Marketing a Message in the Age of AI: Six-Week Continuing-Education Syllabus

Version 1, November 2026 · A companion to the 15-week graduate syllabus

Course overview

A six-week continuing-education course for people who already do communications, fundraising, outreach or program work for an organization with a message, in fields such as wellness, personal development, conflict resolution, public health, humanitarian work, social and civic causes, literacy and philanthropy. It covers how such organizations get found, trusted and joined, and keep the people who join, now that AI assistants increasingly answer first, one Part of the book a week.

Participants work on their own organization, or one they serve as a volunteer or adviser, and finish with a 30-day plan they can start the following week. The course materials are free; instructors register before teaching with them. The only cost to participants is the book.

Item	Detail
Audience	Practitioners and volunteers in organizations with a message. No prerequisites
Format	Six 2.5-hour sessions, weekly, in person or live online (15 contact hours), plus about 4 hours of work between sessions
Continuing-education units	1.5 CEUs (15 contact hours at 10 hours per CEU)
Class size	8 to 24 participants. Each works on their own organization and is paired with a peer reviewer
Required text	J.M. Bonthous, Marketing a Message in the Age of AI (Sky7 Media)
Other readings	One research reading a week, most freely available
Slides and materials	The 15-week course decks, selected by week as shown in the schedule. The full kit, including course modules ready to import into Canvas, Moodle, Blackboard or D2L, is sent on request to verified instructors at www.sky7media.com/course

Learning outcomes

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

1. Diagnose what holds their organization back (awareness, relevance, credibility, the offering, or the experience after discovery) before recommending any spending.
2. Assess how search engines and AI assistants find, describe and cite their organization, and make its key pages easier to retrieve and harder to misdescribe.
3. Distinguish their organization’s own voice from independent corroboration, and plan how to answer critics openly.
4. Map the routes from first encounter to participation, and remove dead ends and pressure along them.
5. Run an honest test, read its result on the right rung, and write a 30-day plan their organization could adopt.

How the course works

- **Your own organization.** Every assignment is done on the organization you work for or serve, so the course produces work you can use. You need its permission to run a test and to share internal material, such as messages or figures, with your peer reviewer.
- **Without an organization.** A participant with no organization to work on uses one of the book's three composite cases and observes a comparable real organization from its public material only, as described in the kit's Case Pack.
- **Peer reviewers.** Participants are paired in week 1. Pairs read each other's drafts and act as strangers for each other's stranger's test and route walk. What a partner shares stays between the two of you and the instructor.
- **Each session.** About 30 minutes discussing the week's Part and research reading, 75 minutes on a workshop, and 45 minutes of work on your own organization with instructor feedback.
- **Reading.** Each week covers one Part of the book, so the reading load is heavy: six to ten chapters a week. Week 1 covers two short Parts. The schedule marks the chapters to read first if time is short; the rest can be read after the course.

Assessment

The course can be taken for completion or for a grade. For completion and CEUs, attend at least five of the six sessions and submit all three assignments at the Adequate level or better on the course rubric.

#	Assignment	Due	Book tool used	Weight if graded
1	Search and AI audit	Week 4	AI Observation Sheet (Appendix J)	30%
2	A live test	Plan week 3; report week 6	Test Log (K); Measurement Ladder (F)	30%
3	30-day plan and presentation	Week 6	First 90 Days (L), first 30 days	30%
	Participation and weekly reading responses	Weekly	Daily checks (A)	10%

Weekly reading responses are 200 words answering the week's question, due before the session. Every assignment is graded on the rubric used in the 15-week course: evidence, right rung, fidelity and usability (see the kit's Rubrics file).

Weekly schedule

Chapter numbers refer to the required text; full citations for the research readings are in the reading list below. Under each topic, "Slides" names the 15-week decks to draw on. Each session uses about 25 slides selected from them: the opening, the rules for the week's chapters and one workshop.

Wk	Topic and reading	Research reading	In class	Due
1	**Before you optimize, and the foundations** Part I and Part II: Introduction; Ch. 1–12.	Kohavi & Thomke (2017)	Predict-then-reveal on classic test results; find your organization's constraint; the stranger's test on your	Draft a list of 12 questions for the AI audit

Wk	Topic and reading	Research reading	In class	Due
	Essential if time is short: Ch. 1, 2, 3, 4, 6, 7, 11 Slides: Decks 1–5		homepage's first sentences	
2	**Being found** Part III: Ch. 13–22 Slides: Decks 6–8	Google Search Central, "AI features and your website"; Aggarwal et al. (2024)	First round of the AI observation sheet, live; check that your key pages can be read by AI crawlers; the experience test on three of your own pages	Question list final; first observation round done in class
3	**Being believed** Part IV: Ch. 23–28 Slides: Decks 9–10	Sleeth-Keppler, Perkowitz & Speiser (2017)	Sort your organization's praise into its own voice and independent voices; role-play a public answer to a fictional allegation	Test plan for approval; second observation round done during the week
4	**Routes to participation** Part V: Ch. 29–33 Slides: Deck 11	Fraustino & Ma (2015)	Walk every route from your main entry points to a first step, on a phone, as a stranger; mark dead ends and handoffs	A1 Search and AI audit; test running
5	**Nurture, from arrival to advocacy** Part VI: Ch. 34–41 Slides: Decks 12–13	Sweeny, Melnyk, Miller & Shepperd (2010)	Read your organization's first-contact replies as a skeptic would; a short pressure audit on three months of messages	Outline of the 30-day plan; test running
6	**Measurement, rhythm and the long game** Part VII: Ch. 42–47; Conclusion Slides: Decks 14–15	Kohavi, Tang & Xu (2020), ch. 1–3	Read each test result on the right rung; 30-day plan presentations	A2 Live test report; A3 30-day plan and presentation

Assignments

Each assignment is a shortened version of the one in the 15-week course. The kit's Assignment Sheets give the full steps, common pitfalls and a worked example; the differences are noted here.

