



THE 4 RULES OF MESSAGING

**The 4 Rules That
Cause People to
Pay Attention to
Your Brand**

Most people blow the message and get ignored. These are the 4 Rules to follow if you want you and your products to get the attention you deserve.

01



02



03



04



Inside This Guide

The 4 Rules of Messaging

R U L E

01



Make It Zero Cognitive Load.

Don't make people think.

PAGE 6

R U L E

02



Link It to Survival.

The one thing that motivates human behavior.

PAGE 9

R U L E

03



Make It Memorable and Repeatable.

If they can't repeat it, it won't spread.

PAGE 12

R U L E

04



Make the Customer the Hero.

You're the guide, not the hero.

PAGE 15

Next step

Build your StoryBrand Messaging Canvas and launch a campaign that works. Get your one-page canvas free at [MessagingCanvas.com](https://messagingcanvas.com)



01



The 4 Rules of Messaging

02



Why Is Nobody Paying Attention to You and Your Brand?

03



Yet another marketing effort has failed. Of course, you blame the failure on yourself or, perhaps, your product. You built the website, ran the ads, posted to social, maybe even paid an agency and the market completely ignored you.

04



We've heard this story thousands of times and you'll be relieved to hear that most of the time it's not you or your product. It's your message.

What do we mean when we say it's your message?

We're talking about the words you use to communicate your offer. Those words should be short, attention-getting, memorable and repeatable. The problem is, very few business leaders can pull it off.

After you read this short PDF, though, you won't be one of those business leaders. Understanding the 4 Rules of Messaging will put you in the rare air of people who can talk about a product (or idea, or personal brand) in such a way people stop and either want to know more, or pull out their wallet to buy it.

At StoryBrand, we are obsessed with helping business leaders like you clarify their message so they get the attention they deserve. We've helped hundreds of thousands of businesses, nonprofits, and leaders get noticed in the marketplace and we're about to help you.

Along the way we've figured out the 4 Rules that make a message work. Messages that break these rules get ignored.

These rules work whether you run a corner shop, lead marketing for a company with a dozen product lines, raise money for a cause, or are building a personal brand. Learn the 4 Rules and you'll become a messaging expert able to see why a message works or fails.

Three things happen when you and your team learn these rules:

You get sharper.

You start writing messages that get results by design instead of by accident.

Your team aligns.

You get a shared language for filtering out weak ideas, so you stop debating and start shipping words that lead to orders.

Customers engage.

Everything you produce works harder, with more leads, more sales, and more word-of-mouth.

Fair warning: *once you know the 4 Rules, every mistake you've been making will become obvious. The good news is you will know how to fix your message, and a brand that stops breaking these rules has a serious competitive advantage. Let's start with the rule brands break the most.*

THREE STEPS TO BECOMING A MESSAGING EXPERT:

1. Print out this PDF
2. Understand the rules
3. Clarify your message using a StoryBrand Messaging Canvas at **[MessagingCanvas.com](https://messagingcanvas.com)**

Clarify your message and customers will engage!



01

01



RULE 01

Make It Zero Cognitive Load

Don't make people think.

Nobody should have to work to understand your offer. A customer should know exactly what you mean the instant they read or hear your words. The moment they have to stop and translate what you say, you've lost them.

Around our office we have a mantra: "Don't make people think."

"Dissolves Hair" sells drain cleaner. "Engineered for today's modern plumbing" does not. One line tells the customer in plain language what problem you and your product solve.

02



03



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The other forces them to translate your words into something understandable and useful, and a busy, distracted shopper will not do that work. When you use cute and clever language, or worse, inside language, you might as well be speaking a foreign language.



DEFINITION

COGNITIVE LOAD is the amount of mental work a person has to spend to understand your offer. The higher the cognitive load, the fewer orders your customers place. The lower the cognitive load, the more orders they place. Every time.

Make your message low cognitive load and watch customers engage.

EXAMPLES

Category	✗ High Cognitive Load	✓ Low Cognitive Load
Mattress company	"Adaptive multi-zone support engineered with temperature-neutral foam technology."	"A comfortable, cool bed for better sleep."
Accounting software	"End-to-end financial workflow automation with real-time reconciliation."	"Intuitive bookkeeping done right and made easy."
Enterprise software	"Unified data orchestration across hybrid cloud environments."	"All your company's data in one place and reports you understand."
Housing nonprofit	"Facilitating holistic community wellness through integrated service delivery."	"We help families find a place to live."
Personal brand / coach	"A transformational paradigm for holistic professional actualization."	"Get unstuck and love your work again."
Auto repair shop	"Full-service automotive diagnostic and repair solutions."	"We'll fix your car right the first time."

