

*/** **TRANSFORM** YOUR TECHNICAL
KNOWLEDGE INTO **POWERFUL MESSAGES** **/*




A MESSAGESPECS BOOK BY
JOEL BENGE

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For my physician father and artist mother.

For my wife, who always has my back (sometimes
shaking her head in disbelief).

For my son, who helped me create my first card
game when he was only eight years old.

And, of course, for the developers, technical founders,
product marketers, and other nerds!



Introduction(s)

The “Blank Stare” Moment

I think every technical founder, practitioner—even every tech marketer—has experienced it. You’re giving a demo or talking about your tech—and you see the audience’s attention drain away. Or you’ve stood up a new marketing asset—and gotten no traffic at all.

You did everything right—including all the talking points and background information, opened with the business case, and used “just the right amount” of graphics. Still, no one is picking up what you’re putting down.

You may be telling yourself, “Some people are just born communicators and I’m not,” or “It’s not me—it’s them,” or “If I just dumb things down just a little....” Don’t listen to those voices.

Every technical communicator has experienced this at some point. It’s not your audience’s fault—and it’s not yours.

Why do the blank stares happen? What to do about them? And how do nerds like us overcome our tendency to either overwhelm our audience with detail or dumb things down?

That’s what we’re going to tackle together in this book.

This Isn't a "Marketing Book"

You won't find the answers to mapping the customer journey, identifying the ideal customer profile (ICP), or setting up an ABM/GTM/PLG/BLAH¹ strategy. (Though I will say that efforts in such areas will be greatly improved if you do read and follow the advice in this book.)

But maybe you're thinking, "Joel, this book is literally listed in the marketing book category. WTF?"

Yeah, about that. I didn't write this book to turn you into a marketer. What I'm about to share are the thought processes and models I've used—influenced by my technical background—in *my* marketing career. My goal is to help you uncover deeper truths about why, as a technical communicator, you are doing what you do and why others should listen to you.

In the end, I hope to help you create a foundation for technical communications (even marketing) that goes beyond mere tactics and playbooks—from one nerd to another.

I'll be borrowing from some of the greatest minds in classical philosophy and psychology—along with modern neuroscience and the entertainment industry—to rock your technical messaging world. Stuff like:

- Tapping into ancient philosophy to find a balance between the discrete persuasion modes of emotion, logic, and credibility.
- Using the neuropsychology of an audience to give them exactly the words they need at the right time.
- Playing a few hands of cards (with the deck stacked in your favor).

Along the way, we'll explore practical (and fun) ways of engaging with both technical and creative teams to create messaging that sticks and scales.

So, come along, nerds, tech wizards, and even you marketing

¹ Account-based marketing, go-to-market, product-led growth, and boring-long-as-heck strategies, respectively.

gurus—it's time to give your messaging a major upgrade and transform the way you talk tech.

But First, a Story

Before I help you tell yours, I'd like to tell you my story. Like any epic transformation tale (*Star Wars*, *Back to the Future*, Nickelodeon's *Rugrats*, etc.), it has three discrete parts.² Buckle up.

From Slime to Security

I've always considered myself a bit of a performer. My first job in high school was wearing a six-foot rat costume at a national entertainment chain restaurant where a kid could be a kid.³ My final summer job was at a regional theme park, working with producers from Florida to create a stage mashup of the Nickelodeon network's greatest hits—physical challenges, pie fights, and green slime (of course). I entered college with a theater scholarship and visions of Oscars and Tonys dancing in my head.

Somewhere in the middle of my sophomore year in college, I figured it was time to get an actual job and make some actual money. This was before the dot-com bubble deflation of the late 1990s. I found myself working in technical support at a video game company. Believe me, you haven't lived until you've worked customer service on Christmas morning. ("Your game RUINED Christmas!")

But, through that job, I learned how to listen to customers and quickly diagnose their challenges—crafting a technical explanation at the level that matched their aptitude and solved their problems, set their holidays right, and got them the hell off the phone so I could go back to playing *Doom*.

² For an interesting look at "The Rule of Three," check out chapter 4.

