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WE GOT THE VOCAB

A plain-language guide to communications terms

By Stacie Ledden | July 27, 2026

There's a lot in leadership we can learn from *The Four Agreements* by Don Miguel Ruiz. The book's concepts have stayed with me over the years, and I revisit them often. The principle I reference most is "Don't make assumptions." Many of the challenges we face in life, in relationships and within our organizations are because we assume truths instead of seeking clarity.

This is why defining terms can be so useful. As leaders, we may assume everyone knows what the word "brand" means. Or "marketing" or "community engagement." But many times, especially in libraries, we have decision-makers from varying backgrounds, industries and experiences, all with different points of view and frames of reference. It's helpful to take the time to define and discuss terms to create a solid foundation for strategic decision-making.

A nod to The Fugees, I've incorporated a slide in my branding workshop for leadership teams titled, "We Got the Vocab," that defines common communications terms. Different words mean different things to different people. To make informed strategic decisions as leaders, it's helpful to all be working from the same playbook so that everyone's set up for success.

I like to break this down to a simple who, what, how, when and, as always, start with why.

WHY

Brand and culture

Brand and culture are the soul of the organization, the WHY, the reason it exists. Yes, a brand includes look, feel and logo, but more importantly, it is the organization's personality, its voice. Culture is the shared set of values, beliefs, attitudes and practices of an organization. The brand influences the culture, and the culture influences the brand — all led by the organization's core values. This becomes the lens by which all work and decisions are made, from space design to hiring to how staff do their work.



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WHO

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Users, non-users, specific audiences, staff

Understanding your audience is essential to making informed strategic decisions about your marketing and communications. Who are you trying to reach? What is the call to action? Are you building general awareness? Are you encouraging them to walk through the doors? Attend an event? Is there a new audience you're inviting to the table? Understanding who you want to reach with your efforts and what you'd like them to do influences all of your next steps.

It's also important to note specifically with non-users that even if you're not actively communicating with this audience, they have opinions. Informed by nostalgia, their neighbors, the media... which is why it's important for organizations to control their own narratives. Don't disregard the power of the non-user.

HOW

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Communications, PR, marketing, advertising, community engagement, outreach

Communications includes all the ways an organization communicates with its audiences. Different methods are used depending on who you are trying to reach and desired outcomes. Public relations leverages relationships with stakeholders, partners and media to tell your story. Marketing is used when there is a call to action — you market to an audience persuading them to engage with a service, go to a place, make a purchase, fill out a survey. Specific marketing tactics are used depending on the action you want that audience to take and how/where they receive information. Advertising is typically paid. Think of your buses, billboards, radio, print and online, to name a few.

For many library clients, community engagement and outreach are interchangeable. However, there are noticeable differences and resources needed when you think of them as unique and separate.

HOW

I define community engagement as work that is done in partnership with the community — whether that's an individual or an organization. Outreach is when a specific service is brought to a specific audience, where the audience is the recipient versus a collaborator in the experience. Both serve an important purpose, and understanding their differences informs the resources, staff training, and communications support needs.



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WHAT

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Email, print, events, swag, radio, newsletters, ads, etc.

Each of the communications strategies listed above has their own set of deliverables. From coveted branded totes that act as walking billboards to targeted emails based on interests, online and social media advertising, partnership development, press releases, guerrilla marketing tactics, commercials, airport displays... Not to mention fliers, table tents, digital signage, bookmarks and all of the ways an organization communicates with folks inside a building.

The amount of “whats” can feel overwhelming sometimes. If you can boil down to who is the audience, what action you would like them to take, and identify the best way to reach them, the “whats” become much clearer.

WHEN

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Timing with intention

Depending on the strategy and audience, there are specific timing tactics, philosophies and best practices that influence communications success. When that ad gets placed, email goes out, press release is sent, post goes live can mean the difference between lots of eyeballs or lost in the shuffle.

To set a strong foundation for decision-making, defining terms is critical. Rule out the assumptions. Provide clarity. Help staff feel smart and aligned. This essential step can make a big difference in building a strong emotional connection between internal and external audiences and your organization. No matter how you define it, that's really what it's all about.

This article was inspired by a slide from my branding workshop for library leaders that consistently resonates with participants. Interested in working together? Contact me at info@stacieledden.com or visit stacieledden.com.