

# Writing a communication strategy

## What is a communication strategy?

A communication strategy is a single, coherent narrative that describes a communications solution to a problem or bundle of problems. Working at a strategic level, it sets out:

- the nature of the problem or challenge
- the key considerations in addressing it
- the choices that have been made
- the key drivers of those decisions (crucially, insight into audiences)
- the resources required
- the stages to go through
- the evaluation criteria
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A strategy differs from a plan in that it:

- considers the wider context
- tends to take a longer-term view
- avoids the detail of individual activities

A strategy provides answers to 'what?', 'why?' and 'who?', while a plan fills in more detail around 'when?' and 'how?'.

Strategies can be developed either at corporate level or to support individual policy or delivery initiatives.

## Why develop communication strategies?

If communication and marketing plans drive the delivery of campaigns and projects, is creating a strategic overview an unnecessary burden? Well, like anything that we write, a strategy should be seen from the perspective of those who will read it.

Communication strategies can:

- provide a link between business objectives and communications planning and delivery
- help explain to policy and delivery colleagues how communications will support departmental objectives, and which strategic choices have been taken and why
- build common understanding of audiences and priorities across a communications division
- create continuity in communications activity over an extended period (especially when there is high staff turnover)
- articulate objectives and measures of success when building a case for resources or evaluating performance
- explore and mitigate communications risks

## Communication strategies - step by step

As with most communication disciplines, there are a number of approaches to developing strategies. However, there are certain common elements that should always be present.

This section includes ten key things for you to consider.

### Context

Before you get into the detail of what is new in a strategy, it is important to recognise the context in which it is being created. Crucially, this includes linking the strategy to the departmental business objectives or strategic priorities. Setting communications in the context of a departmental business case is crucial in making the case for them.

A second crucial area of context is an assessment of what we already know, whether this is about the audience, the product, the service, the initiative or previous attempts at communication. This should not be a comprehensive analysis of the target market - that level of detail is not required at a strategic level. However, the information set out here will provide a context against which the strategy will be judged. For example, if you describe a communications initiative that has failed in the past, the strategy document will have to make clear why this strategy is different.

Crucial questions to consider at this stage are:

- What policy areas are covered by the strategy?
- What work related to this project has been done in the past, and what did it achieve?
- What is the long-term future of the project?
- What are the key milestones?

### Vision, aim and objectives

A crucial role of a communication strategy is to define the ultimate outcomes desired. These can be expressed at several different levels:

- **Vision.** The vision is the ultimate goal of the strategy. It can be helpful to express this in colloquial terms - answering the question 'What does success look like?', for example. The vision sets the context for the objectives rather than providing a structure for evaluation, and therefore does not need to conform to SMART. Nonetheless, it should still consider the audience - which behaviours and attitudes are you trying to develop?
- **Aim.** An optional second step is to define an aim. This is an overarching objective, again not necessarily SMART. An aim can be useful in providing a focus for the more detailed communications objectives.
- **Communications objectives.** Communications objectives are distinct from the business objectives, which will already have been set out. They are a crucial part of any strategy, as they will drive the strategic decision-making process and provide the focus for evaluation. Communications objectives should be SMART.

Crucial questions to consider at this stage are:

- What does success look like?
- How can our communications help ensure successful implementation of this project?
- What are we hoping to achieve with these communications (attitude, awareness, behaviour)?
- Can these objectives be measured in SMART terms?
- How will they be measured?

## **Insight**

Insight is a deep truth based on behaviour, experiences, attitudes, emotions or beliefs that is powerful enough to effect change. The four key sources of insight are data, research, environment/technology and people closeness.

If there is no insight at the heart of the strategy, the strategy will need to set out a process for developing insight. It may be that a series of assumptions will need to be made around strategic options, assumptions that will need to be examined and tested as the strategy is put into action.

Crucial questions to consider at this stage are:

- Who are the audiences for this piece of communication?
- What do we know about them? What are their beliefs, attitudes, influences, behaviours?
- What deep truth underlies this that we can use to guide our strategy?