³ BEST ... JOB ... EVER! Nothing says "children's entertainment" better than a high schooler in a fur suit, pantomiming a happy birthday dance, while you and your friends stuff your faces with pizza and plunk coins into video game machines.

Fast forward through the help desk, system admin, network operations, Security Operations Center (SOC), and IT compliance roles, and I found myself squarely in my thirties wondering where all the pizza, cake, and games had gone.

Uncle Sam Comes Knocking

A chance lunch with a family friend pointed me toward an open position in the U.S. government. I applied for a security and compliance analyst position with the newly formed Department of Homeland Security (DHS). They took one look at my résumé and the hiring manager asked whether I was interested in a different position—communications manager.

“What’s the difference,” I asked, “between compliance and communications?”

“One lives in Microsoft Excel and the other in Word,” was the reply. I figured my partial liberal arts background could serve me well there.

So, I found myself working for the chief information security officer at DHS as the principal cybersecurity communications manager. I spent my days coordinating cyber policy and strategy communications across the various departments, managing data calls for the executive secretariat’s office, and writing the annual “change your password as frequently as you change your underwear” cybersecurity awareness messages.

That role laid the foundation for skipping the technical nonsense and getting to the point, when it came to presenting technical information.

Tech Startups and Tabletop Games

Fast forward nearly seven years. I was at another chance lunch meeting with the same manager who had hired me at DHS. He had recently left his White House position as a national security advisor on cybersecurity, completed his PhD, and launched a startup. But he found it challenging to quickly explain how his product worked and how it fit into customers’ lives.

INTRODUCTION(S)

I asked him for his pitch. The tech was cool, but the story left something to be desired.

He invited me to join the founding team as product-evangelist-cum-marketing-director. “I don’t know anyone who can tell a technical story like you can, Joel,” he told me. I wasn’t sure I believed him, but the pace of government work was wearing thin and I accepted.

Together, we redefined the product and I accidentally invented my first card game—with the assistance of my then-eight-year-old son—to explain the core algorithm. (More about that later.)

When it was time to move on from the startup, I found myself in branding and content roles at a handful of creative marketing agencies just outside Washington, DC, supporting clients in the defense and intelligence markets with a few cybersecurity startups on the side. You could say I sort of came full circle and became a marketer for the same nerds I was working with a few years prior.

So, What Now?

Today, I spend my days working with technical founders and leaders, product managers, and marketing teams to identify and nail their market messaging. As a nerd myself, I love working directly with technical people in an organization to draw out gold-nugget messaging elements and put them on display in what I call their first-principles messaging.

I’ve helped pivot early-stage companies toward human-first messaging, improving their websites to the point where qualified inbound leads increased by 400% in the first year. And I’ve aligned internal technical teams at multibillion-dollar defense contractors around a bigger corporate vision, something previously considered a big joke.

To do this, I deploy a little bit of what I call “message therapy” (not a typo) to make sure they not only cover the technical “how” details of their story, but also the “so what?,” the “why?,” and sometimes the “wtf?” elements that really engage customers.

BE A NERD THAT TALKS GOOD

This book is an in-depth look into the philosophies, methods, and frameworks that I've used to pull some of the most hardcore nerds out of their shells until they were world-class communicators and advocates for their own companies. The book is broken into four major parts:

- **Part One:** Focuses on philosophical and scientific background material to help us understand why technical marketing sometimes falls flat to human ears.
- **Part Two:** Presents my philosophy on creating a well-balanced messaging stack.
- **Part Three:** Contains a step-by-step model for executing a successful messaging workshop.
- **Part Four:** Includes a whole bunch of other fun reading and resources that will help to reinforce your messaging. After all, what nerd can resist a little extra-credit homework?

I sincerely hope it all helps your journey into the ranks of the *nerds that talk good!*

PART ONE

The Basics

Remixing the Classics for Modern Messaging



The word “nerd” traditionally refers to a person who is highly intellectual, passionate, or obsessed with a particular subject or field. Many references also go on to include aspects of nerds being perceived as socially awkward or overly focused on niche interests.

