

# The Right Message Matters

By Tim Geisert and Mary Lafferty, Kenexa

It's no secret that recruiting the right people is pivotal to the success of your organization. Recruitment begins with communication, and communication begins with messaging. If your messaging is weak, off-point or in the wrong voice, it won't deliver the success you're looking for.

## Research First, Message Second

The only way to achieve accurate messaging is to formulate it from a strategy based on research. Research will define the current market position of your organization, explain why candidates seek you out, uncover how to duplicate your top performers and reveal the internal culture of your organization. These research insights will define your employment brand and serve as the foundation for your messaging. MoreBusiness.com, an online business resource center on market research, states:

*Market research consists of a plan that charts how relevant data is to be collected and analyzed so that the results are useful and relevant for making marketing decisions. Once the research and the related analysis are complete, the results are communicated to management. This provides management with in-depth information regarding crucial factors that have an impact on the target market and existing marketing mix. Market research allows management to make the changes necessary for better results through adopting a proactive approach.*

Thorough and accurate front-end research will help you develop strategic messaging that empowers candidates to self-select in or out of the recruitment process.

## Opt for Uniqueness

In a world full of media and message clutter, finding a point of differentiation is key. This differentiation is your company culture, uncovered by talking to your top performers and key stakeholders. Your culture is the sum of all your parts, both the rational facts

and emotional truths that define your organization. Recruitment messaging should bring your culture to life, telling a candidate what it means to work for your company. For example, are your people status driven or team oriented; do they pride themselves on the projects they work on or the clients they work with; are they motivated by customer satisfaction or commissions? Sharing these messages in a succinct manner begins the company process of self-selection.

Simple headlines are great and sometimes the quickest way to get your message across. But being too simple will either confuse the candidate or not tell them enough. It's about finding the right combination.

When it comes to recruitment messaging, the first instinct might be to include popular recruitment phrases such as *dynamic*, *passionate* or *innovative*. However, these words don't tell the candidate the benefit of working for your organization or give any insight into the culture. Words are powerful, and help begin selecting people in or out of the application process within seconds of viewing an ad. Other commonly used recruitment phrases include:

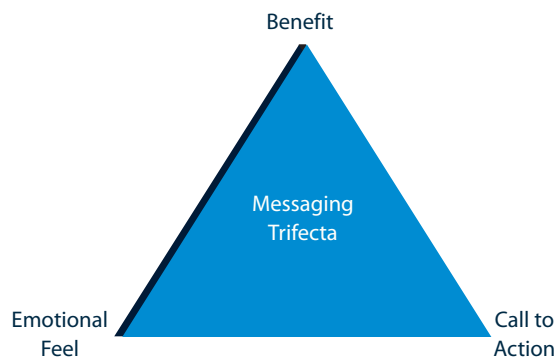
*"The opportunity of a lifetime"*  
*"Improve your work life"*  
*"Work for an industry leader"*

Consumers and candidates are able to filter messaging in seconds. Messaging that isn't authentic and doesn't resonate with them will be disregarded immediately.

## Sell the Benefit

As your HR team begins to think more like marketing or brand managers, you can leverage the messaging practices and techniques that attract the right candidates to your organization.

To find candidates that resemble your top performers, you need to message the benefit of your organization (which is the recruiting aspect), the right emotional feel and a call to action. There are many organizations to choose from when searching for a job, but each one has its own unique qualities. The goal of recruitment messaging is to deliver those unique qualities and attract candidates that would perform well within your culture—to do this, the message needs to focus on the benefit, give the correct emotional feel to the candidate and provide a call to action.



In the book “What Sticks,” written by Rex Briggs and Greg Stuart, the Rolex watch is used as an example. The functional benefit, or rational fact, of a Rolex is that it serves a need—it tells time. And while this is the underlying reason why someone would buy a watch, it isn’t the only reason why someone would buy a Rolex. People are drawn to a Rolex because of the social motivation, the emotional truth of the brand. According to “What Sticks,” “the brand tells something about the individual wearing it.”

Candidates use the same decision making process when looking for a job as they do when purchasing a product. Having a job serves a need; it creates income, which is the rational fact. But candidates need to know the social motivation, or the emotional truths, of your organization. In other words, what is the culture like? What motivates current employees? What values and standards do you expect from an employee? What will make them want to stay?

