

# The Medical Cannabis Advocate's Handbook

## STRATEGIC MESSAGING

*Given marijuana's proven efficacy at treating certain symptoms and its relatively low toxicity, reclassification would reduce barriers to research and increase availability of cannabinoid drugs to patients who have failed to respond to other treatments...ACP strongly urges protection from criminal or civil penalties for patients who use medical marijuana as permitted under state laws.*

—American College of Physicians



# STRATEGIC MESSAGING

**Words matter.** The way advocates talk about medical cannabis shapes the opinions of the public and policy makers. There are an infinite number of topics surrounding medical cannabis but not all of them are politically relevant or advantageous. Strategic messages steer the public discourse toward relevant topics, defined priorities, and preferred language. It will help define the parameters of the debate and guide your audience toward desired actions. Strategic messages are not exhaustive explanations of your beliefs and rationales. They are carefully crafted statements or slogans that are designed to reach and move your target audiences.

**SUGGESTED READING: Don't think of an Elephant, by George Lakoff**

This section will take you through a process of developing messages that will support your campaign's goals and objectives. These messages will be used when talking to the media, public speaking, testifying at civic meetings, in outreach materials, on signs and banners, and in discussions with elected officials. After reading this section go to the worksheet and practice crafting key messages based on your strategic plan.

## A. IDENTIFY THE TARGET AUDIENCE

The first question you should ask when developing strategic messages is 'WHO are we trying to reach?' It is important to identify our target audiences so that your messages can be crafted to reach them. Although our primary goals and key objectives include "the general public," our public awareness efforts should be focused toward more specific target audiences.

### **Ignore the Opposition and Convince the Majority**

In social change movements, advocacy organi-

zations should not expend any effort on trying to convert the opposition. They are unlikely to listen or be persuaded. Instead, it's most important to focus on clear supporters and those who fall somewhere in the middle on our issues - those who are open to being influenced. Fortunately for our mission, those two groups equal the overwhelming majority of the US population) Specifically, we should target:

- " Self-Identified Medical Cannabis Supporters who are not aware of the urgent threats faced by patients and their providers in states that allow access, the situation of patients now being forced into the underground market to secure their medicine, and the pain that many endure because of fear of arrest.
- " Other Political Activists/Potential Allies who do not yet see how the safe and legal access to cannabis therapeutics is intertwined with issues they are already actively working on such as HIV/AIDS advocacy, consumer health care issues, Religion vs. Science advocacy, etc.
- " The "Mushy Middle" who may not identify themselves as activists, but can be swayed and influenced to act on this issue if it is framed as something that is or could be affecting their lives or the lives of their loved ones. This group may not respond to medical cannabis as a social or political issue.

### **Focus on Key Stakeholders**

Advocates should target the following (even more narrowly defined than the audiences listed above) key stakeholder audiences who have the power to create meaningful and significant change:

- " Law Enforcement Community whose members can exercise influence over federal, state, and local-level decision making and who have the power to make

recommendations and formulate drug enforcement strategies.

- Opinion Leaders like leading media pundits, politicians, and community leaders who frame issues impacting public health and policy and consequently influence the public's perception of those issues. They may be educated on the legal and legislative attacks on medical cannabis but are not aware of the particularly urgent threat to patients.
- Acute Care Medical Communities (Cancer, AIDS, Multiple Sclerosis, Crohn's Disease, etc.) since they may potentially need these services, and, as health care consumers, can make demands on the medical community to provide those services as an integral part of medicine.
- Medical Professionals and Scientific Communities who may think that "medical marijuana" is a political/social issue rather than an issue of public health policy.

## **B. GET YOUR MESSAGE HEARD: "SAY WHAT YOU MEAN TO SAY"**

### **Know Your Target Audience**

If you want to reach your target audience, it is important to consider what messages they want to hear. For instance, think about how you would tell your mother a story about a date as opposed to what you would tell your best friend. While the two stories are about the same event, they will most likely differ in details and descriptions. In this case, you are sizing up your target audience and giving them the details they want or need.

