

Developing a communications strategy

Step-by-step guide to producing a communications strategy

<http://knowhownonprofit.org/campaigns/communications/effective-communications-1/communications-strategy>

A communications strategy is designed to help you and your organisation communicate effectively and meet core organisational objectives. Here we look at the key elements of a communications strategy as well as how press/PR plans, web strategies and marketing plans fit into your organisation's overall communications strategy.

Writing your communications strategy

1. Statement of purpose

It is useful to say up front why you have developed a communications strategy and what you hope to achieve with it. This does not need to be very detailed, it acts as a reference and reminder for those using it in their work. For example:

"This communications strategy shows how effective communications can:

- help us achieve our overall organisational objectives
- engage effectively with stakeholders
- demonstrate the success of our work
- ensure people understand what we do
- change behaviour and perceptions where necessary."

2. Your current situation

The introductory part of the communications strategy should briefly outline what your organisation does, what its main functions are and where it operates. It should also look at your organisation's communications strengths – what has been successful and what hasn't worked well over the last five years or so. The following tools can be used to help analyse your organisation's current situation.

a) PEST Analysis

This involves listing the **Political, Economic, Social and Technological** factors that could affect your organisation's work. These could be positive or negative factors and should include issues that are likely to have an impact on how your organisation operates. You should indicate why each factor will have an effect.

For example, under 'political' you might include: Change of government: needs to build contacts with new civil servants/MPs. Need to understand new policy agenda. Implications for target media.

See more on [PESTEL analysis](#) in our strategy section.

b) SWOT Analysis

A SWOT Analysis involves listing your organisation's **strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats**. Think about what this means in terms of your communications priorities. How can threats be turned into opportunities, how can you play on your strengths through effective communications?

See more on [SWOT analysis](#) in our strategy section.

c) Competitor Analysis

Another useful tool when assessing your current situation is to look at what your competitors are doing. This can be a relatively simple exercise where you identify your main competitors and rank them against certain criteria. Try to be objective when assessing current strengths and weaknesses.

Download [communications competitor analysis \(Word, 46kb\)](#) for templates and examples.

3. Organisational objectives and communications objectives

Any communications strategy should closely reflect your overall organisational plan. In this section you should look at your organisation's overall vision and core aims and objectives. You should then suggest how communications can help deliver these goals. As well as referring to specific objectives, this section should give an overall sense of the principles of communications that underpin the strategy and the key messages that the organisation wants to convey.

It is important that your communications objectives should be seen to contribute to the achievement of the overall objectives of the organisation. In this way they will be recognised not as an "add-on", but something as fundamental as operational or policy objectives to achieving the organisation's overall mission.

The example below shows how for a (fictional) homelessness organisation this might work in practice. Each of the organisation's strategic objectives (from its business plan) can be broken down to show how operations and communications can contribute to delivering the objectives.

EG - Objective 1: To provide the best standards of care and support for people using our services

Operational or policy objectives	Communications objectives
To train our staff effectively to work with our service users	To ensure all staff know and understand the standards of care expected

To keep the premises clean and well maintained	To ensure service users know the quality of services they should expect, and know what is expected of them
To provide opportunities for service users to enter education, training or employment	To ensure service users have opportunities to communicate their needs within the organization
	To regularly gather feedback to ensure we are maintaining standards of care and support

EG - Objective 2: To play a key role in the community as a valued provider of services for vulnerable people

Operational or policy objectives	Communications objectives
To build strong relationships with the local authority and other funders	To provide a regular flow of information to key stakeholders
To fulfil contracts with the local authority to provide services for service users	To regularly showcase organisational successes in the local media
	To be approached by local media for opinions on availability of services for vulnerable people

Top tip: Most organisational plans cover for a period of around five years, your communications vision should work to the same timescale.

Top tip: When setting objectives, it's important to be realistic in terms of timeframes, budgets and resources. It's also important to ensure they are measurable.

4. Identifying stakeholders

In this section, you should give a detailed description of your main audiences – both external and internal. These might include the public, politicians, service users and staff. You might also refer to potential audiences that your organisation is keen to connect with. Many organisations will find that they have lots of audiences who they need to interact with. One part of the strategy might look at which audiences will be interested in which parts of your organisation or activities. Understanding this may make it easier to prioritise your communications work.

In this fictional example, a charity providing advice and other services has looked at what its key stakeholders might be interested in:

Audience	Advice or information	Accommodation services	Policies and practice	Policy and research	Financial accounts	Success stories
Staff	No	No	X	X	X	X
Board of trustees	No	No	X	X	X	X
Donors	No	No	No	No	X	X
Community groups	X	No	No	X	No	No
Service users	X	X	X	No	No	No
Social services	No	X	X	X	No	X

Another way of prioritising your audiences or stakeholders might be to ‘map’ them. This involves choosing criteria which are important to your organisation and then ranking your different audiences against those criteria. This can help show you which are the most important and therefore the ones on which you should be spending most of your effort communicating. It is often easier to do this analysis with two criteria, so you can highlight the differences between audiences.

Some simple examples of mapping stakeholders include: looking at their influence on policy and resources and their interest in your organisation. For the fictional organisation above, the map might look something like this:



Description of the diagram: The diagram shows a square divided into quadrants with each quadrant shaded a different colour. The x-axis (horizontal) shows 'interest in your organisation' whilst the y-axis (diagonal) shows 'influence on policy and resources'. The quadrants are titled (clockwise starting from top left) keep satisfied, key players, keep informed and monitor.

In each of the boxes, there is a suggested prioritisation of communications with these audiences. The key players (top right section) are clearly those you want to spend the most time communicating with. NB – it is likely that some of these audiences will become more or less influential and have a greater or lesser interest in your organisation over time and depending on their interaction with you. So it is worth revisiting this type of exercise periodically to see if the priorities are still the same.

