



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.

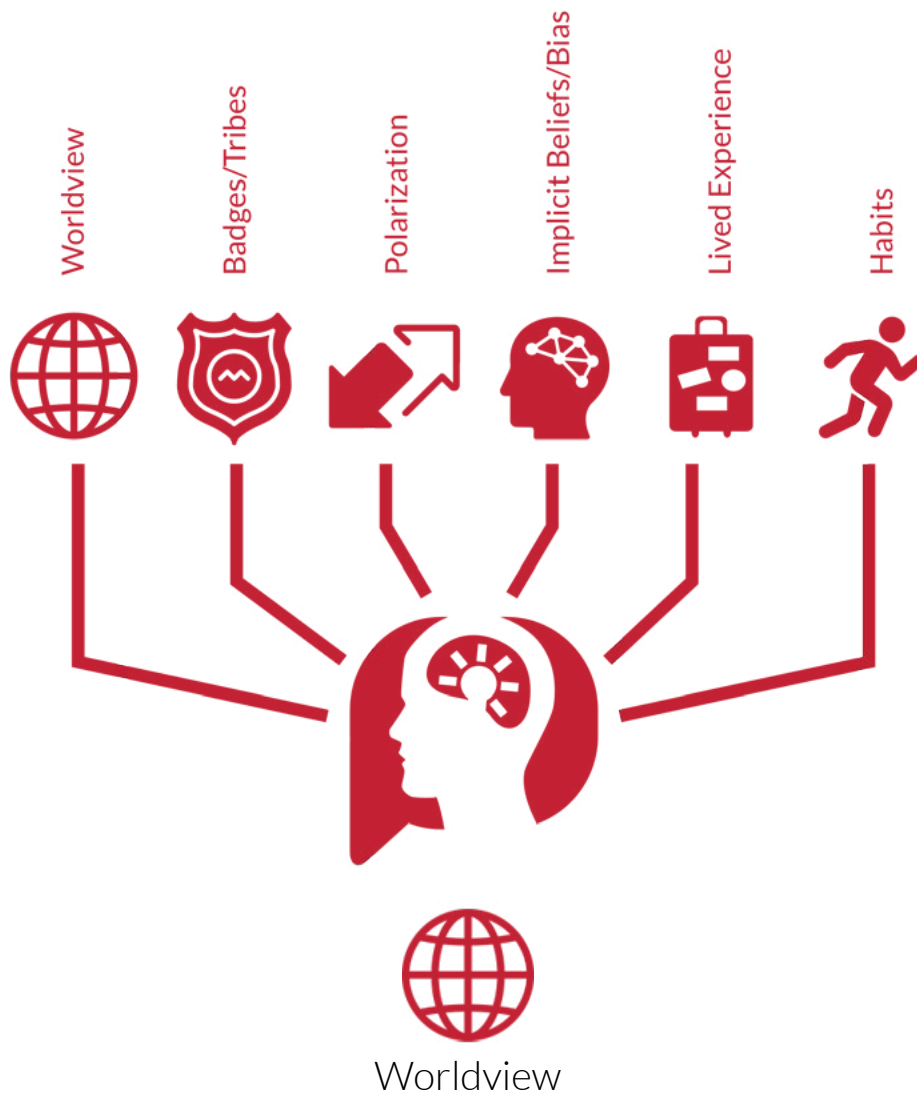
The [Smart Chart](#) points out the importance of segmenting people. Banish the idea of engaging that mythical group called the “general public.” I love seeing groups break down their audiences into true segments. I hear about Makers building mind-boggling creations in Appalachia, urban-dwelling young 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.