

How to Write a Communications Strategy

Introduction

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. 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. Feed the communications strategy into the organisational strategy to ensure maximum alignment and efficiency.

Further resources

- The Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) 'How to write a communications strategy'