



# The MAC Guide to Messaging Components

A quick tour of the most common messaging elements in an organization's brand toolkit



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# Unique selling proposition (USP)

## AVIS

"We're number two. We try harder."

## Mast Brothers Chocolate

"An obsessive attention to detail, meticulous craftsmanship, and inspirational simplicity."

## Flag & Wire Coffee

"Whole beans delivered to your door. No more running to the store on a Sunday morning because there's only eleven coffee beans left in the bag."



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A unique selling proposition (USP) identifies what you do really well, which your competitors aren't doing at all. This may or may not line up with why your audience actually chooses you. Ideally it will, but let's not get distracted: when defining a USP, put the emphasis on "U."

In the first example, Avis is the only rental company in the number two position. That's not a good thing, but it is unique. Their main competitor (Hertz, in number one) has no way to challenge them on it. Now here's where it gets brilliant: Avis has taken that unique attribute and reframed it as a selling point. We're the underdogs here. We're hungrier. We'll outperform the big fish.

As for the Mast Brothers example, "obsessive attention to detail, meticulous craftsmanship, and inspirational simplicity" are indeed unique, when you consider that each bar is handmade by brothers who live like they're from the 18th century, down to cacao-sourcing by wooden sailboat.

Our client Flag & Wire highlights their unique proposition, then goes on to appeal to a common pain point, positioning themselves as their customers' solution.

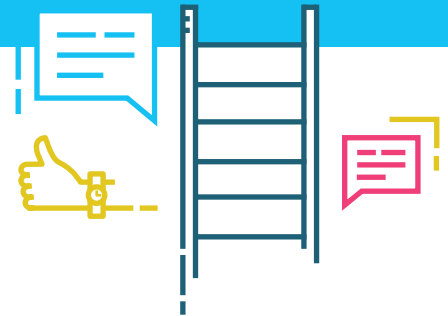
### How to begin

What are you doing really well, that your competitors aren't doing at all?

“ When defining a USP, put the emphasis on 'U.' ”

# 2

## Benefits ladder



### Fictional example

“Be the guy with the scores. Tell your friends what’s happening in the game before it’s even been announced. Instant updates, wherever you go. Get the XYZ sports phone. It’s the only one with real-time sports scores.”

Laddering is a qualitative marketing research technique, in which we map the steps from feature, to functional benefit, to higher-order benefit, to experience. In so doing, we translate the features and functions of a product (what it is and does) to an emotional experience (why people want it).

Once we have our ladder, we work backward along it to create the messaging: starting with the endpoint of experience and moving from there to benefit, to function, to feature.

Note, different audiences may derive different emotions from the same features. Each group may need its own ladder.

In the example, the XYZ sports phone user likes getting real-time scores (feature), because it lets him know what’s happening right away (functional benefit), which positions him to give that info to his friends (higher-order benefit), which adds to his social standing in a way that feels really good (emotional benefit).

### How to begin

Map a line from feature, to functional benefit, to higher-order benefit, to emotional benefit — then work backwards to build the message.

# 3

## Brand promise

### Geico

"Fifteen minutes or less can save you 15 percent or more on car insurance."

### Volvo

"Safety."

### Abound

"Adult degree programs. Find your opportunity."



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This component translates your basic value proposition into one, at most two, core concepts, which sum up the promise that your audience responds to: the reason they choose your brand.

Important note: this must be a promise that you do, in fact, deliver. Otherwise it'll ring false.

- A brand promise can be boiled down to a single word, as in the Volvo example "safety."
- It can also take the form of a complete statement, as with Geico.

- Our client Abound evaluates higher ed programs and helps adult students choose one that fits their needs; their promise is to help them advance their career and take control of their future.

#### How to begin

Bottom line, why do people pick you instead of someone else?

**“ This must be a promise that you do, in fact, deliver. Otherwise it'll ring false. ”**

# 4

## Brand essence

### Disney

“Fun family entertainment.”

### BMW

“The ultimate driving machine.”

### Woodcastle

“Forever furniture.”



