

# BRINGING YOUR MESSAGE TO LIFE

Using story-based communications principles  
to get real, get valued and get known



**In today's cluttered, fragmented,  
information-laden and noisy messaging  
environment, EVERYONE STRUGGLES  
TO BE HEARD ABOVE THE FRAY.**

**There are more ways to connect than ever before—and more static  
obscuring what we're trying to say.**

And there's also a huge opportunity waiting for communicators who are ready to get real with their words. There's a universal longing for engaging, involving, authentic communications that help us make meaning of our worlds and see

where the enterprises, institutions and individuals we interact with fit into our lives. Using story-based methods for deciding what to say and how to say it is the best way for creating communications that fill those needs.

**GETTING A GREAT MESSAGE OUT doesn't usually happen by accident. It's the result of a decision to understand what actually matters and translating that into messages that resonate.**



If we're being honest, we have to admit that most of what we say never really gets heard. Sometimes that's because we think more about what we want to say than what our audiences want to hear. Sometimes we lose sight of what our messages are really supposed to do. Often, we don't know who we really are in the larger story playing out around us.

#### **What happens because of that?**

- We get bogged down in information points that don't bring anything about us to life
- We create one-way communications instead of conversations
- Our messaging isn't very strategic (or inspiring or intriguing)
- We miss out on opportunities to say something important



**SO A GOOD FRAMEWORK  
for developing messages  
that resonate is all we  
need, right?**

Well, it's certainly the right place to start. A framework brings some discipline to the process of creating messages, and a way to align what we're trying to accomplish with what we actually say. A good messaging framework does more than just help us organize content; it helps us think through what kind of message matters most in a given situation.

The bottom line is that there are really only four things a message can do:

1. It can **INFORM**
2. It can **PROMOTE**
3. It can **INSPIRE**
4. It can **MOTIVATE ACTION or ALLEGIANCE**

If we're thinking it through, we'd never use the same message to inform someone as we would to inspire them. Often, though, we just start crafting things to say without thinking so much about our communications task. Changing that is the first step to getting conscious about what we're saying—and to overcoming the biggest obstacle to meaningful messages.

## **TOO MUCH RELIANCE ON MESSAGES THAT INFORM OR PROMOTE**

**is the biggest obstacle to getting  
heard for many communicators.**

**Those are both one-way forms of communication that let us talk about ourselves—but don't leave much room for the other guy.**

Too much one-way messaging is by far the most common messaging mistake I see communicators make. We're all guilty of it at one time or another. We create fact sheets that are chock full of information; web sites that are teeming with promotional messages; press releases that comprehensively cover our point of view. But we're much more likely to engage other people if we use more two-way messaging with content that's designed to inspire and/or motivate. That's where story comes in.



## **SO, STORYTELLING IS THE BEST WAY TO GET HEARD, right? It's two-way communication, our audiences can see themselves in the plot, and everyone knows how to tell a good story. . . or do they?**

Actually, some of my clients are a little afraid of stories; well, not literally frightened, but certainly intimidated. Some think it takes special skill to deliver a good story. Others don't know what kind of stories to tell. Some don't think they'll be taken seriously unless they have lots of facts and information to share.

So here's the good news: You don't have to tell a story at all to make your communications a lot more interesting—or to dramatically increase the chance that your messages will be heard—or to make the kind of human connection with an audience that starts to build a real relationship. But you do have to use story-based communications principles.





**STORY-BASED MESSAGING**  
**isn't about being a great storyteller. It's about**  
**using the principles of great storytelling to**  
**become a really fine messenger.**

If you want to do that, here are the four key story-based principles you'll need to keep in mind if you want to create messaging that matters:

1. Begin at the end
2. Typecast yourself
3. Get serious about sharing your values
4. Tell the truth

# Story-based principle #1: BEGIN AT THE END.

If you don't know where to begin, remember this: when it comes to quickly engaging other people in what you have to say, it's the outcomes they care about (the "happy endings," so to speak).