It’s a definition like a double-edged sword.

We nerds often tend to be very action oriented and tactically focused. Regardless of your preferred topic, I’ll bet there’s a subject or two in your life on which you could spend hours sharing complex theories, listing interesting facts, or engaging in deep philosophical discussions. From “soup to nuts,” as they say.

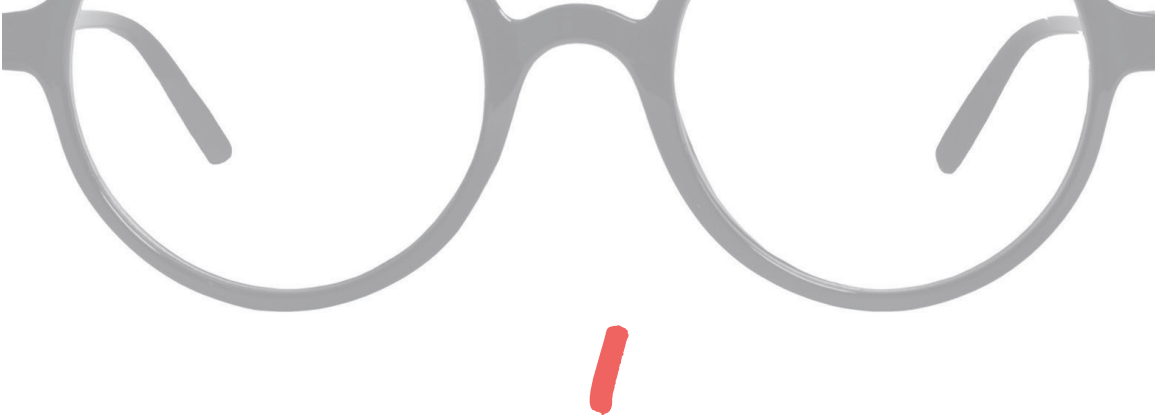
I’d also wager you’ve run into situations when the person on the other

BE A NERD THAT TALKS GOOD

end of the conversation wasn't quite putting all the puzzle pieces together.

As we'll discuss in this section, we nerds sometimes need to take a step back and establish some fundamentals in order to lay a foundation for higher-complexity conversations. After all, everyone starts somewhere.

This section presents a 101-level exploration of how our brains receive and process information so we can identify why technical messaging fails, and presents what we can learn from some of the world's greatest thinkers to make it work. For clues, we'll look at some theoretical foundations from ancient philosophy, evolutionary biology, and psychology.



Why Bother Talking Good?

For the Skeptical Nerds Out There

“Thoughts are wonderful things, that they can bring two people, so far apart, into harmony and understanding for even a little while.”

Ernest “Ernie” Pyle
American journalist and war correspondent



If you’ve picked up this book, it’s likely because you are in one of the following situations or something similar:

- You’ve been asked to present a technical talk to corporate executives or other nontechnical folk.
- You’re an inventor or startup founder who keeps getting prospective customer or funding doors slammed in your face.
- You dread the “so, what do you do?” question at social events or

family gatherings.

In each of these situations—and many more—the ability to quickly communicate is often more important than technical prowess. Don't believe me? Think about some of the biggest technical success stories of the past 20 years:

- **Apple Computer:** Rose to be the first trillion-dollar company in 2018, overshadowing technically superior competitors on the back of a charismatic CEO and successful marketing.⁴
- **Tesla:** Despite poor build quality and “quirky” software issues, Tesla Inc. often ranks above Toyota as one of the most valuable automotive companies in the world.⁵
- **Oculus:** Its Quest headset was considered a mediocre competitor in the virtual-reality space until Facebook purchased the technology for \$2 billion and incorporated it into its ecosystem.⁶

None of these companies has been the first, best, or only option. But they're the ones that most consumers think of when asked to name a computer company, electric car, or VR headset.⁷

Think about your own experiences. Have you ever looked at some “successful” people and wondered how they got to where they are? Chances are they weren't the best at what they did, but they likely had a certain undefinable “edge” in how they presented or carried themselves.

