Marketing a Message in the Age of AI: Graduate Course Syllabus

Nov 1, 2026 · @JM Bonthous

Course overview

A 15-week, 3-credit graduate course on how organizations with a message get found, trusted and joined, and keep the people who join, now that AI assistants increasingly answer first. Students work all semester with one real partner organization and finish with a 90-day plan it can use.

The course materials are free, sent on request to verified instructors, who register the course before teaching with them. The only cost to students is the book.

Item	Detail
Level	Graduate (master's in nonprofit management, public administration, strategic communication, or marketing)
Credits	3
Format	One 2.5-hour seminar a week for 15 weeks (37.5 contact hours), in person or live online, plus about 6 hours of work outside class each week (90 hours), meeting the federal credit-hour baseline for 3 semester credits
Prerequisites	None. Some experience in communications, fundraising or program work is helpful
Class size	12 to 30 students, working in teams of 3 or 4
Required text	J.M. Bonthous, *Marketing a Message in the Age of AI* (Sky7 Media)
Other readings	Research articles listed by week, most freely available

An organization with a message exists substantially to help people understand, adopt, or act on an idea. It may work in wellness, personal development, conflict resolution, public health, humanitarian work, social and civic causes, literacy, philanthropy, or many other fields. What it offers is taken up over time, not bought, and its standing rests on trust. The course treats those differences as the starting point, not an afterthought to product marketing.

Learning outcomes

By the end of the course, students will be able to:

1. Explain how marketing a message differs from marketing a product, and why intuition is an unreliable guide in both.
2. Diagnose what holds an organization back (awareness, relevance, credibility, the offering, or the experience after discovery) before recommending any spending.

3. State an organization's outcome, promise and positioning in words a stranger understands and its founder or teacher would recognize.
4. Assess how search engines and AI assistants find, describe and cite an organization, and recommend changes that make it easier to retrieve and harder to misdescribe.
5. Distinguish the organization's own voice from independent corroboration, and plan how to earn the latter and answer critics openly.
6. Map the routes from first encounter to participation, and find dead ends, leaks and pressure along them.
7. Design measures on the right rung (visibility, engagement, participation, outcome) and run an honest test whose result could change a decision.
8. Write a 90-day plan that a real organization could adopt.

The partner organization and how the course works

Each team works with one real organization with a message for the whole semester. Every assignment is done on that organization, so the course produces work it can use.

- **Choosing partners.** The instructor recruits partners before the term, or teams propose one by week 2 for approval. Any organization with a message can be a good partner, in wellness, personal development, conflict resolution, public health, humanitarian work, social and civic causes, literacy, philanthropy, or another field, if it has a website and at least one person willing to meet the team three times.
- **Permission and boundaries.** The partner signs a short written agreement. Teams observe public material only, run tests only with the partner's approval, and never contact the partner's audience directly without it. Findings are shared with the partner first.
- **Fallback.** Where no partner can be found, a team uses one of the book's three composite cases and works from public material on a comparable real organization.
- **Each session.** About 45 minutes discussing the week's chapters and research, 60 minutes on a case or workshop, and 45 minutes of team work with instructor feedback.
- **Composite cases.** The book's three cases (a teacher's organizations in Brazil, a literacy foundation in Sweden, a relief organization in South Africa) are used for in-class discussion. Their figures are illustrative, and students are asked to treat them as teaching cases, not data.

Assessment

Seven team assignments build on one another and on the same partner, and together make up 90 percent of the grade. Each uses a tool from the book's appendices.

#	Assignment	Due	Book tool used	Weight
1	Diagnosis memo	Week 4	Four preconditions; constraint table	10%
2	Promise and positioning brief	Week 6	Audience Listening Brief (C)	10%
3	Search and AI audit	Week 9	AI Observation Sheet (J)	15%
4	Corroboration and critics map	Week 11	Claim and Evidence Register (E)	10%
5	Route map and pressure audit	Week 13	Pressure Audit (G); Metrics for Each	10%

#	Assignment	Due	Book tool used	Weight
			Stage (I)	
6	A live test	Week 14	Test Log (K); Measurement Ladder (F)	15%
7	Capstone: 90-day plan and presentation	Week 15	First 90 Days (L)	20%
	Participation and weekly reading responses	Weekly	Daily checks (A)	10%

Team grades are adjusted individually by a confidential peer evaluation submitted with assignments 4 and 7. Weekly reading responses are individual: 300 words answering the week's question, due before class.