EXERCISE

Print your website on a sheet of paper. Circle every place you use vague language, insider language, or words that have nothing to do with the problem your customer is trying to solve. Then replace them with plain language the customer understands instantly.



02

01



RULE 02

Link It to Survival

02



The one thing that motivates human behavior.

03



Human beings buy one thing: **survival**. We are survival machines, always scanning our environment for anything that helps us get ahead. Saving money, saving time, easing anxiety, improving health, looking better, feeling better, gaining status, connecting with the people we love, securing a better future: these are all survival links. Connect your message to one of them (just ask, “how does my product improve my customer’s life?”) and you grab attention. Fail to, and customers ignore you altogether because you failed to offer what they were actually looking for.

04



A vitamin brand can say “22 essential micronutrients in every serving.” Or it can say “Improve your immune system so you don’t get sick.” The second one attracts customers because it promises survival: better health, more energy, less time lost to being sick. The customer was never shopping for micronutrients. They were shopping for a survival asset.



DEFINITION

A **SURVIVAL LINK** is anything that helps a customer get ahead in life. The more obviously your message links to survival, the more orders your customers place. The weaker the link, the more likely they are to ignore you.

Link your message to survival and watch your brand grow.

EXAMPLES

Category	✗ Weak Survival Link	✓ Strong Survival Link
Solar panels	"High-efficiency monocrystalline panels with 22% conversion rates."	"Cut your power bill in half."
Gym	"State-of-the-art equipment and certified personal trainers."	"Get fit enough to keep up with your kids."
Enterprise security	"Enterprise-grade threat detection and endpoint protection."	"Keep your company off tomorrow's breach headline."
Community college	"A broad catalog of accredited academic programs."	"Train for a job that's hiring near you."
Personal brand / speaker	"A thought leader at the intersection of leadership and purpose."	"Learn to lead a team that respects and loves your leadership."
Life insurance	"Flexible term and whole life coverage options."	"Provide for your family after you're gone."

EXERCISE

List the products or services you sell. Next to each one, name the survival benefit it delivers: does it save money, save time, ease anxiety, improve health, raise status, or build connection? If a claim doesn't connect to survival, cut it or rewrite it until it does. The strongest messages state the survival benefit clearly.



03

01



RULE 03

02



Make It Memorable and Repeatable

03



**If they can't repeat it,
it won't spread.**

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The best advertising is word-of-mouth advertising. We all hope it will happen to us. But can we actually improve our chances of our message spreading? Definitely.

Say your message once, and your customer should be able to repeat it back to you word for word, right there in the moment

and again the next day. A memorable message travels. A vague message dies the moment it's spoken. When your words are short and simple enough to repeat, your customers start doing your marketing for you, quoting you to friends, a spouse, coworkers, and on their social feeds, turning happy customers into brand evangelists. A line that's hard to remember is hard to spread, and a message that can't spread can't grow your business.

A pizza shop can say "Fast delivery and quality ingredients." Or it can say "Sal's Pizza: Delicious and Delivered Fast."

The second one sticks because you can repeat it without trying. It's short, it's specific, and the promise is easy to picture. The first line evaporates the second you hear it. The second gets repeated at the dinner table.



DEFINITION

REPEATABILITY is how easily a customer can say your message back to you after hearing it once. The more repeatable your message, the more it spreads. The less repeatable, the less it spreads.

Make your message repeatable and watch your brand grow.

EXAMPLES

Category	✗ Forgettable	✓ Repeatable
Coffee shop	"Artisan, ethically sourced coffee crafted by expert baristas."	"Coffee worth waking up for."
Moving company	"Full-service residential and commercial relocation solutions."	"Nothing breaks, whatever it takes."
Plumber	"Licensed plumbing services for residential and commercial properties."	"Leak-free or it's on me."
B2B consulting	"Optimizing operational efficiency through data-driven transformation."	"Our Dashboard is where your data gets decoded for decisions."
Tax preparer	"Comprehensive tax preparation and planning for individuals and businesses."	"Tax Strategy: Keep more of what you make."
Personal brand / author	"Empowering individuals to unlock their fullest potential."	"Coaching That Creates Confidence."

