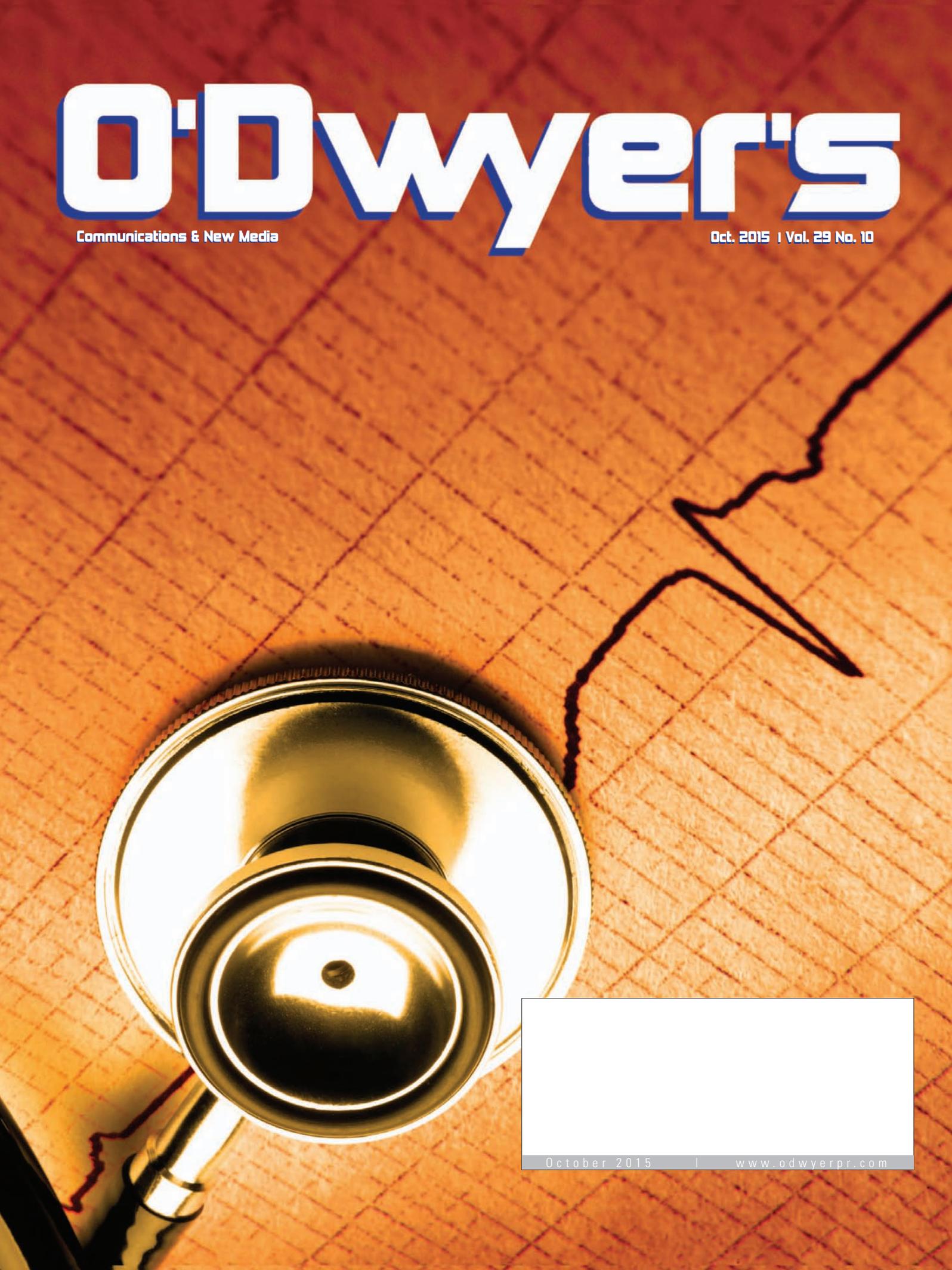


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Why message testing is all about proving your worth

The healthcare industry is changing faster than ever, forcing hospitals and health systems to create new business models and healthcare professionals to demonstrate their value and contributions to the bottom line. Message testing is a powerful tool now increasingly being used to help healthcare organizations share their capabilities and strengths.