Weekly schedule

The course follows the book's order: before optimizing, foundations, being found, being believed, routes, nurture, and measurement. Chapter numbers refer to the required text; full citations for the research readings are in the reading list.

Week	Topic	Book	Research reading	In class	Due
1	Marketing a message, and why intuition fails	Introduction; Ch. 1	Kotler & Levy (1969); Kohavi & Thomke (2017)	Predict-then-reveal exercise on six classic test results; the retreat-page case	Teams formed; partner proposals
2	Before you optimize: leaks and offline preconditions	Ch. 2–3	Christiano & Neimand (2017)	Map one partner's journey offline; find the constraint	Partner agreement signed
3	Outcome first; earn it; listen before defining the promise	Ch. 4–6	Christiano & Neimand (2018)	Outcome–behavior–content–metric chain for each partner	Listening interviews begin
4	The portable claim and positioning without distortion	Ch. 7–10	Neimand & Wright (2019)	Stranger's test on each partner's description	**A1 Diagnosis memo**
5	Presence over persuasion; optimizing the whole	Ch. 11–12	Markowitz & Shariff (2012); Schneider et al. (2017); Västfjäll, Slovic & Mayorga (2015)	Rewrite a guilt-based appeal; rescale a need to one district	Interviews complete
6	Being found I: serve search and	Ch. 13–15	Google Search Central, "AI	Dissect a real "mirage" proposal	**A2 Promise and positioning brief**

Week	Topic	Book	Research reading	In class	Due
	AI; refuse volume and mirages		features and your website"; Kumar & Lakkaraju (2024)		
7	Being found II: answers first, placement, retrievability	Ch. 16–18	Aggarwal et al. (2024)	First round of the AI observation sheet, live	Prompt list drafted
8	Being found III: extract, write for strangers, advertising, human accountability	Ch. 19–22	Google, "Creating helpful, reliable, people-first content"	Audit one archive page; lift test on answer pages	Second observation round
9	Being believed I: authority, the echo chamber, the missing choir	Ch. 23–25	FTC, 16 CFR Part 465	Sort a partner's praise into own voice and independent voices	**A3 Search and AI audit**
10	Being believed II: independence, critics, silence	Ch. 26–28	Sleeth-Keppler, Perkowitz & Speiser (2017)	Role-play: drafting a public answer to a grave allegation	Test plan approved
11	Routes to participation: no dead ends, one switchboard	Ch. 29–33	Fraustino & Ma (2015)	Walk every route on the partner's sites; mark the handoffs	**A4 Corroboration and critics map**; test running
12	Nurture I: arrival, private evaluation, human time, receiving people	Ch. 34–37	Sweeny, Melnyk, Miller & Shepperd (2010)	Read a partner's first-contact replies as a skeptic would	Test running
13	Nurture II: past week one, readiness, owned audience, the side door	Ch. 38–41	Ganguly & Tasoff (2017)	Pressure audit lab on a year of real messages	**A5 Route map and pressure audit**
14	Measurement and testing	Ch. 42–44	Kohavi, Tang & Xu (2020), ch. 1–3; Addie et al. (2025)	Read each team's test result on the right rung	**A6 Live test report**
15	AI share of voice, citation, and the long game	Ch. 45–47; Conclusion	Rereading of week 1 readings	Capstone presentations to partners	**A7 90-day plan and presentation**

Assignments

Every assignment is written for the partner as its first reader: plain language, findings first, no more than the stated length.

A1. Diagnosis memo (week 4, 1,500 words)

Find what is actually holding the partner back before anyone recommends spending. Check the four offline preconditions, name the main constraint (awareness, relevance, credibility, the offering, or the experience after discovery), and show the evidence for it. Include a one-page map of the journey as it exists today, with the leaks marked.