They did something that made someone around them sit up and pay attention.

⁴ Rob Davies, “Apple Becomes World's First Trillion-Dollar Company,” *Guardian* (U.S.), August 2, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2018/aug/02/apple-becomes-worlds-first-trillion-dollar-company>.

⁵ “Tesla Overtakes Toyota to Become World's Most Valuable Carmaker,” *BBC*, July 1, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/business-53257933>.

⁶ Brian Solomon, “Facebook Buys Oculus, Virtual Reality Gaming Startup, For \$2 Billion,” *Forbes*, March 25, 2014, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/brian-solomon/2014/03/25/facebook-buys-oculus-virtual-reality-gaming-startup-for-2-billion/>.

⁷ So much for Zune, Polestar, and HTC Vive.

Paying Attention, in This Economy?

Why is this?

You've probably heard of the so-called "attention economy." Coined by Nobel laureate economist Herbert A. Simon in 1971, the concept revolves around the idea that human attention is a finite resource that can be captured and monetized. He wrote, "A wealth of information creates a poverty of attention."⁸

One significant consequence of the attention economy is the commodification of attention. Just as natural resources like oil and minerals have economic value, so too has human attention become a valuable commodity. Companies and advertisers pay top dollar for our attention as it can directly translate into profits and revenue. This has given rise to various attention-grabbing techniques like clickbait headlines, social media notifications, and targeted advertising.

The attention economy has also had a profound impact on our relationships. In the past, people primarily interacted with each other in person or through traditional forms of media like books, newspapers, and television.

Today, the digital landscape has created countless ways to connect with others, often at the expense of face-to-face interactions. Even our "social" interactions are controlled by platforms designed to keep us engaged and scrolling, often leading to reduced in-person socialization and potentially isolating individuals.

At its core, the attention economy is driven by the recognition that we as humans are constantly shifting our focus between competing needs.

⁸ Herbert A. Simon, "Designing Organizations for an Information-Rich World," in *Computers, Communications, and the Public Interest*, ed. Martin Greenberger (Johns Hopkins Press, 1971), 38-52.

What Does That Mean for You?

Even when presenting in person to someone, there's a chance that they're subconsciously ticking through a mental to-do list or replaying a recent phone conversation in their head. If you're not the most important, most engaging, most relevant thing happening to them at that moment, you've lost the attention economy.

In fact, research has shown that time and again, people are more likely to invest in or work with people and companies they like over “technically better” options. Plus, they'll often pay a premium for that experience.⁹

This holds true for personal life just as much as it does for professional life. Whether pitching a product or trying to land a job, if you're competing on details alone, the alternative that stands out even a little bit on an emotional level will likely beat you. Emotion drives—and is often required to make—decisions.¹⁰

The Good News!

Luckily for you and me, it's not difficult to develop that edge. You don't need to become a masterful copywriter, brand expert, or Toastmaster.

Looking for the secret to standing out? It's not “speaking well.” You only have to speak as good (or a little good-er) as the next person.

⁹ A study published in the *Journal of Consumer Research* found that brand loyalty is often driven by emotional bonds, leading consumers to choose familiar brands even when alternatives offer better technical features. This suggests that emotional attachment can outweigh technical considerations in purchasing decisions: Rita Pina and Álvaro Dias, “The Influence of Brand Experiences on Consumer-Based Brand Equity,” *Journal of Brand Management* 28 (2020), 99-115, <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41262-020-00215-5>.

¹⁰ In his book *Descartes' Error*, neuroscientist Antonio Damasio explores his research on individuals with damaged connections between thinking and emotional regions of the brain, revealing that they could analyze choices logically but struggled to decide due to an inability to feel emotions about the options.

Before We Move On

Take a moment to reflect on where you want to improve your communications and who/what you might be comparing yourself to (or want to edge out) by answering these prompts:

I often feel most challenged when I'm communicating about ...

The person/brand/company that does an excellent job of communicating is ...

This will give us something to set our eyes on as we proceed.

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FOR READING!**

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