By Sharon Reis

An unprecedented wave of disruption in healthcare has caused organizations to revisit their positioning and messaging as they attempt to explain their value and ROI in this turbulent new world.

Professional associations are trying to ensure their members are well-positioned as integral elements of the healthcare team helping to improve care outcomes and reduce costs. Foundations are seeking to evolve and develop new programs to identify innovative care models. And advocacy groups are making sure that patients and families are part of these strategic decisions and actively involved in their care.

Identifying the right language that engages and creates action is an essential component for success for both organizations and individuals. It sounds simple, but it requires being open to constructive feedback and a willingness to change how people, programs and organizations are viewed and explained.

“Our society undertook message testing as an outgrowth of the larger imperative to clarify the branding and positioning of our society and specialty,” said Cheryl Sadowski, Senior Director of Communications, Publications and Marketing for the Society of Interventional Radiology. “It was time to pull back, look at how we wanted to be perceived in the new environment, and assess whether our messaging was helping us to achieve that.”

Benefits of message testing

When done well, message testing can have significant and positive impact. It reveals what really engages people quickly and effectively, while simultaneously pinpointing the specific words or phrases that can detract from key ideas and hinder engagement. It helps identify the commonalities that bring diverse groups and opinions together.

Message testing also isolates the precise data points that are most compelling to make your case and those that may serve to confuse or raise doubt. It often confirms something that you may already know: that what worked before probably won't work now, that it's time to think and act differently.

Message testing continues to be done to advance public policy, but is increasingly

conducted to build consensus among coalition members and to position an organization, profession or program.

“Message testing for diagnostic error has been interesting,” said Mark L. Graber, MD, FAACP, President and Founder of the Society to Improve Diagnosis in Medicine. “We've debated this in our society. The issue, for us, is the ‘error’ word. In medicine, we have this dichotomy between safety and quality. Safety is avoiding doing everything wrong. Quality is doing everything right. Talking about ‘error’ really gets people's attention and it also alienates different groups. If you talk about improving quality of diagnosis it sounds better, but you are really talking about the same thing. It has been a conundrum from the start.”

Building consensus

Three medical societies decided to form a coalition to positively position their respective fields and raise awareness of the contributions of their collective members to medicine and society. Bringing together three different organizations with three sets of language for explaining roles and values proved quite challenging even though they represented similar and overlapping groups of physicians and researchers.

As a way to mitigate politics and bring objectivity to the process, and to identify the most compelling language and salient points, we conducted message testing using combined language and materials from all three organizations. It wasn't so much about what the societies thought was the best language to use, rather it was about what the target audiences wanted to hear. Going directly to those intended audiences created a way to bring the three groups together and increase likelihood for success.

“When our foundation was preparing for a national thought leader summit, we had to present integrative medicine in such a way that would bring together the medical community, assure leaders it was grounded in science and differentiate it from alternative medicine,” said Bonnie Horrigan, Executive Director of The Bravewell Collaborative. “Message testing helped us focus on the concept of patient-centered care and not the specific modalities. When we talked about putting patients at the center of their care and the need to examine physical

and emotional well-being, we got people's attention.”

Influencing the C-suite

Reforming payment systems is causing hospitals and health systems to examine the role and value of all members of the healthcare team. The enhanced scrutiny and need to prove their worth is forcing healthcare professionals to define their value with data showing improved care and reduced costs.

Often times, these numbers are not readily available, yet the need is urgent and the stakes are high. Many professional societies are conducting message testing to gauge awareness and understanding of their role and to identify the most effective way to explain their contributions to thought leaders, policymakers, patients and families, and other health care professionals. In lieu of having hardcore research, they need to find the touchpoints to convince the C-suite that their contributions matter.

“We thought we knew what made our health-coaching program unique, but what we didn't know was how to explain it to people who were unfamiliar with health coaching in general and our specific program at Duke,” said Adam Perlman, MD, MPH, Duke University, Director of the Center for Integrative Medicine. “Message testing helped us identify the most important differentiators and to get to the point quickly.”

Message testing can help organizations and individuals determine effective language to engage a target audience and create a desired effect. It's about finding what works, areas of compromise, and touch points that divide. As Apple's CEO, Tim Cook, once said, “You can focus on things that are barriers, or you can focus on scaling the wall and redefining the problem.” Message testing is what helps you achieve success by looking at a situation in a new light.

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