1. Search and AI audit (week 4, 1,200 words plus the observation sheet)

Find out how search engines and AI assistants find, describe and cite your organization, and what would most help.

1. Fix a list of 12 questions: eight strangers' questions in their own words, two questions about your organization by name, and two a skeptic would ask.
2. Put each to three AI assistants, twice each, in clean sessions, and record every answer on the observation sheet. Run the first round in the week 2 session and the second round a week later.
3. Check whether your key pages can be read as text: robots.txt, pages without JavaScript, logins, scanned PDFs, transcripts.
4. Report where your organization is cited, named, linked or absent, where it is misdescribed, and the three changes most likely to help.

Shorter than the 15-week version: 12 questions instead of 15, two runs instead of three, three changes instead of five.

2. A live test (plan week 3; report week 6, 800 words plus the Test Log)

Run one real test on how something is presented, and read its result honestly.

1. With your organization's approval, choose one presentation question that can produce a result within three weeks: an email subject line, a follow-up message, a page opening, an invitation.
2. Write the question, the prediction and the decision rule before the test starts, and confirm with someone who knows the work that both versions make the same promise.
3. Where a split test is impossible, use alternation, a holdout or repeated AI questions.
4. Report the result on the highest rung you could observe, what else could explain it, the decision, and the later check you will run before adopting a winner. A test that changes nothing is a valid result.

Three weeks is short. Choose a test that reaches enough people in that time, and say plainly if the later check is still to come.

3. 30-day plan and presentation (week 6, 1,200 words plus a 10-minute presentation)

Combine what you have found into a plan your organization could start the following week.

1. Organize the plan in three stages: agree and fix the obvious (days 1–10), repair and test (days 11–20), review and decide what comes next (days 21–30).
2. Give every action an owner in your organization, a date, a signal (with its rung) and a stopping point.
3. Draw on the audit, the test, and the week 1, 4 and 5 workshops on your organization.
4. Present it in 10 minutes, findings first, as you would to your director or board.

Use the first 30 days of the 90-day plan workbook in the kit's Templates folder.

Weekly reading responses

Week	Question
1	Think of a change your organization made because everyone agreed it would work. What happened, and how would you have known if it had not worked?
2	Ask one AI assistant a question a stranger might ask, where your organization should be part of the answer. Was it named, cited, linked, or absent? What did the assistant rely on instead?
3	List three things said in praise of your organization. Which of them would a skeptic accept as independent, and why?
4	Where does a person who has just discovered your organization go next? Describe the first step as they would meet it, and say where it could break.
5	Think of something you looked into privately for a long time before contacting anyone. What would have driven you away?
6	Which number does your organization report most often? Which rung is it on, and what would the next rung up be?

Reading list

- Aggarwal, P., et al. (2024). GEO: Generative engine optimization. KDD 2024. arXiv:2311.09735. (Week 2)
- 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. (Week 4)
- Google Search Central. AI features and your website. developers.google.com. Check the current version before the course. (Week 2)
- Kohavi, R., Tang, D., & Xu, Y. (2020). Trustworthy online controlled experiments: A practical guide to A/B testing. Cambridge University Press, chapters 1–3. (Week 6)
- Kohavi, R., & Thomke, S. (2017). The surprising power of online experiments. Harvard Business Review, 95(5), 74–82. (Week 1)
- 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 3)
- Sweeny, K., Melnyk, D., Miller, W., & Shepperd, J. A. (2010). Information avoidance: Who, what, when, and why. Review of General Psychology, 14(4), 340–353. (Week 5)

Links and access notes for every reading are in the kit's Reading List. The other readings from the 15-week course are optional further reading.

Notes for instructors

- **Who it suits.** Continuing-education schools, professional associations and certificate programs. It can also run inside one organization or network, with each participant working on their own team or chapter.
- **Preparing the slides.** Before each session, open the decks listed for the week and choose the slides you will use. Speaker notes give the timing and how to run each workshop. Most workshops work on a participant's own organization exactly as written for a partner.
- **Week 1 is the heaviest.** Send the reading list and the first reading-response question two weeks before the course starts, so participants can begin Part I early.
- **Sensitive material.** Participants may bring internal messages and figures. Agree at the first session that nothing shared leaves the room, and that real allegations are never used as exercise material. The week 3 role-play uses the fictional case in the week 10 deck.
- **The AI material dates fastest.** Before each run of the course, check the items listed in the Instructor Guide, and rerun the week 2 exercise yourself.
- **Self-paced version.** Possible with recorded sessions, a discussion forum for the reading responses, and two live calls: one in week 2 for the observation round and one in week 6 for the presentations.

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 check every fact and quotation against its source before submitting. [Add or replace with your institution's AI policy.]

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