance.

Carol S. Dweck, Ph.D., leading researcher in the field of motivation Professor of Psychology at Stanford University.

Amy J. C. Cuddy: [@amyjccuddy](#) Associate Professor at Harvard Business School with a Ph.D. in Psychology. Author of *Presence: Bringing your Boldest Self to Your Biggest Challenges*. [ILR School – Columbia University](#)

Keith Maddox, Ph.D.: [@MaddBlackProf](#) Associate Professor of Psychology and Director of the Tufts University Social Cognition Lab. Experimental Social Psychologist. [Associate Professor of Psychology – Tufts University](#)

Vanessa Bohns: [@profbohns](#) Social Psychologist and Assistant Professor of Organizational Behavior at Columbia University. Examines the extent to which people recognize the influence they have over others across a variety of situations.

[Grit: The Power of Passion and Perseverance](#) by Angela Duckworth

[Mindset: The New Psychology of Success](#) by Carol S. Dweck, Ph.D.

[Presence: Bringing Your Boldest Self to Your Biggest Challenges](#) by Amy Cuddy

[Contagious: Why Things Catch On](#) by Jonah Berger

[Don't Even Think About It: Why Our Brains Are Wired to Ignore Climate Change](#) by George Marshall

[Emotional Intelligence: Why It Can Matter More Than IQ](#) by Daniel Goleman

[Immunity to Change: How to Overcome it and Unlock the Potential in Yourself and Your Organization](#) by Robert Kegan

[Incognito: The Secret Lives of the Brain](#) by David Eagleman

[Influence: The Psychology of Persuasion and Pre-suasion](#) by Robert Cialdini

[Made to Stick](#) and [Switch: How to Change Things When Change Is Hard](#) by Chip Heath and Dan Heath

[Scarcity: Why Having Too Little Means So Much](#) by Sendhil Mullainathan and Eldar Shafir

[Social: Why Our Brains Are Wired to Connect](#) by Matthew D. Lieberman

[The Hidden Brain: How Our Unconscious Minds Elect Presidents, Control Markets, Wage Wars, and Save Our Lives](#) by Shankar Vedantam

[The Power of Habit: Why We Do What We Do in Life and Business](#) by Charles Duhigg

[The Upside of Irrationality: The Unexpected Benefits of Defying Logic](#) by Dan Ariely

[The Winner Effect: The Neuroscience of Success and Failure](#) by Ian H. Robertson

[Thinking Fast and Slow](#) by Daniel Kahneman

[What Makes Your Brain Happy and Why You Should Do the Opposite](#) by David DiSalvo



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