In formal marketing speak, that means shifting your communications strategy to an outcome-based orientation. In plain speak, it means telling people what's going to happen for them if they get involved with you (e. g. , buy something, donate, advocate for your position, etc.). And it means telling them less about what you do and more about how it's going to turn out.

| Level          | Task                | Content                            | Appeal               | Example  |
|----------------|---------------------|------------------------------------|----------------------|--|
| Motivator      | Involve / Influence | Outcomes<br>Vision<br>Happy ending | Emotional / Rational | We help clients tell stories that engage, inspire and influence others.                  |
| Connector      | Inspire / Engage    | Values<br>Beliefs<br>Feelings      | Emotional            | We believe that every organization and individual has a powerful story to tell.          |
| Differentiator | Promote             | Strengths<br>Qualities<br>Benefits | Rational             | We use a combination of creative skills, innovative tools and unique planning processes. |
| Descriptor     | Inform              | Features<br>Facts<br>Data          | Rational             | We offer branding, culture assessment and leadership communications services.            |

## **OUTCOME-BASED MESSAGING**

### **is all about a climb up the messaging ladder to the motivational rung.**

You can build an entire messaging strategy using this ladder, which helps you line up what you're trying to do (the task) with the kind of messages most appropriate for achieving it (the content). You can also use the ladder to create a complete messaging system for your organization or yourself. Just decide the most compelling thing you can say at every level of the ladder—and keep on climbing until you've created a happy ending or two.





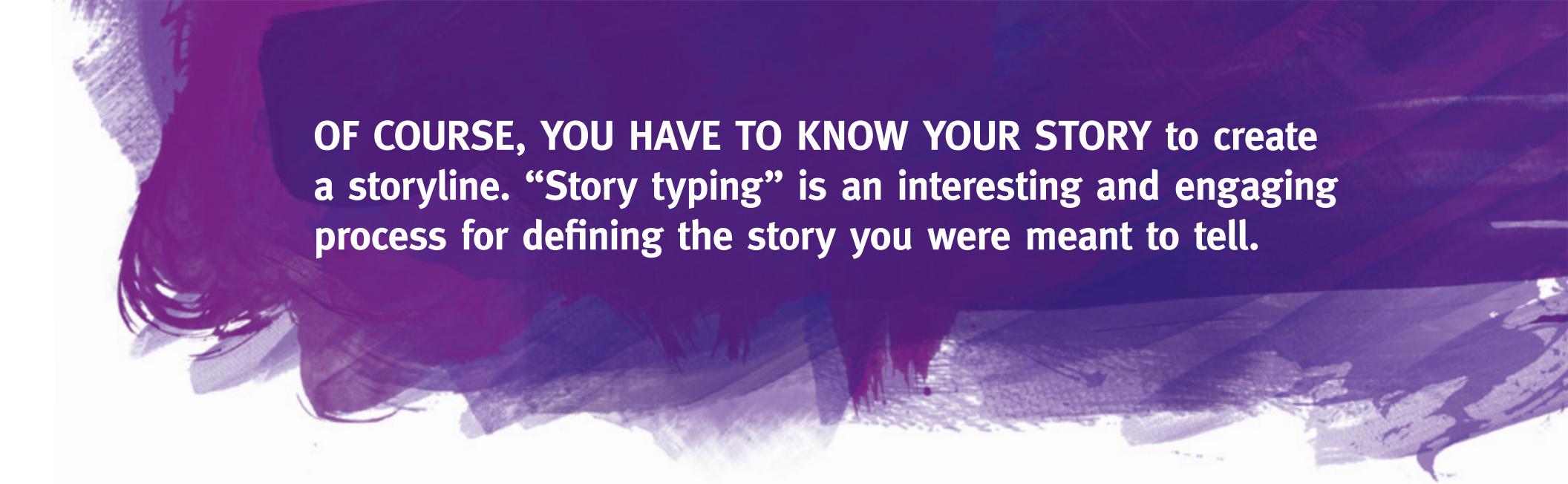
## Story-based principle #2: **TYPECAST YOURSELF.**

**You absolutely, positively can't tell a story if you don't know what character you're playing. The simplest way to think in story-based terms is to cast your organization or yourself in an authentic role—and base your communications on a storyline that reflects it.**

We've finally gotten to the fun part—the part where we get to use our imaginations, forget about "strategic messaging approaches," and start to act and talk like real people.

