

••• communication research

# Be clear and coherent

Meta-analysis reveals best practices for more effective marketing claims

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## snapshot

The authors offer a three-step process for vetting marketing claims and provide four rules for message creation.

At the core of an effective marketing claim is a truly resonant message, one that is written in an articulate and compelling way. The ultimate proof of an effective claim often lies in the sales numbers. But before a claim can be launched into the market, it falls on the marketing researcher to discover what message will resonate most with consumers.

A meta-analysis conducted by the marketing research firm SKIM examined more than 850 claims in 16 categories including personal care, cosmetics, foods, home care and durables. Through multivariate analysis techniques, researchers at SKIM were able to uncover valuable insights into how to develop a winning claims strategy.

SKIM created 34 codes representing hypothetical drivers of message effectiveness. In order to construct the codes, previous studies were examined to identify patterns, such as the fact that fluffy messages always seemed to be outperformed by more concrete ones. Next, tens of thousands of open-ended responses provided a vast amount of feedback that helped the researchers better understand how consumers react towards certain characteristics. Lastly, recognizing the importance of including linguists and copywriters in the claim-creation process, SKIM worked in close collaboration with a linguistic expert. This was especially relevant in refining the codes related to the articulation of the claim.

All claims were then coded and analyzed to identify the key success drivers. To ensure the validity of the results and to avoid any discrepancies in the coding and analysis process, every claim was coded separately by at least two individuals. For all claims, inter-coder consistency was computed and inconsistencies were resolved by having the coders, including the linguistic expert, agree upon the interpretation of the code.

Understanding which factors drive claim effectiveness will help marketers craft language that provides their product with a competitive edge in the consumer's mind. Although every category has its own intricacies, the inclusion of a broad range of



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interrelated categories in this study provides a universally-tested framework that can be applied across multiple categories.

The resulting three-step process aids in developing and optimizing a winning claim:

Define: "What" do you say?

Develop an effective core message that ties back to the product's value proposition to entice consumers and provide market differentiation.

Refine: "How" do you say it? Once the optimal content of the claim has been determined, it is important to articulate it in a clear and compelling way.

Deliver: Understand the context and environment into which the claim will be delivered.

### Define: four rules of message creation

Our meta-analysis found that strong messages have four common characteristics. By writing claims that include these characteristics, marketers can boost the likelihood of a message performing strongly in the market.

**1. Promise value.** A prerequisite for successful messages is to promise value by communicating relevant and tangible benefits that help the consumer reach a desirable end state. Whether a detergent cleans more stains or a gum is better at stopping bad breath, a promise of value must be made. This is the essence of a winning claim and its defining point of difference. To best communicate the promised value, straightforward language should be utilized while fluffy and unsubstantiated statements should be avoided.

✓ For perfectly smooth skin  
Designed for perfection

✓ A rich chocolate taste made from real cocoa beans  
Chocolaty goodness to indulge yourself

### 2. Put the key benefit(s) first.

When there's only a split-second to capture attention, it is important to mention the key benefit first. If this is not done, consumers may pass over to the next product be-

fore even reading the main benefit of your product.

✓ Lose weight faster with our improved product formulation  
Our improved product formulation will help you lose weight faster

While it's absolutely critical for a message to have at least one benefit, it can be even better to showcase multiple benefits. A powerful way to communicate multiple benefits is to offer a solution to a dilemma by combining two seemingly incompatible benefits into one appealing statement (e.g., health and taste or efficiency and duration).

✓ A healthy breakfast never tasted this good  
A healthy breakfast to start your day off right

**3. Be specific.** Being specific is the most important driver of claim effectiveness. The more specific a relevant message is, the better. Consumers want to know exactly what tangible benefits a product will deliver and "how much" or "how much more" the product offers than the competition. Specificity can be achieved by highlighting either words or numbers within a message.

✓ Smooth in seconds, lasts for three weeks or longer  
Easy hair removal for long-lasting smoothness

✓ Removes more tough stains than any other detergent  
More cleaning power than any other detergent

**4. Set yourself apart.** Every product is being measured against a set of alternatives. Rarely, if ever, is a product alone on the shelf. Due to this competition, it is important to position by saying or implying that a product offers greater value than the competition. However, it is worth noting that the meta-analysis did not find any evidence of significant differences in effectiveness between comparative and non-comparative messages, which suggests that merely drawing a comparison with competition is not enough. This stresses the importance of having a differenti-

ating value promise that sets the product apart by default.

When using a comparative claim, it is most effective to benchmark against the category. Benchmarking against one's own brand can be a sign of weakness, and targeting a single competitive brand can be detrimental as consumers may like that brand and feel offended, dislike it and feel alienated, or not know it and feel indifferent.

✓ 12 hours of nonstop waterproof protection  
Protects you from the sun longer than Brand X

✓ 4 hours of more battery life than any other brand  
Now with 20% longer battery life than before

### Refine: an articulation checklist

The findings of the meta-analysis revealed that every message must meet certain standards for style and tonality in order to succeed. While adhering to the message checklist below might not guarantee that a message is successful, it will ensure that the claim does not fall short because of weak articulation. In essence, these are the counteractions to avoiding common pitfalls. To develop a winning claim, one should do the following:

- Be positive: Offer something positive instead of avoiding something negative.
- Be respectful: Know your audience; don't inadvertently be condescending or presumptuous.
- Be clear: Use simple unambiguous language to ensure the message is understood.
- Be coherent: Connect the dots – ensure benefits and reasons to believe related to each other.
- Be fluid: Create sentences that flow naturally and do not sound contrived.
- Avoid jargon: Use words and terms that are meaningful and known to your target audience.
- Avoid humor: Be direct and focus on efficiently getting your value proposition across.

### Deliver: consider the message environment

Messages should be evaluated with

consideration for the competitive landscape. Winning messages are most effective when they are designed to work in the real world.

First, benchmark new messages against current messages. Include current messages in the testing process. If you don't include current messages, it's impossible to know if the new winner is an improvement over the status quo.

Second, consider the decision-making ecosystem. Is there a single decision maker or are there multiple inputs and influencers involved in the decision? For example, if you are selling through an intermediary (e.g., insurance through an agent or pharmaceuticals through a physician) one must take into account the influence of each stakeholder before choosing the winning messages.

Third, find out exactly what makes the message a winner and why others are less successful. This can be achieved through open-ended questions or by using a claims tool that asks respondents to highlight liked and disliked parts of the mes-

sages. The resulting information can provide valuable insights for creative and brand teams and often can help optimize the message.

Finally, context can make or break a well-worded message. Test the messages in the applicable delivery environment (e.g., print, Web and packaging) beyond just words on a page. Sometimes a message that seems compelling at first will fall short in the context of the overall graphics or packaging. For this reason it is important to test the messages within a graphical context that allows respondents to identify what it is about the message that resonates strongly – as well as what is negative – in a more realistic scenario.

### Speak clearly and persuasively

Powerful messages are a critical part of successful product marketing. “Big brands get very short opportunities to communicate with consumers – when we do get that chance, we need to speak clearly and persuasively,” says Justin De

Graaf, senior manager, corporate marketing strategy and insights, the Coca-Cola Company. “That’s why it’s absolutely imperative to have a robust approach that allows us to build our comms with input from our consumers. On several occasions I’ve successfully used this best-practices framework to optimize messaging to have greater consumer appeal and also to avoid language that would have turned off consumers.”

By leveraging the three-step process – define, refine, deliver – laid out above, market researchers can provide an additional level of certainty for successful message development and help ensure that marketers make the most of their chances to communicate with consumers. ①

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