

# Shift from Defense to Offense

## Targeted, Emotional Language Can Broaden Support for Nonprofits

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*Fight for the things you care about but do it in a way that will lead others to join you.*

- Ruth Bader Ginsberg

The language nonprofits use to communicate their missions can unite people to change the world or ignite fiery opposition. Unfortunately, nonprofit organizations may not always wield the power of language in ways that advance their cause – particularly in the public policy arena. In some cases, their language can even become a barrier. This research explores the types of language nonprofits can leverage language to build large, diverse coalitions or avoid hostility. The key to inspiring others to join your fight may require matching the appropriate message with a specific audience.

### Playing Defense

In recent years, nonprofit leaders may feel like they are playing defense more often than offense in the public policy arena. Some sector leaders claim this current defensive position is due to a failure by nonprofits and philanthropy to effectively utilize data and communicate their value and expertise to policymakers and the public. Nonprofit advocate Steve Taylor (2025) says, “Those of us in the nonprofit world have for years failed to sufficiently explain who we are and what we do” (para. 15).

When it comes to effective utilization of data, one challenge for nonprofits is the extent the information they use in advocacy messages can be trusted. Increasing selectivity in how data is collected and reported – even among government sources – may make it more difficult for public and policymakers on both sides of the aisle to trust fact-based messages (Sommer, 2015).

Skepticism of facts make it more difficult for nonprofits to combat increasing criticism of their programs and policy objectives. Nonprofit leaders feel the need to bolster their defenses against new critiques, with some choosing to head off criticism before it arises by preemptively changing how they do their work (Bogart, 2025). If nonprofits are changing their approach to their missions due to public and political opposition, it is important to understand the cause of that criticism.

Sector leader Eboo Patel (2025) asserts nonprofits are losing public support because they appear to be out of touch with what is important to everyday people. More specifically, some of the language nonprofits use to describe their work may trigger backlash among target audiences (Feinberg & Willer, 2019; Watkins, 2025). Consultant Matt Watkins explains, “You say equity, they hear exclusion” (Watkins, 2025, para. 1). These critiques imply that nonprofits may be great at fighting for what they care about, but they are not inspiring a diverse coalition to join

them. To what extent may nonprofit advocacy communications be ineffective or invite opposition? If they need to be improved, what should nonprofits say to help them shift from defense to offense?

## **Understanding *All* of the Players**

A critical strategy when competing at a high level in sports is to understand *all* the players. Coaches spend hours studying the capabilities of players on their own team, but also the opposing teams. Similarly, nonprofits need to understand what motivates not only their supporters, but also those that are neutral or oppose them.

Psychology and communications literature show that people make most of their decisions, including political decisions, based on emotions rather than facts. People's emotions often are triggered by morals and values that shape how people see the world (Haidt, 2012; Greene, 2013; Lakoff, 2014). Shared values motivate people to cooperate and work together toward a common goal (Westen, 2007; Haidt, 2012; Greene, 2013; Lakoff, 2014).

Objective facts and education can be persuasive when people do not have a preformed opinion or emotional reaction to an issue (Greene, 2013). Policy issues impacting the broad nonprofit sector, such as tax policy, often fall within this category. Unfortunately, unfamiliarity with an issue can mean policymakers and the public do not see many sector issues as relevant (Olson, 2016; Pecorino, 2015). Research also shows that fact-based messages are less likely to inspire a person to act compared stronger, values-based motivations (Haidt, 2012; Greene, 2013). Although nonpartisan, unfamiliar nonprofit policy issues may appear well-suited for fact-based messages, facts still may not generate enough support for policymakers or the public to move nonprofit needs to the top of their agenda.

Understanding that emotions and values serve as great motivators for all the “players” in the policy arena, challenges still arise when attempting to tap into the power of words. When advocates create emotional messages, they often choose language that appeals to themselves rather than their target audience (Feinberg & Willer, 2019). By default, people try to persuade others to agree with their own values and worldview, rather than looking for common ground. Unfortunately, matching the wrong value with a target audience further entrenches opposition (Feinberg & Willer, 2019). Given these insights, what can the nonprofit sector learn through research to help them craft more effective messages that strengthen support from policymakers and the public?

## **Mounting a Good Offense**

The adage “the best defense is a good offense” explains why nonprofits have an opportunity to strategically use language to broaden support for their issues and mitigate opposition. This research explored how different types of emotional and factual messages influence public support for nonprofit sector-wide issues. A large volume of research tests the extent values-based messages can influence people's positions on well-known, controversial issues. This research contributes to the existing field of research by testing how effectively fact- and values-

based messages influence people’s positions on unfamiliar, historically nonpartisan policy issues about nonprofits.