EXERCISE

Say your main message out loud to a teammate, once. An hour later, ask them to repeat it back. If they can't say it word for word, it's not memorable or repeatable yet. Cut or change words until what's left is short enough to stick and simple enough to remember, then test it on a few more people. The version everyone can repeat without effort is the one that will spread.



04

01



RULE 04

02



Make the Customer the Hero

03



You're the guide, not the hero.

04



Your message should not be about you. It should be about your customer. They are the hero of their own story, and you are the guide who helps them win. Brands that talk endlessly about their history, their mission, and their passion come across like a guy on a first date who only talks about himself. Cast the customer as a hero with a problem, cast your brand as the guide with a product that solves it, and you will be perceived as the business they have been looking for.

This rule is less about words and more about the posture of your heart. Insecure brands talk at their customers, mostly about how great they are. Confident brands talk with their customers, mostly about how they exist to solve their customers' problems.

Here's one way to tell whether you're making the customer the hero. Read your homepage and count how often you say "we," "our," and "I" against how often you say "you" and "your." If you-language doesn't win by a decent margin, you've cast yourself as the hero and relegated your customer to the audience.

You can still talk about yourself but when you do, make sure it's about why and how you care about solving your customers' problems. Talk about yourself the way a good guide does, only enough to prove you care about them and are competent to solve their problem.

A home remodeler can say, "We've built award-winning kitchens for 30 years." Or they can say, "Our customers love their new kitchens." The second one works because it positions the company as a guide helping the hero win.



DEFINITION

Heroes in stories are afraid, ill-equipped, unsure, and worried. Guides are strong, competent, and capable of helping the hero win the day. **Never play the hero. Always play the guide.**

Make the customer the hero, and the clicks and the sales go up.

EXAMPLES

Category	✗ Brand as Hero	✓ Customer as Hero
Marketing agency	"We're an award-winning agency with 20 years of storytelling expertise."	"Invite your customers into a story and win their business forever."
Boutique hotel	"Experience our historic property, architecture, and four-star kitchen."	"Unwind, sleep well, and wake up in a place you love."
Enterprise platform	"The market-leading platform trusted by the Fortune 500."	"Give your entire team one platform that helps them get work done."
Wedding photographer	"I'm a fine-art photographer with a signature editorial style."	"Relive your wedding day every time you see your pictures."
Credit union	"Proudly serving this community with a full suite of products since 1954."	"Bank with people who answer the phone and know your name."
Outdoor apparel	"Engineered by mountaineers using proprietary technical fabrics."	"Stay warm, stay dry, and go farther."

EXERCISE

Print your homepage. Highlight every "we," "our," and "I" in one color, and every "you" and "your" in another. Stand back and look at the balance of color on the page. If your brand's pronouns dominate, rewrite as many sentences as you can so the customer reads about themselves more than they read about you.

What Happens When Your Message Gets Clear

When you obey the 4 Rules of Messaging, your message gets better and customers start paying attention.

“Before StoryBrand we received zero leads from our website. Within the first month of changing our website, we received two \$2 million leads.”



Casandra Laymon — *President, Beacon Wealth Consultants*

“After going through StoryBrand, my revenue quadrupled.”



Whitney English — *CEO, Day Designer*

“We rewrote a webinar registration page using the StoryBrand framework, and it converted at 60% to a cold audience.”



Amy Porterfield — *Online Marketing Expert*



Ready to Put the 4 Rules to Work?

The 4 Rules show you what good messaging looks like. Now it's time to build your message using the StoryBrand Messaging Canvas.

Your message is the foundation of everything you create: your website, emails, ads, sales conversations, pitch decks, social posts, and campaigns.

When the message is unclear, every marketing asset multiplies the confusion. But when it's clear, everything you produce starts working together.

The Messaging Canvas is a simple, one-page tool that helps you clarify the core pieces of your message, including your elevator pitch, brand story, and soundbites.

[Get the Messaging Canvas](#)

STORYBRAND MESSAGING CANVAS

THE 4 RULES

- 1 Make it zero cognitive load
- 2 Link it to survival
- 3 Make it memorable and repeatable
- 4 Make the customer the hero

[The canvas includes several text input fields for writing your message, organized into sections for clarity, rules, and content.]