Real people care about things. They have interests and passions; ideas and ideals. They like to talk about those things. So should you and/or your organization.

Real people relate to the characters in stories they love. If they see you as part of a story they care about, they'll relate to you, too.



**OF COURSE, YOU HAVE TO KNOW YOUR STORY** to create a storyline. “Story typing” is an interesting and engaging process for defining the story you were meant to tell.

**Take a look at the list of “story types” below. Which one seems most like you or your organization? How would you communicate if you were speaking from that character’s perspective?**

- **Caregiver:** responding to need/serving others
- **Ruler:** taking the lead/managing complexity
- **Creator:** crafting and expressing new things/generating ideas
- **Hero:** overcoming obstacles/achieving goals
- **Revolutionary:** challenging the status quo/reforming
- **Magician:** effecting change/realizing a vision
- **Jester:** lightening things up/using wit and resourcefulness
- **Everyperson:** building community/sharing empathy
- **Lover:** building relationships/sharing passion
- **Innocent:** living ideals and values/maintaining hope
- **Explorer:** discovering unique approaches/having adventures
- **Sage:** finding insights and answers/thinking things through

*If you’d like to use a story typing tool to cast you or your organization in a meaningful role, you can take our free assessment by visiting this web page: [www.storybranding.com/site/take-the-pvsi-survey.php](http://www.storybranding.com/site/take-the-pvsi-survey.php)*

**AN AUTHENTIC STORYLINE** is like a power source you can draw on to bring your communications to life.  
Let your main storyline lead, and let other stories follow.

**One of the first rules of journalism is to never bury your lead. One of the first rules of story-based communications is to open with who you are.**

If you're a **Caregiver**, you're most powerful, purposeful and passionate when you talk about nurturing or supporting others. That's the happy ending. Start there.

If you're a **Sage**, you're at your communications best when you have an insight to share. Put it out there.

If you're a **Hero**, you'll be compelling when you're framing a challenge. Just do it. (Okay, so that's what Nike says—and who better to exemplify the Hero brand?)

Whatever story you're telling, put it out there early, often and consistently. That's what sticking to your storyline is all about.





## Story-based principle #3: GET SERIOUS ABOUT SHARING YOUR VALUES.

The characters in great stories rely on a combination of strengths (what they're good at) and values (what they care about) to accomplish their missions. Strengths are critical, but they're not as memorable as values.

If you want to move past one-way messaging into two-way terrain, you have to establish some common ground with your audience. Take a look at the list of values associated with each of the story types below. How can you engage others by letting them know these are what matter to you? How can you let them know that when this is what they're looking for, they should turn to you?