A2. Promise and positioning brief (week 6, 1,500 words plus interview notes)

Interview at least eight people from the partner's audience, including people who looked and did not join. Using the Audience Listening Brief, write the outcome in one sentence, the portable claim, and a positioning statement. Test the description on five strangers and on someone who knows the work well, and report both results.

A3. Search and AI audit (week 9, 2,000 words plus the observation sheet)

Put a fixed list of at least 15 questions to three or four AI assistants, three times each, and record every answer on the AI Observation Sheet. Check whether the partner's key pages are retrievable as text. Report where the partner is cited, named, linked or absent, where it is misdescribed, and the five changes most likely to help.

A4. Corroboration and critics map (week 11, 1,500 words plus the register)

List the partner's central claims in a Claim and Evidence Register, marking for each whether any independent source confirms it. Map who speaks for the partner in channels it does not control. Identify the hardest questions a skeptic would ask, and draft a plain public answer to the most serious one.

A5. Route map and pressure audit (week 13, 1,500 words plus diagrams)

Walk every route from the partner's main entry points to a first step and beyond, and mark dead ends, broken handoffs and gaps between properties. Run a pressure audit on a year of the partner's messages and requests. Recommend which devices to remove and what to send instead.

A6. A live test (plan approved week 10; report week 14, 1,500 words plus the Test Log)

With the partner's approval, run one real test on how something is presented: a subject line, a page opening, a form, an invitation. Write the question, prediction and decision rule before it starts. Where a split test is impossible, use a holdout, repeated AI questions, alternation or

structured conversations. Report the result on the right rung, what else could explain it, and the decision. A test that changes nothing is a valid result.

A7. Capstone: 90-day plan and presentation (week 15, 3,000 words plus a 20-minute presentation)

Combine the earlier findings into a 90-day plan in three stages: diagnose and agree, repair and test, review and extend. Each action names an owner, a date, a signal and a stopping point. Present it to the partner, who is invited to attend.

Rubric used for every assignment

Criterion	Excellent	Adequate	Weak
Evidence	Every finding rests on observation, interviews or sources the reader can check	Most findings are supported; some rely on assumption	Findings rest on opinion or on the team's taste
Right rung	Each number is labeled visibility, engagement, participation or outcome, and none stands in for a higher rung	Rungs are mostly clear	Visibility or activity is presented as success
Fidelity	Recommendations change how the message is presented and leave the message intact; no pressure tactics	Minor drift toward simplification or pressure	Recommendations distort the message or rely on pressure
Usability	The partner could act on it next week; owners, dates and costs are stated	Actionable with some interpretation	General advice the partner cannot act on

Institutional statements

[Insert your institution’s statements on academic integrity, accessibility and accommodations, nondiscrimination, attendance and recording, and student support.]

Use of AI tools. You may use AI tools in your work. State which tools you used and for what, and a named team member checks every fact and quotation against its source before submission. [Add or replace with your institution’s AI policy.]

Reading list

Alphabetical, with the week each reading is assigned.

- Addie, Y. O., Hanson, D., Melnick, E., Mohebi, M., & Neimand, A. (2025, May 7). How to measure narrative change. *Stanford Social Innovation Review*. (Week 14)
- Aggarwal, P., et al. (2024). GEO: Generative engine optimization. *KDD 2024*. arXiv:2311.09735. (Week 7)