The research analyzed data from five surveys fielded between 2019 and 2023 that asked a nationally representative sample of people living in the U.S. the extent of their support for a range of nonprofit sector issues. Each survey presented factual and emotional messages on the same topic to measure which messages resonate with a particular audience. Emotional messages relied on values-based statements that align with the taxonomy of Moral Foundations Theory (Haidt, 2012) as well as a category emphasizing belonging labeled “tribal” messages (Greene, 2013; Curry, 2019). Specific values tested in the survey include:

- Care/Harm – Concerns for the pain of others, underlies kindness, nurturance
- Fairness/Cheating – Reciprocal altruism, or a sense of justice, equality, autonomy
- Loyalty/Betrayal – Patriotism and sacrifice for a group
- Authority/Subversion – Respect for social hierarchy
- Liberty/Oppression – Rejection of bullies, supports solidarity
- Equity/Proportionality – Equal treatment/outcomes or resourcing based on merit/need
- Tribe – Prioritizing the needs of people the respondents know (family, group, community)

Several statistical approaches were used to analyze the data in this research. A paired sample t-test was used to examine mean differences in the impact of aggregated fact- and values-based messages. A Freidman’s test ranked the impact of individual messages against one another in each survey. In-depth analyses of relationships between individual messages and specific independent variables primarily used multivariate analyses of variance (MANOVA) with accompanying Tukey’s Post-Hoc tests. Five key findings from the analysis are highlighted below:

Key Findings	
1	Emotional, values-based messages persuade more than facts*
2	Facts still effective as a part of communication strategy
3	Values & emotions create common ground with neutral or opposing audiences
4	Equity messages least effective across almost all audiences
5	Increasing personal connections more important than language

\* When matched with the appropriate audience

*Emotions are more persuasive (with a major caveat)*

An initial analysis combined the average influence of all fact-based messages and compared it to the influence of all values-based messages. This aggregated analysis showed slightly mixed

results, with fact-based messages performing slightly better. At first glance, this finding contradicts existing literature (Haidt, 2012; Greene 2013). However, a more detailed analysis that individually ranked all 29 messages showed values-based messages consistently performed the best across each survey and issue. Fact-based messages ranked toward the middle or bottom of each analysis. The disparity between the aggregated and disaggregated findings may illustrate the negative impact of mismatching values-based messages to target audiences. Some values-based messages, particularly those known to be partisan, rank toward the bottom of the analyses. Because partisan values were tested among a diverse cross-section of respondents, it is possible some respondents strongly reject those messages (Feinberg & Willer, 2019). In these cases, the low scores of mismatched, partisan values-based messages may have pulled down the overall average performance in an aggregated analysis. So, the conclusion is emotional, values-based messages are more persuasive than factual messages on unfamiliar, nonprofit issues, but only if the values match the target audience.

### *Facts still are important*

Although communications seeking to motivate people to act may want to lead with emotional, values-based messages, factual messages still play an important role. The performance of fact-based messages typically ranked toward the middle in the disaggregated analyses, showing they can be useful among diverse audiences and as a complement to values-based messages. This finding is consistent with existing literature that encourages using both values-based and factual messages (Haidt, 2012; Greene, 2013).

### *Values can create common ground*

Leveraging values to find common ground among neutral or opposition audiences extends beyond language. The types of language that nonprofits can use to describe their work may be limited depending on their approach to a problem. Therefore, if a nonprofit seeks to build a broad base of support based on shared values, it is important to center that value in all aspects of the work, not just in the final communications stage (powell, 2019, 2022). Consultant Matt Watkins (2025) recommends nonprofits to “treat language as infrastructure, not an ornament” (para. 20).

### *Equity messages may be least effective*

Two of the five surveys fielded equity-oriented messages that referenced the word “equity” or a policy’s impact on marginalized groups. Findings show these messages consistently ranked at the bottom in terms of influence. This finding contradicts literature that suggests equity messages typically resonate with left-leaning, progressive audiences (Atari, 2023). It is important to clarify that a message ranking at the bottom of an analysis does not necessarily mean audiences did not like a message. It just means there are other messages they found more persuasive for a wide range of reasons. Therefore, content about equity may be a good candidate for “moral reframing,” a strategy that enables nonprofits to maintain a policy position or practice but describe it using other values the target audience already understands.

### *Increase personal connections to cause*

Messages that appealed to “tribes” consistently ranked the highest in the study across surveys, issues, and audiences. Tribe messages explained how an issue impacted “someone you know” or “your local community.” The example transforms an unfamiliar, abstract issue into a human-centered, concrete example impacting someone close to the respondent. The success of these types of messages is consistent with a large body of literature (Bloodgood, 2010; Greene, 2013; Harrison & Michelson, 2017; Bleau, 2018; powell, 2019, 2022; Sassor & Strachtan, 2019; Neilson 2020). For nonprofit sector-wide issues, the most obvious way to personalize an issue impacting nonprofits is to increase local engagement across all types of stakeholders (i.e. constituents, donors, volunteers, advocates and employees). The more people that interact with nonprofits, the easier it would be to personalize nonprofit issues.

In conclusion, this research can help nonprofits identify biases and misperceptions built into current communications and practice. Armed with better knowledge, sector advocates can more effectively defend the sector against unfavorable public policies and persuasively build broad, grassroots support for complicated issues. Nonprofits do not necessarily need to change how they pursue their mission when faced with opposition. Instead, they can seek to understand those that do not already support their cause and try to identify shared values and goals that can inspire that audience to join with them in their fight to change the world for the better.

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