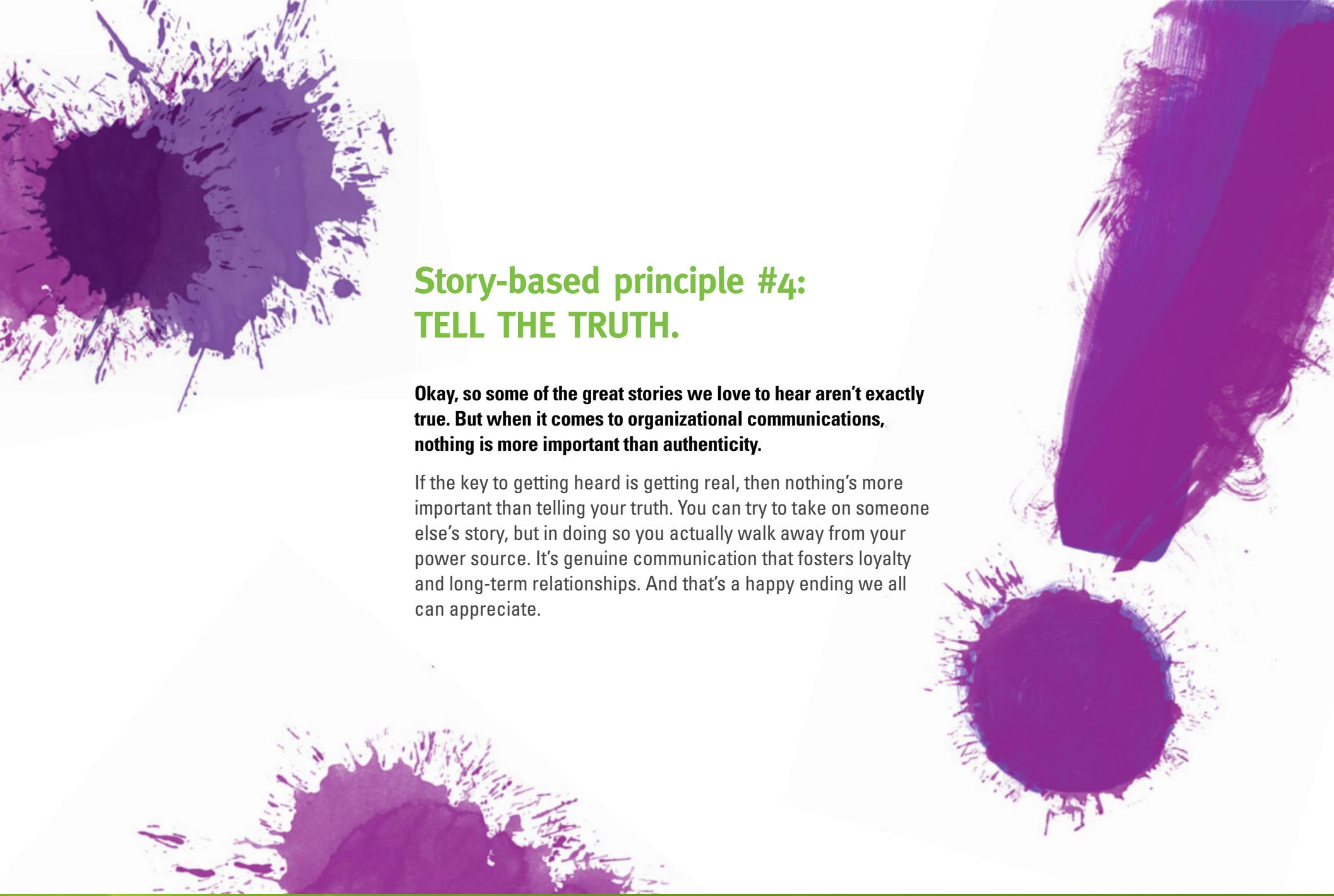
- **Caregiver:** Nurturance and Support
- **Ruler:** Stewardship and Savvy
- **Creator:** Imagination and Invention
- **Hero:** Determination and Action
- **Revolutionary:** Radical Thinking and Reform
- **Magician:** Vision and Possibility
- **Jester:** Joy and Wit
- **Everyperson:** Empathy and Interdependence
- **Lover:** Appreciation and Connection
- **Innocent:** Idealism and Hope
- **Explorer:** Discovery and Freedom
- **Sage:** Wisdom and Knowledge



## YOU CAN USE STORY-BASED APPROACHES to understand more about what your audience values, too.

Values are the currency of meaning and inspiration; the surest path to making a connection with your audiences. Of course, you have to know what people really value to connect with them from that perspective—and it turns out that a lot of what people value most is hard for them to articulate.

It's actually easier to talk with people about storylines than about values. Values are pretty abstract; storylines are more concrete. Just try this exercise: give a customer or a donor or a supporter a list of the 12 story types on the previous page. Ask them who your organization is most like. Then ask them who they are most like when they're interacting with you. That brief exercise will tell you more about who you are in your customer's eyes—and who you help them be—than an hour's worth of traditional research inquiry.



