

# The Messenger Matters

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You work in sustainability. Or in health. Or safety/risk management. Or any change-related field.

You have a Vitally Important Message that the people you are seeking to influence must hear.

You've considered your audience/s, determined the frame/s most likely to be effective, and crafted your content – a campaign, flyer, ad, whatever it is.

You might have even eschewed the usual delivery of data, and instead used an engaging story.

But are YOU the best person, or organisation, to deliver it?

It's not just what we say, or even how we say it – it's who delivers The Message.

## The Power of Norms – Monkey See, Monkey Do



Imitation may be the highest form of flattery, but it may also be the key when it comes to sustainability.

For years – years! – I had been on at my father to get solar panels installed on my parents' house.

'Dad, climate change is a real concern because of sea level rise and extreme weather events and species loss, so it's important to do our bit to minimise greenhouse gas emissions from energy use and fossil fuel consumption.'

He knows about this stuff, because I'm on about it all the time. I think he cares about it, but like many, it just seems too abstract and remote to him.

'Dad, electricity prices are going to rise. I know you and Mum are retired and it's going to be a payback period of a number of years. But you're best to lock this in now, and get some self-sufficiency. And the government rebate runs out soon.'

Yes. That's a concern he can relate to. But what to do?

'Dad, there's a solar expo on that the council has organised – let's go!'

My Dad loves a chat, so that was a winner. We brought home brochures and business cards and they sat there. I think they're still in his shed.

And then, suddenly, after my many attempts from all kinds of angles had failed – we're getting solar panels!

I was both pleased and offended. What? How had this happened? Who had waved a magic wand? How had they succeeded where I hadn't?

Very simple – the neighbours had them installed. Seven panels (their roof size is too small for the standard eight panels).

The installers were on the neighbours' roof making a racket, which is a siren song to my Dad – something's up in the neighbourhood, and he wants to know what's going on.

Dad came home with the story – who did you get the panels from? How many do you need? How much does it cost? Who installed them?

A few phone calls were made, some installers turned up and voila!

Lesson: climate change didn't really register, even if it matters to his daughter. Money concerns – sort of. But we could still be waiting, for power prices to rise and the solar panel subsidy to expire if it hadn't been for the power of norms: what are others around me doing?

The neighbourhood has solar systems sprouting all over the place, driven by the subsidy, but also by their visibility to neighbours and passers-by. It's increasingly becoming a norm.

And the motivation for my Dad was seeing this manifest in front of him, speaking to someone who had just been through the process of deciding what system to get and from whom.

Our communications approaches need to be much more mindful of how people learn, and how they are motivated.

## **Authority Rules**

Recently I've been having a fiery debate on Facebook with a contact who is in a very different place to mine with his views. I've been posting a lot of stories on the Occupy movement, and copping flak from him that is similar in content to what elements of the US media have been saying, best summed up by Rolling Stone's Matt Taibbi in a recent post:

*The right-wing media wasted no time in cannon-blasting the movement with its usual idiotic clichés, casting Occupy Wall Street as a bunch of dirty hippies who should get a job and stop chewing up Mike Bloomberg's police overtime budget with their urban sleepovers. Just like they did a half-century ago, when the debate over the Vietnam War somehow stopped being about why we were brutally murdering millions of innocent Indochinese civilians and instead became a referendum on bra-lessness and long hair and flower-child rhetoric, the depraved flacks of the right-wing media have breezily blown off a generation of fraud and corruption and market-perverting bailouts, making the whole debate about the protesters themselves – their hygiene, their "envy" of the rich, their "hypocrisy."*

No matter what I said or did, explaining what's going on, what's behind the idea of Occupy, pointing to previous civil movements, I could not get any quarter from this person that maybe there was a rationale to what's been going on in New York City and hundreds of other Occupy sites. In fact, I was subjected to a bit of 'messenger shooting'.

But despite my patient inquiry into what he understood about it all, how he came to that view, would he consider this, he became so strident – and at one point so belligerent that he got into a flame war with another friend of mine whom he had never met – that I considered screening him out of all further such posts. It was just exhausting to keep going over and over the same things. When I posted a clip of an 84 year old woman who was pepper-sprayed by the police in Seattle, his comment on that post was that it 'was a cheap shot designed to gain sympathy'!

That was the last straw.

Determined to get my contact to 'play the ball, and not the (wo)man', I thought – who does this message need to come from, for him? Not an activist or an academic or any of those other 'lefty' types.

Now the fellow in question is a Harley-riding former bikie who often has a friendly dig at me for being 'a bloody hippy'.

I took a punt, based on what I know of his musical tastes, that they included Rage Against the Machine.

I posted an interview that Rage Against the Machine guitarist Tom Morello gave at the Occupy Wall Street site in October to my friend's wall.

In addition to being a media magnet because of his celebrity status, Morello is articulate and very well informed.

He has the killer credentials of not only being in a rock band, but he is also an ex-staffer for a Senator, and a Harvard graduate with a degree in political science – ie. the guy knows what he is talking about, having studied and worked in politics at the coalface.

He has authority.

I was expecting another inflamed response to this post, but the comment he left surprised me:

...how far would a rock band get if they were not rebellious but he probably is a good choice of spokesman for your cause i agree..... for once

This says to me that because he looks to this band and it's music as a source of authority, he is open to accepting Morello's word where nothing else has resonated.

I don't think I've in any way 'converted' him – he has joined a Facebook group called 'F\*ck Occupy' – but being able to find the right messenger has given him pause to at least consider that there might be another way to look at this.

Have you ever encountered a situation where essentially the same message has not worked on one occasion, but worked on another, and the only difference is who issued the message?

Have you ever successfully found the right messenger and stepped aside to enable your message to be received by your intended audience?