

Words That Work

Messaging Recommendations from Our Public Opinion Research

State DOTs and AASHTO must be ready with strong, supporting messages about their programs, examples of effective projects, and facts to back up their positions. The language of these messages is critical, painting word pictures in the minds of the listener and illustrating the key issues of accountability, performance and community. Equally important is the use of repetition to bring these messages home across every communications platform, from printed materials to speeches to media interviews.

“Are We There Yet? We Can Be” has the flexibility of being a rallying cry for both national and state concerns. It is anecdotal, populist and familiar, and cuts across the full range of issues. The object is to take the familiar and link it to questions that concern our priorities—for funding, safety, or for whatever challenges are facing your state and the nation.

AASHTO research found that although people grumble about their individual transportation concerns, there is qualified support for raising funds for better projects, but **ONLY IF** they are presented with a clear roadmap for how and why things will be different in the future.

Some key communications techniques:

- Be consistent in using the same words in every communication—press releases, speeches, the website copy, media interviews and any other verbal or written statement, such as folder covers, programs or events. This will ensure that the audience will walk away with a few big ideas—and ones you have carefully chosen.
- Communicate the individual benefits to each and every user of your transportation system (driver, transit or bicycle rider, or pedestrian, while assuring them that the DOT is a responsible steward of their finances.
- Build your message around three steps in the communications “ladder”:
 - **Step One:** Guarantee accountability as your first priority.
 - **Step Two:** Show that the project is community driven—reflecting the priorities and needs of the drivers and users of the system (and be sure to include state and local decision-makers as primary spokespersons).
 - **Step Three:** Show that the project is performance-driven—on-time and on-budget.

The Value of “Grasstops” and Key Influencers

- State DOT officials are considered the most credible voices on what needs to be done
- At the same time, research has identified some skepticism about these voices
- Independent voices can reinforce the messages
- Influencers vary by state and issue
- Identify them and provide information and opportunities so they can voice their views

Chose Your Words Carefully

- Every message should be supported by “facts and stats” and local examples
- Just as research has shown words that work, there are words that do NOT appear to move the public. (Note, however, that many influencers may be swayed by them, depending on their own interest.)
- Word references that do NOT appear to work with the general public:
 - Lofty and wistful appeals to history and tradition
 - Do the right thing and honor a commitment
 - References to climate change
 - References to China and India, and large dollar amounts
- **Concepts That Work**
 - Offer an explicit plan of action—not vague platitudes
 - Personalize the message—my street, my company’s trucks, my driving
 - Localize the benefits
 - Provide context for your proposals—not a two or five-cent gas tax, but “an amount equal to a weekly cup of coffee at your local 7-11”
 - Position yourself as offering smart solutions
 - Challenge their worldview
 - Use commonsense comparisons—roads have a lifespan, just like your car
 - Use facts sparingly—and when you do, personalize them or provide a context people can see or visualize
- **Words That Work**—These words tested well with both the public and opinion leaders
 - Accountable
 - Community-based
 - Performance-driven; on-time, on-budget; and using innovative technologies
 - Fighting earmarks and wasteful Washington spending
 - Fair, open and non-partisan
 - Safety first—safety on our roads (“Even low-cost simple fixes like rumble strips or cable barrier system will drastically reduce highways fatalities, but only if we have the will to pay for them.)
 - Smart solutions
 - We must invest now, before it’s too late
 - It’s time for greater and smarter investment of our transportation dollars