In addition to the benefit and emotional pull, the message needs to portray a call to action to differentiate it from a product or consumer ad, and tell candidates in seconds the action you would like them to take.

Use a message that is clear and precise, not one that might confuse a candidate, make them guess the overall benefit or tell them the wrong thing—it’s not good for your organization and it’s not good for the candidate. If you don’t know the benefit,

start with conducting interviews and focus groups with your top performers; find out why they perform well and why they stay at your organization. Then use this information to attract other top performers who fit within your current culture.

### Consistency in Attitude Versus Delivery

In a world where candidates are faced with thousands of messages every day, it is important to stay consistent in personality and attitude, but authentic and unique in delivery.

The trick is conveying your organization’s personality, while keeping the element of surprise in delivery. This will attract a candidate’s attention. Depending on whom the target audience is, delivery is configured in different ways. Contrary to common marketing beliefs, the surprise factor will be diminished with consistency in delivering recruitment messaging.

For example, every individual has a consistent personality and attitude, but based on the situation, will dress themselves differently for the role they are playing. Most people dress one way for work, one way for black-tie affairs and one way for lounging at home.

A great example of surprise within consistency is the Google recruitment campaign of 2004. While staying within its current brand guidelines (so the messaging source was easily recognized by candidates), Google placed a billboard ad on a major highway in Palto Alto, CA. But instead of using traditional messaging, the company posted a math problem. The solution to the math problem directed you to a URL, which, in turn, sent you to a page with a more difficult math problem. These completed steps led candidates to the recruitment process, but, even more importantly, the messaging was spot-on for the type of person Google wanted as a candidate. The personality and attitude conveyed within this marketing was consistent with the Google brand, but the delivery was a surprise.

### Use One Voice

Learn the internal brand of your organization, talk to top performers, perform as much research as you can and let the message start to define itself. Once this is done, use it consistently. Of course you can change messaging on pieces (it would be impossible not to), but ensure your organization is speaking with one voice.

By defining your employment brand, you not only ensure that your external messaging is using one voice, but you ensure your employees speak with one voice—making them advocates for the brand, both as recruiters and sellers.

### Theory Into Action

The Kenexa Employment Branding team partnered with the Navy Medical Center Portsmouth (NMCP) to maximize civilian nursing recruitment efforts and reach more candidates. One of the tasks on the table was messaging. Current recruitment messaging wasn't clear or consistent and didn't unify NMCP or clearly reflect the brand.

After extensive research, it became clear the messaging needed to capture a sense of pride. Top performers at NMCP feel a great sense of pride in their work and are driven by the desire to support the American troops and their families.

Our suggested tagline of *Medicine with a Mission* and a recruitment headline of *Stand Beside Those Who Serve* was right on target.

### Why We Messaged the Way We Did

It's no secret that without the right people in the right jobs, an organization cannot achieve maximum potential. If the right talent is selected during the recruitment process, the end result is employees who are engaged, driven and perform well.

This effort starts with messaging—messaging that comes from a foundation of research and strategy and tells the benefit of your organization. Remember, the first opinion a candidate has of your organization is formulated from messaging.

When Kenexa built its Employment Branding team, the company opted for people who had lived the marketing and advertising world and knew the ins and outs of effective marketing—a decision that has proven itself successful for Kenexa and its clients. ■

### About the Authors

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Tim L. Geisert is a Kenexa Principal and serves as the vice president of Employment Branding. Mr. Geisert specializes in helping organizations clearly articulate their cultural brand through a proprietary strategic brand planning process. He previously held executive positions at Bailey Lauerman and The Martin Agency, working with a variety of organizations including many global companies in the Fortune 100.

Mr. Geisert has published numerous articles on employment branding, cultural insight, organizational discovery and effective recruitment practices. He is an engaging, thought provoking speaker, and regularly speaks to corporate audiences and HR Professionals on the significance of branding in the organizational environment. Mr. Geisert holds a degree from the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, where he has also taught communications research and strategy courses as an adjunct professor.

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Mary Lafferty is a copywriter for the employment branding team at Kenexa. With more than 10 years of copywriting experience, she oversees message development as well as overall creative concepting for all clients. Ms. Lafferty has a deep background in editing, copywriting and creative development. Before joining Kenexa, she held positions with Nelnet and Sandhills Publishing, where she was responsible for the copywriting department and overall quality of creative messaging.

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