Top tip: Don't forget your internal audiences – staff, board members etc. Internal communications is a crucial part of any communications strategy.

Download a template diagram to map your stakeholders ([work plan template \(Excel, 39kb\)](#)).

5. Messages

Once you have identified your audiences, the next task is to break down your objectives into relevant messages for each of those audiences. Start with the audiences that are the highest priority.

Remember that your messages should be relevant and appropriate to the audience. You might want to speak to your supporters and donors in much more forthright language than you would use for local authorities or other funders. But it is very important that there is a continuity across the messages. It is important that all of your stakeholders understand what kind of organisation you are, so your messaging needs always to link back to your key organisational objectives and values.

The table below sets out some examples of how messages can be tailored to different audiences.

Audience	What they need to know	Key communications messages
Service users	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – What we offer them – How to access our services – Where to go for advice 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – We provide useful, practical information and support – We are trustworthy and reliable – We put services users first and value their opinions

Local MP or councillors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – What we want to see changed in policy terms – Our strong evidence base and supporter base 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – We have a strong evidence base and our calls are grounded in robust evidence – We have a good knowledge of the policy environment – We are a well-respected, authoritative organisation
Supporters	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – We have the ability to make change if they help us 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – We need you to support our campaign by writing to your MP, signing our e-petition, donating to us etc

6. Key communications methods

For each audience identified in your previous section, you should now indicate the most appropriate channels for communicating with them. These might include an e-bulletin, conference, workshop, leaflet, press release, event – or broader methods such as media and your website.

There are pros and cons to all of these channels, which once again will vary depending on your organisations needs and resources. Try a simple internal analysis of the channels you have at your disposal to see which are the best to use for getting specific messages to particular audiences.

Once you have looked at the channels you have, you can begin to construct your communications plan, linking audiences, messages and channels.

For example:

Audience	Key communications messages	Key communications channels
Service users	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – We provide useful, practical information and support – We are trustworthy and reliable – We put services users first and value their opinions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Service user e-bulletin – Quarterly service user meetings – Service user representation on the Board – Media training for service users who are keen to act as spokespeople
Politicians	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – We have a strong evidence base and our calls are grounded in robust evidence – We have a good knowledge of the policy 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Quarterly policy briefings on specific policy areas – Look into creating an All Party Parliamentary Group – Ensure all press releases are sent to relevant government department in advance

	environment – We are a well-respected, authoritative organisation	– Positive media coverage	• • • •
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Example of service user publication: [Facing Hard Times by Kids in the Middle](#)

Top Tip: for each audience, there will probably be several appropriate communications channels

You may want to include supplementary strategies for your web/online media presence, Press/PR Plans and direct marketing. These will help you go into greater detail about how your organisation plans use these channels to communicate effectively with relevant stakeholders.

7. Work plan

With your audiences and key communications methods identified, the next step is to draw up a table that indicates the key communications activities, budget and resources allocated to delivering the strategy.

The work plan should also include proposed timescales and identify particular milestones within the strategy. This will allow you to measure clear steps towards ultimate goals.

There may be specific projects, events or publications that you know will take place and these should be highlighted.

Download a sample [work plan template \(Excel, 39kb\)](#). This provides an outline for how you might go about mapping communications activity against key objectives.

8. Evaluating success

Your communications strategy should conclude with a section on evaluation. What does success look like and how will you know when objectives have been met?

Here you should indicate the tools you will use to evaluate various sections of your communications. These could be simple measures such as the number of responses to e-bulletins, hits to your website or increases in donations following a mail-out. They could be focused on policy changes, for example have the key calls of your campaign been achieved? You could also include measures of media coverage; not only in terms of volume, but also breadth and depth. How often were your key messages mentioned and has there been a shift in public attitude on issues you've been campaigning for?

Top Tip: include milestones in your evaluation section so that you can measure progress towards ultimate goals.

Useful links

- [Developing a communications strategy \(The Centre\)](#)
- [What does a good communications strategy look like? \(CharityComms\)](#)

Supplementary strategies

Press/PR plan

A Press/PR plan looks specifically at how your organisation aims to raise its profile through the media. This includes print, broadcast and online media. The Press plan should link closely to the broader communications strategy.

For more in-depth tips on developing on a Press/PR plan, see section on [media coverage](#).

Useful links

- [Writing a PR plan \(Media Trust\)](#)
- [How to devise a media strategy \(Volunteer Genie\)](#)
- [Defining a PR Strategy \(Growth Business\)](#)

Further reading

- PR in Practice: Planning and Managing Public Relations Campaigns: A Step-by-step Guide: 1, By Anne Gregory
- Press Releases Are Not a PR Strategy, by Linda B. VandeVrede

Web strategy

A web strategy sits alongside an organisation's communications strategy and looks specifically at how the organisation can build its online presence. This includes having an effective website, utilising social media, running online campaigns and identifying what resources you should have online and for web marketing.

See the [social media](#) section for tips on how to make the most of social media and how to develop a web strategy.

See the [social networking – best practice](#) section for information on social networking and how to build strong online networks.

Useful links

- [Integrated web strategy \(Webrouser\)](#)
- [Internet marketing strategy report](#) (available for FREE on econsultancy)

Marketing plan

A marketing plan follows a similar structure to a communications strategy. You should analyse your operating environment, look at your strengths and weaknesses, identify key audiences and indicate which methods you will use to take your product to the market.

See [marketing and branding section](#) for tips on marketing.

Useful links

- [How to write a marketing plan \(Knowthis.com\)](#)

Crisis communications plan

A crisis communications plan should be included in your communications strategy. See the [crisis management](#) page for information and tips on how to handle a crisis and tips on putting together a crisis communications plan.