



Developing a communications strategy

Communications is a large and nebulous area. It comprises various disciplines, many of which overlap, have different names and refer to different activities depending on the speaker's perspective. For example communications, marketing and corporate affairs are overarching terms for the multiple means of conveying a message whereas issues, brand and stakeholder management are more recent terms to denote approaches which cut across numerous communications activities.

Some of the main communications disciplines are public relations, internal communications, corporate communications, direct marketing, advertising, branding, public affairs and investor relations. These are aimed at different audiences and use different tools and activities to convey a message. For example public relations may use a press release or a media pack to target the media whereas public affairs may use a briefing for MPs on a bill to communicate with those in government.

As in any other organisational aspect, planning your communications is important and beneficial for many reasons. It ensures the most efficient use of scarce resources, prioritises between conflicting demands and gives a clear direction for everyday activity. Furthermore it identifies the drivers of change and the best means of dealing with them, enables a review of existing organisational activity and provides milestones against which to measure future success.

Drawing up a communications strategy is an art, not a science and there are lots of different ways of approaching the task. The advice provided below is only a guide and does not contain hard and fast rules. Your communications strategy can apply to an individual project within your quarterly or monthly plan, or can refer to the communications strategy which sits above these periodical plans and below the overarching organisational strategy.

Whether your communications strategy is designed for a specific project or for the same period as your organisational strategy, it should establish the following:

- Objectives.
- Audiences.
- Messages.
- Tools and activities.
- Resources.
- Timescales.
- Evaluation and amendment.

Objectives

Your objectives are the key to the success of your communications strategy. They should ensure that your communications strategy is organisationally driven rather than communications driven. Your communications activity is not an end in itself but should serve and hence be aligned with your organisational objectives. Ask yourself what you can do within communications to help your organisation achieve its core objectives.



Aligning your communications and organisational objectives will also help to reinforce the importance and relevance of communications and thereby make a convincing case for the proper resourcing of communications activity within your organisation.

Audiences

You should identify those audiences with whom you need to communicate to achieve your organisational objectives. The best audiences to target in order to achieve an objective may not always be the most obvious ones, and targeting audiences such as the media may not always help achieve your objectives. Everyone would like a higher media and political profile, yet activities aiming towards this may ultimately be self-serving and only communications driven, with no wider impact. They can even have a negative effect if you dedicate resources towards this that would otherwise be put towards communicating with key stakeholders.

Messages

Strategic targeting and consistency are key to your organisation's messages. Create a comprehensive case covering all the key messages, and emphasise the different elements of the case for different audiences.

To maximise impact you should summarise the case in three key points which can be constantly repeated. Remember that communications is all about storytelling: use interesting narrative, human interest stories and arresting imagery.

Tools and activities

Identify the tools and activities that are most appropriate to communicating the key messages to the audiences. These will be suggested by your audiences, messages, or a combination of the two. For example, an annual report is a useful tool in corporate communications whereas an email newsletter lends itself well to internal communications. Ensure that you tailor your tools and activities to the level of time and human and financial resources available.

Resources and timescales

The key rules to observe are always to deliver what you promise and never over promise. Use your resources and timescales to set legitimate levels of expectations and outline the case for more dedicated resources.

Evaluation and amendment

Consider performing a communications audit to assess the effectiveness of your strategy with both your internal and external audiences. You should use open questions with appropriate prompts and benchmarks and if possible, get someone independent to do the work. Consider and discuss the results carefully and use them to amend your strategy.

Example audiences to consider are your staff, funders, key political targets and media. Questions you should consider asking are:

- What do you read/see/hear?
- What works/doesn't work?



- What do you want to see more of?
- What information do you need that you are not currently supplied with?
- How often do you want us to communicate with you?

While drawing up your strategy, you should involve your team, and on a smaller scale, the entire organisation. You should also seek approval from both your team and organisation. Feed the communications strategy into the organisational strategy to ensure maximum alignment and efficiency. Derive a detailed month-by-month communications plan from the strategy and monitor and report your activity against the original objectives contained within the strategy.