## **Story-based principle #4: TELL THE TRUTH.**

**Okay, so some of the great stories we love to hear aren't exactly true. But when it comes to organizational communications, nothing is more important than authenticity.**

If the key to getting heard is getting real, then nothing's more important than telling your truth. You can try to take on someone else's story, but in doing so you actually walk away from your power source. It's genuine communication that fosters loyalty and long-term relationships. And that's a happy ending we all can appreciate.



**Of course, all of this will be a lot more effective if you harness the power of your #1 communications resource: THE PEOPLE WHO WORK FOR YOUR ORGANIZATION.**



Where do others get the most information about your organization? Is it from your website, your advertising, your social media initiatives, your public relations efforts—or is it from the people who work for you? In most organizations, what your people say about you makes more impressions than your formal communications vehicles. And most organizations do little to plan for that.

The first thing to remember, of course, is that you can't ultimately control what your people have to say (well, sure, you can fire them for actual insurrection, but it's pretty tough to catch more subtle forms of communications sabotage). What you can do is involve them in developing a storyline for your organization that feels real and genuine to them, and captures a purpose that they actually want to talk about.



# YOUR PEOPLE KNOW WHO YOU ARE and there are lots of ways to engage them in developing your communications storyline.

**You can use a formal or informal story typing process to define the culture and style of your organization.**

There's the scientific, quantitative route, which involves surveying everyone in an organization to find out your story type (you can read more about the instrument for doing this, the Kenexa Cultural Insight here: [www.storybranding.com/site/assessments.php](http://www.storybranding.com/site/assessments.php)). You can follow that up with focus group discussions where you talk about the high-scoring storylines and why they came out on top.

You can do the whole process more informally through discussion sessions and creative exercises that get at who you are at your best. What's important is to get your people talking about the organization's strengths and values; its purpose and passion; its vision and mission. Ask them to help you see the storyline that emerges.

## **Being involved isn't enough to make your people great communicators, though. THEY NEED RESOURCES, TOOLS AND TRAINING, TOO.**

I've always been a little baffled by the great lengths organizations go to in developing elaborately detailed graphic standards—and how little effort goes in to any kind of verbal standards. No one expects people to use a logo properly without some guidance, and the same thing is as true when it comes to talking about the organization.

Don't wait for a crisis, a merger/reorganization or a rebranding effort to help your people understand and appreciate who you are as an organization. Allocate resources to ensure that your people know your story and can communicate it.





**IF YOU'VE INVOLVED YOUR PEOPLE  
IN DEVELOPING A STORYLINE**  
**they can see themselves in, then  
they'll actually appreciate (and maybe  
even use) your messaging tools.**

Here are the four foundational messaging components that every organization should have. They're resources for executive leadership, professional communicators and anyone in the organization who needs to talk about you at one time or another (which turns out to be everyone):

- **A “message menu”** with a literal menu of message choices for use in all kinds of communications.
- **A “language library”** with words and phrases that can be used to vividly paint a picture of who you are.
- **An organizational, product or service description** that weaves together messages from all levels of the communications ladder.
- **Talking points**, including an “elevator speech” that's designed to help your people start a two-way conversation about your work.



**SO, LET'S RECAP.**

**If you want what you say to get heard, there are four key things to remember:**

1. Be deliberate about climbing the messaging ladder
2. Know who you are and let your messages tell that story
3. Stay on storyline
4. Get your whole organization involved

**The reward? Well, you could just live happily ever after.**

# The Storybranding Group



**Cindy Atlee is founding principal of The Storybranding Group and inventor of the storybranding process.**

Since writing her first (and last!) novel at the age of 13, Cindy has channeled a passion for helping others understand and express themselves into a 20+ year career as a branding/messaging consultant, facilitator and coach. For Cindy, the happy ending comes when her clients can express what's best and most distinctive about them—and unleash a voice that engages and inspires others.

You can email Cindy at [cindy.atlee@storybranding.com](mailto:cindy.atlee@storybranding.com); phone her at 703-917-4040; read her blog at [www.findandunleashyourvoice.com](http://www.findandunleashyourvoice.com); or follow her on [@storybrander](https://twitter.com/storybrander).