Advocates often try to communicate information that their audiences don't understand because they are not as educated as the advocates are on the issue. For instance, talking about good dispensaries versus bad dispensaries may turn someone off who is just learning about the medical efficacy of cannabis.

### **Key Media/Public Messages**

Key Messages are what you need the public to know about your issue. Remember you do

not need to fully disclose political strategy in these messages but rather articulate problems on your terms. Key messages should be used to craft sound bites, slogans, and any press statements.

Key Media/Public Messages should:

- Appeal to target audiences but frame issues on your terms
- Communicate problem and the cause
- Communicate the solution and who has the power to make that solution
- Communicate actions that reinforce your goals

### **Framing Our Issue**

One of the most popular buzzwords in media relations and public advocacy is "framing." Taken together, the words, phrases, and themes chosen create a "framework" for how those issues are discussed publicly. In our world of 30-second sound bites and 10-minute meetings, those who frame issues well often win public discussions. By taking control of how our issues are framed for the media and policymakers, we are able to:

- Define our issues on our terms-use terms like medicine, cannabis, medicate, dispensaries, provider and patients, NOT drugs, marijuana, get high, clubs, grower and users;
- Identify how our efforts are part of social issues that impact a greater number of people than our members-i.e. medical cannabis represents the struggle of all patients who cannot access their medicine that their doctors agree is the best treatment;
- Identify who are the most important players including those who can make changes; and
- Put the opposition on the defensive-i.e. ask the DEA and other opponents to prove that the harms of cannabis therapeutics are worse than the pain these patients face every day or the harassment they face from the Federal Government.

## How to Frame: Using our Key Messages

The best strategy for framing issues is to stand back, look at our primary goals, and develop the best messages for communicating those goals. By condensing our complex issues down to a few key messages, we will be able to:

- Communicate the "frame" around our issues-think of the "big picture" values, such as compassion, liberty, democracy, medical professionalism;
- Highlight our primary goals-Safe and legal access to cannabis therapeutics NOW;
- Focus reporters and policymakers on the most relevant issues- i.e. we're talking about patients, not criminals; and
- Maintain control and direct interviews with reporters and meetings with policymakers. Don't let distracting questions pull you away from your strategic message.

## MESSAGE DISCIPLINE: ONE MESSAGE, MANY MESSENGERS

If we practice "message discipline" - consistently and persistently delivering these same key messages - we will have the greatest impact. As mentioned earlier, key messages are more likely to reach target audiences if they echo again and again through all of our public advocacy work, especially media outreach. The best way to ensure that we stay "on message" is for every spokesperson - whether in California, Montana, or elsewhere - to consistently use strategic messaging.

Although factual information is important, reporters and policymakers are also interested in having social problems expressed in human terms. Personal stories are essential elements in producing compelling news stories and successfully educating policymakers. These messages are only intended as guidelines for speaking about cannabis therapeutics. They are only compelling when injected with the more personal stories of why and how ASA advocates are committed to this issue.

<b>NEGATIVE CONNOTATIONS</b>	<b>BETTER TERMINOLOGY</b>
<b>Marijuana</b>	<b>Cannabis</b>
<b>Weed, stash, dope, etc</b>	<b>Medicine</b>
<b>Smoke pot</b>	<b>Consume cannabis, medicate</b>
<b>Pot club</b>	<b>Medical cannabis dispensary</b>
<b>Dealer, Seller</b>	<b>Cannabis provider</b>
<b>Buy, Score</b>	<b>Acquire</b>
<b>Sell</b>	<b>Provide</b>
<b>Vendor, grower</b>	<b>Patient-cultivator</b>
<b>Hash</b>	<b>Cannabis extract</b>
<b>Clones</b>	<b>Cuttings or plants</b>
<b>Buzz, high, stoned, etc.</b>	<b>Medicated, cerebral effects</b>
<b>"420"</b>	<b>Just do not use it!</b>

For more information, see [www.AmericansForSafeAccess.org](http://www.AmericansForSafeAccess.org) or contact the ASA office at 1-888-929-4367 or 510-251-1856.