- Christiano, A., & Neimand, A. (2017). Stop raising awareness already. *Stanford Social Innovation Review*, Spring 2017. (Week 2)
- Christiano, A., & Neimand, A. (2018). The science of what makes people care. *Stanford Social Innovation Review*, Fall 2018. (Week 3)
- Federal Trade Commission. (2024). Trade Regulation Rule on the Use of Consumer Reviews and Testimonials, 16 CFR Part 465. (Week 9)
- Fraustino, J. D., & Ma, L. (2015). CDC's use of social media and humor in a risk campaign: "Preparedness 101: Zombie Apocalypse." *Journal of Applied Communication Research*, 43(2), 222–241. Summary: Zombies attract viewers, but do they prompt behavior change?, *Communication Currents*. (Week 11)
- Ganguly, A., & Tasoff, J. (2017). Fantasy and dread: The demand for information and the consumption utility of the future. *Management Science*, 63(12), 4037–4060. (Week 13)
- Google Search Central. AI features and your website. (Week 6)
- Google Search Central. Creating helpful, reliable, people-first content. (Week 8)
- Kohavi, R., Tang, D., & Xu, Y. (2020). *Trustworthy online controlled experiments*. Cambridge University Press. Chapters 1–3. (Week 14)
- Kohavi, R., & Thomke, S. (2017). The surprising power of online experiments. *Harvard Business Review*, 95(5), 74–82. (Week 1)
- Kotler, P., & Levy, S. J. (1969). Broadening the concept of marketing. *Journal of Marketing*, 33(1), 10–15. (Week 1)
- Kumar, A., & Lakkaraju, H. (2024). Manipulating large language models to increase product visibility. arXiv:2404.07981. (Week 6)
- Markowitz, E. M., & Shariff, A. F. (2012). Climate change and moral judgement. *Nature Climate Change*, 2(4). (Week 5)
- Neimand, A., & Wright, S. (2019, June 17). How to use stories to bring "us" and "them" together. *Stanford Social Innovation Review*. (Week 4)
- Schneider, C. R., Zaval, L., Weber, E. U., & Markowitz, E. M. (2017). The influence of anticipated pride and guilt on pro-environmental decision making. *PLOS ONE*. (Week 5)
- Sleeth-Keppler, D., Perkowitz, R., & Speiser, M. (2017). It's a matter of trust: American judgments of the credibility of informal communicators on solutions to climate change. *Environmental Communication*, 11(1), 17–40. (Week 10)
- Sweeny, K., Melnyk, D., Miller, W., & Shepperd, J. A. (2010). Information avoidance: Who, what, when, and why. *Review of General Psychology*, 14(4). (Week 12)
- Västfjäll, D., Slovic, P., & Mayorga, M. (2015). Pseudoinefficacy: Negative feelings from children who cannot be helped reduce warm glow for children who can be helped. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 6. (Week 5)

Course policies and notes for instructors

- **Policies**

- **Use of AI tools.** Students may use AI assistants to draft and analyze, and are expected to study them as part of the course. Every submission states which tools were used and for what. A named team member checks every fact and quotation against its source and answers for it.

- **Ethics of fieldwork.** Interviews are voluntary, notes are anonymized, and no personal data from the partner's audience leaves the partner. Tests follow the course rule: only options the partner would be willing to keep and explain.
- **Confidentiality.** Partner findings are shared with the partner first and are not published without its written consent.
- **Late work.** Assignments build on each other, so late work loses 5 percent a day up to five days, unless agreed in advance.

- **Notes for instructors**

- **Recruit partners early.** Six to eight weeks before the term is realistic. Alumni working in foundations and causes are the best source.
- **Keep the AI material current.** Assistants change monthly. Before each term, rerun the week 6 exercise yourself and replace any example that no longer holds.
- **Adapting the format.** For quarter-system schools and continuing-education programs, a 12-week version merges weeks 6–8 into two, weeks 9–10 into one and weeks 12–13 into one. It gives 30 contact hours: about 3 quarter credits, or 3 CEUs. For a 6-week continuing-education version, teach one Part of the book a week, keep A3 and A6 as the main assignments, and replace the capstone with a 30-day plan.
- **Course materials.** Slides for each week with full speaker notes, discussion questions for the three composite cases, assignment sheets, editable templates of the book's tools, rubrics, a partner agreement, a fallback case pack, and course modules ready to import into Canvas, Moodle, Blackboard or D2L. All are provided at no cost, sent on request to verified instructors at www.sky7media.com/course. To teach with them, register the course there first, free of charge, agreeing that your name, institution and term may be listed as users. Questions: info@sky7media.com.
- **Running it before formal approval.** A new course usually needs a year to pass a curriculum committee. Most programs can run it sooner under an existing Special Topics course number.