## **Strategic options**

The crux of the strategy should show the strategic options that have been considered and the choice that has ultimately been settled on. It should be founded on audience insight, and linked back to the context in which you are operating. It is important to demonstrate consideration of a number of alternatives here, and the factors that drove the eventual choice. If there are big thoughts at the centre of the strategy (and there should be), this is where they would be included.

Crucial questions to consider at this stage are:

- What is our overall strategic approach?
- What is the best way to achieve our goals within budget constraints?

## **Stakeholders**

The strategy should consider the various audiences and the relationships between them. In addition to a description of the end customer or citizen, this should include:

- partners;
- delivery agents;
- interested bodies and individuals; and
- staff (in the department and/or agency).

This is also the stage at which consideration needs to be given to the internal communications aspects of the project.

Crucial questions to consider at this stage are:

- Who are the representatives of or intermediaries between our audiences?
- Who are our partners in this piece of communication? Are there advisers, experts or other parts of government we need to involve?
- How do we involve the various groups of departmental staff? Is there a role for the unions?

## **Proposition and top-line messaging**

Creating detailed, audience-specific messaging is part of the creative process of delivering the project. However, at the strategic level it is important to consider the proposition or propositions you will make to the audience (a proposition is a key promise or trade-off made to an audience).

The proposition may be supported by the top-line messages - the most important points you wish to get across to the audience.

Crucial questions to consider at this stage are:

- What are the key messages we wish to communicate?
- How do these messages relate to and support each other?
- Are these messages short, jargon-free, concise and meaningful?

## **Outline of approach**

The detailed elements of communication media and channels are generally presented in a separate plan. However, the strategy should present an outline of how the ideas will be put into practice. Crucially, it should identify the role of each medium and the communications milestones, and present a timeline. This is also the point at which full consideration should be given to the diversity of the audiences.

Crucial questions to consider at this stage are:

- What are the key activities to be carried out, and at what stage?
- Will there be further research required, and at what stage?
- Will this work on a national level, or is it regional? And what does 'national' mean in this context? The UK? England?
- How are minority groups being addressed?
- Does the campaign adhere to guidelines concerning images of disability, colours, type size, use of English and diversity issues? Does it comply with the Disability Discrimination Act?

## Resources

Having established what we are going to do and for whom, the strategy now needs to set out the budget and resources required, and how much of these are already secured.

This is also a good place to set out roles and responsibilities, such as project leader or SRO. A list of names and contact details is useful here.

Crucial questions to consider at this stage are:

- Who will lead the delivery of this strategy?
- Who are the key contacts in relevant policy or delivery teams?
- Will delivery be largely in-house, or will it be done by an agency?
- What is the total budget required?
- Have bids already been made?
- Is this funding already in place?

## Interdependencies

Depending on the range of the initiative covered by the strategy, it might be useful to set out a series of interdependencies. If, for example, the strategy addresses only part of a strategic priority, is there activity planned to complete the rest of the work?

This is also an opportunity to identify and mitigate against potential clashes/duplication and identify synergies.

Crucial questions to consider at this stage are:

- Is any proposition fully agreed with service delivery?
- How does this fit in with other strategy and policy issues within the department?
- Are others covering this issue, or part of it?
- Is an audit needed to find out the situation?

## Risks and assumptions

Whatever the recommendations of the strategy, there is certain to be an element of risk. This may be associated with:

- unknowable reactions from stakeholders or other audiences;
- uncosted elements of the strategy; or
- the evolving nature of many of the policy areas being worked in.

A complete strategy should identify the key risks associated with the recommended strategic approach, their likelihood of occurring/potential impact and top-line mitigation plans. The assumptions that will have necessarily been made to complete this

document should be identified, and the impact of mistaken assumptions acknowledged.

Crucial questions to consider at this stage are:

- What are the risks of this course of action?
- How likely are these to happen? What could the impact be?
- What could we do to mitigate any risks?
- What assumptions underlie this strategy? What is being done to test these assumptions?

While the headings above serve as a guide, it is important to note that the communication strategy is a living document. Key sections should be added as they are developed, e.g. the core script, role of media, creative idea, creative guidelines, budget breakdown, stakeholder plan, etc.