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A brand essence distills your promise, differentiators, and audience perceptions into one short phrase (2–3 words) that captures the intangible quality that makes you who you are. It must be:

- Unique (refer to your USP for insight)
- Focused (pick one quality only)
- Important to your audience
- Experiential (a feeling)
- Accurate (the brand promise that you do in fact deliver)
- Essential (sure to stay true even if you extend your brand or evolve down the road)

For example, our client Woodcastle makes heirloom-quality furniture. This is unique — they’re the only manufacturer in their category to offer a lifetime guarantee on everything they make. It’s focused. The quality it expresses is important

to customers. It’s experiential; passing furniture to one’s grandkids is a meaningful idea. It’s accurate. And it’s essential, defining them at their core.

#### How to begin

Identify your USP. Define your brand promise. Research how your audience thinks of you. Then distill it all into 3–5 words (try: adjective, adjective, noun) that meet all the criteria above.

# 5

## Positioning statement



### De Cecco

"De Cecco is the premium pasta for serious chefs."

### Shadowserver

"A nonprofit security organization working altruistically behind the scenes to make the Internet more secure for everyone."

### Harley

"Harley provides macho guys with bigger, louder bikes than any other motorcycle manufacturer."

### Brice Co.

"Brice Co. provides young men with lower prices than any other sporting goods store. We do this by eliminating overhead, forming strategic partnerships with major brands, and matching any other price on the web."

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A positioning statement articulates who you are, what you do, whom you serve, and which corner of the market you own. It may or may not go on to assert credibility by showing how you deliver.

- The De Cecco example gives us the most basic version: brand, differentiating benefit, audience.
- The anatomy is the same in the example of our client Shadowserver: who, doing what, for whom.
- The statement can also include a competitive reference, as in the Harley example ("louder than").

- An expanded version may go on to offer proof, as in the Brice Co. example ("We do this by ...").

### How to begin

[Brand] provides [audience] with [superlative] than any other [competitor] by [reason to believe].

# 6

## Elevator pitch



### Fictional example

“We develop mobile apps for business leaders to train their staff remotely, so senior managers can use their time for other things. We’re not the only company doing this, but the difference is, we visit each organization we work with — in person — to find out exactly what they need. Which is why 95 percent of our clients are happy with the first version of their app. So how do you train new people?”

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An elevator pitch equips you and your team to ignite someone’s interest, tell what you do and why it’s unique, and invite them to engage further — even if you have only 30 seconds to work with.

In the example, the speaker leads with the offering, explains why it matters, tells how their company is different, throws in a data point, and finishes with an open-ended question to spark dialogue.

### How to begin

In 75 words or fewer, state your offering, the problems you solve, a supporting fact, and a question.

# 7

## Tagline

### Columbia

“In the city of New York”

### Pollywog

“Prepared parents. Healthy families.”

### Local Ocean

“Dockside Grill + Fish Market”



A tagline is meant to last for years, even decades. While campaign slogans come and go, a tagline must be so true to brand that it can outlive the needs and styles of the moment — but also flexible enough to adapt to new needs, styles, and campaigns as they arise.

Tall order? Yes. There are no shortcuts to a good tagline.

- The Columbia University tagline meets the bar superbly. It succinctly claims a core brand benefit whose value is impervious to change: the legendary city in which it’s located.
- Our client, Pollywog, provides a support network to new parents, so that when challenges arise later, they’ll have the education and resources to handle them positively already in place. The tagline encapsulates the goal of the project in a form that will stand the test of time.

- The third tagline is a straightforward description of what our client Local Ocean does. It emphasizes their location along the dock to differentiate them from competitors, while conveying the benefit of freshness at the same time.

### How to begin

Write 75 taglines. Rule out all but your ten best ideas. Refine from there until you have the one.

“ There are no shortcuts to a good tagline. ”



# 8

## Campaign slogan



### McDonald's

"I'm lovin' it."



### Google

"Don't be evil."

### Reebok

"I am what I am."

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A campaign slogan is a focused response to the needs of the moment. Unlike a tagline, which must be stable and broad enough to represent the entire organization for one or more decades, a slogan is free to home in on one goal, in one moment, for one audience.

Campaign slogans should roll off the tongue. While they may be presented as text, never forget that they need to sound good when spoken.

### How to begin

As with a tagline, the surest way to arrive at a solid campaign slogan is to draft a ton of ideas (50-100), then narrow these down to one. You have to get all the mediocre ideas out of the way before you can get to the one that's really great.



Madison Ave. Collective (our friends call us the MAC) is a strategic branding design and web development firm. We use solid research to help businesses and nonprofits raise their game.

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