Teaching the course online

The course can be taught in person, live online, or, for the continuing-education version, self-paced. Assignments, readings, the partner organization and the rubric are the same in every format. Only the in-class exercises change.

- **Live online.** A weekly 2.5-hour video session (Zoom, Teams or similar) with breakout rooms, a poll tool and a shared whiteboard or document. The session plans in the speaker notes apply unchanged; the adaptations below replace paper with shared files and small groups with breakout rooms. Ask students to keep cameras on during exercises that depend on speech, such as the stranger’s test.
- **Self-paced (continuing education).** Recorded short videos built from the slides and speaker notes, a discussion board for each week’s question, and exercises done individually or with people in the student’s own life. Release each week’s reveal or model answer only after the student has submitted a prediction or draft.

- **Interaction requirement.** In the United States, a for-credit course taught at a distance must provide regular and substantive interaction between instructor and students. Weekly written feedback on reading responses and assignments, scheduled office hours, and instructor posts on the discussion board meet this in most programs. State the arrangement in the syllabus.
- **Partners at a distance.** Online delivery makes distant partners possible. Partner meetings can be video calls, and interviews were always by phone. Agree the time zone for the three partner meetings in the partner agreement.
- **Accessibility.** Caption every recorded video and live session, share slides before the session, and give an alternative to timed oral exercises for students who need one.

Week-by-week adaptations of the in-class exercises:

- **Week 1, predict then reveal.** Live: students answer each question in a poll before the reveal; show the results. Self-paced: a form collects all six predictions before the reveal video unlocks.
- **Week 1, retreat case.** Live: breakout rooms of three or four. Self-paced: each student posts answers to the four questions, then reads two classmates' posts.
- **Week 2, journey map.** Live: each member draws alone on a shared whiteboard, then the team compares in a breakout room. Self-paced: each student maps the partner's journey and walks the real path online alone; the team compares maps asynchronously.
- **Week 3, outcome chain and trace test.** Live: teams fill the chain template in a shared document. Self-paced: individual chain and trace test, submitted for written feedback.
- **Week 4, stranger's test.** Live: paired teams in one breakout room; the text is read aloud once and never pasted into the chat. Self-paced: the student runs the test with five people outside the course, as Assignment 2 requires, and posts the replies word for word.
- **Week 5, rewriting an appeal.** Live: rewrite in a shared document, compare versions in breakout rooms. Self-paced: rewrite and post beside the original for peer comment.
- **Week 6, mirage proposal.** Live: annotate the proposal together in a shared document. Self-paced: individual annotation against the chapter's questions, then a model annotation released.
- **Week 7, AI observation sheet.** Live: each student runs the prompts on their own device during the session and logs results in one shared sheet. Self-paced: the same, within a set 48-hour window so results are comparable.
- **Week 8, archive audit and lift test.** Works identically online; teams share screens to review pages.
- **Week 9, sorting praise.** Live: sort quotations on a shared whiteboard. Self-paced: sorting exercise in a form, then discussion-board comparison.
- **Week 10, answering an allegation.** Live: role-play in breakout rooms, with one student as a skeptical journalist. Self-paced: a written draft answer, reviewed by two peers acting as skeptics.
- **Week 11, route walk.** Works identically online; one team member shares a screen and walks every route while others mark handoffs.
- **Week 12, first-contact replies.** Live: read anonymized replies together in breakout rooms. Self-paced: individual reading with a written skeptic's commentary.

- **Week 13, pressure audit lab.** Live: teams work on a shared spreadsheet of messages. Self-paced: the same spreadsheet, worked individually, then compared.
- **Week 14, reading test results.** Live: each team presents for five minutes and the class assigns the rung by poll. Self-paced: teams post results; peers assign the rung in comments.
- **Week 15, capstone presentations.** Live: partners join the video session; record it with everyone’s consent. Self-paced: a recorded 20-minute presentation sent to the partner, with a live question session scheduled separately.

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Suggested credit: "Adapted from Marketing a Message in the Age of AI by J.M. Bonthous."