

STRATEGY IV

CRAFT MEANINGFUL MESSAGES

THE TACTICS IN STRATEGY IV FOCUS ON

- Finding and using your voice to your advantage.
- Preparing critical messages in advance.
- Thinking on your feet.

SPEAK IN HEADLINES WITH TAGLINES

I've been researching other school systems—you know, it's great that we're able to do all of this online. I've found so much information that is invaluable to us as PTA members. In fact, I've found more information than we can even possibly use. I found best practices from schools around the country that are doing things in a much more efficient and effective way than we are. The Dallas school system, for example, has an entire interactive website that parents and teachers can use to their advantage. Would you believe that they get over five hundred unique visitors every day while we can't even get a good turnout for our meetings? That's really something that we need to turn around. And the Seattle schools are engaging local businesses to help them design their website and make it more interactive. Of course, they're lucky because Microsoft is in their backyard. Unfortunately, we don't have the same kind of resources in our community. Well, anyway, what I'd like to talk about are a few ideas for how we can improve the quality of education in our own school system.

Was that painful for you to read? It was painful for us to write! And it's even more painful for the people who had to listen to it. Using more words than necessary to convey a message causes great ideas to be minimized, misunderstood, or flat out ignored (case in point: did you even read that paragraph to the end?). The inclination of nice girls is to use far too many words but the more words that are used, the less effect they have. As a result, nice girls often unwittingly sabotage their best efforts to communicate important messages for fear of being too direct or pushy.

Not to worry, though. We've got a method for getting your point across more effectively and succinctly without coming across as brazen

or strident. Like it or not, men have more latitude when it comes to short communications. Most women can't get away with short, pithy messages the way men can—we're accused of being aloof or rude, whereas men are just assumed to be busy and efficient. We're expected to not only communicate clearly, but also care about what others think about what we've just said—and that's where headlines and taglines are the ideal solutions.

In the painfully long argument that begins this chapter, the woman made the mistake of not clearly stating from the outset the message she wanted people to take away. She left it until the end, and by then many listeners had mentally checked out. The first thing that comes out of your mouth should be your headline, and it should indicate to the listener what's about to come. In this case, the woman's headline should have been:

I'd like to present three ideas for how we can improve the quality of education in our school district based on the best practices of other districts.

Now *that's* clear! It gets the attention of her audience. It also sets up what's to come, so people will want to keep listening. She would be wise to continue as follows:

First, we need to engage more parents in the process. One way to do this is to develop a user-friendly interactive website.

Second, I propose that we develop a process where parents meet more regularly with teachers to better understand their challenges.

And third, our curriculum is outdated and would benefit from a review by an outside expert who can help us to ensure it's state-of-the-art.

These are the key points: 1, 2, 3. But she can't stop there. Because she's a woman, walking that tightrope between being seen as pushy or

not being seen at all, she should add the following direct, straightforward tagline:

These are my recommendations. However, I'd like to open it up for discussion so that we can get other good ideas on the table as well and make a decision as to the most appropriate way to move forward.

Now her ideas have been clearly expressed and she's also indicated that she's open to other options. Regardless of your audience or your message, using headlines and taglines in this way will help to organize your thoughts, present them in a way that is understandable to the listener, and increase the likelihood of being heard.

MAKE IT WORK FOR YOU

- **Prepare your communications in advance.** If the message you want to convey is important, then preparing it in advance is critical. Sketch out the boxes in the following diagram and fill them in with your message. If you have to think on your feet and don't have time to write down what you want to say, mentally picture the boxes and what you want to say within each one. Pretty soon, you'll be able to use the model without even having to write anything down. Make several copies of the diagram and keep them handy as a reminder.
- **Avoid the temptation to share everything in your head.** No one wants or needs to know everything that you're thinking. Operating under the misconception that more is better, nice girls overexplain themselves and provide too much detail. Save the fine points for when and if questions are asked.
- **Use headlines and taglines *everywhere*.** This technique is not only valuable when making important presentations, but also when you're communicating a message to your spouse, child, friends, salespeople, and so on. If you've ever wondered why your husband or friends tune you out, it could be that you're not getting your

point across quickly enough. We've found that to be better heard, most women can reduce their messages by at least 25 percent.

- **Cue people when you're thinking out loud.** There will always be times when you just don't have a clear message outlined in your head; that's all right provided you say, "Let me think out loud for a moment." It cues the listener not to expect a fully thought out and succinct communication.

