Making communication count: a Strategic Communications Framework

Many researchers and development actors know that if their work is to benefit people and planet they need to communicate it. But we need to guard against focusing on individual products such as books and briefings rather than thinking about the end goal and what impact we need to achieve. We need to be strategic in how we think about communications. Experience suggests that a Strategic Communications Framework — which distinguishes approaches based on their underlying purpose be that influencing policy change, mobilising communities, sharing information or raising profiles — can help identify the most appropriate strategy for the purpose at hand and point to relevant tools and tactics to ensure communication activities make an impact.

Policy pointers

- Effective communication strategies will differ depending on whether you are communicating to influence change, engage or mobilise communities, share information, or raise profiles.

- Influencing change relies on engaging key audiences in dialogue that is relevant, context-specific and backed up by robust evidence.

- Communities can be mobilised by providing platforms for debate — for example through networks or coalitions — and building the capacity of marginalised actors to participate.

- Communication for sharing information ensures good flows of clearly presented, robust information in an accessible and engaging way.

- By ensuring a match in how you present your identity and how you are perceived by key audiences, communication for profile raising can help build trust and credibility.

Communications means all things to all people. For many it conjures up outputs — books, reports, websites, brochures, leaflets, and so on. For others, it can imply potentially wasteful marketing activities. For communication professionals, it is a catch-all for a myriad of strategies, approaches and different channels of communication that is underpinned by a vast body of theory.

Without the 's', communication is less about products than capturing a better way to ensure a more strategic approach to achieving your end goal. It involves thinking about the nature in which you communicate. That will often include listening to your audience so that you can deliver the right message at the right time and, more importantly, so that you can gain greater insight into how to make the biggest impact.

Communication professionals face two big challenges, particularly in the non-profit sector. First, how to justify their expenditure on communication activities. This is particularly important during times of financial crisis, where a knee-jerk reaction can often be to cut 'communications' or 'marketing'.

The second challenge lies in demonstrating their strategic approach to communication (rather than simply providing a list of end-of-pipe products).

A Strategic Communications Framework can help with both. By providing a structure for thinking strategically about communication, the framework can help ensure the development of appropriate approaches. It is a useful tool for getting colleagues — particularly non-professional communicators — to focus on the impact they want to achieve, and consider the different options available for achieving it.

It also offers a base for checking assumptions about goals and objectives, and for developing effective monitoring and evaluation tools to demonstrate value for money.

A strategic approach

Why is it important to have a strategic approach to communication? First, it ensures greater impact, especially if it is designed at the start of a project. It also forces you to think more carefully about target audiences and what it takes to communicate with them. This ensures you select appropriate channels of communication and make the most cost-effective use of time and resources.

A key element in defining a strategic approach is understanding whether you are in supply or demand mode. Are you producing information on a subject because it is something you are interested in saying, or have you identified a need among your target audience for this information?

Most organisations will likely need to adopt both a supply and demand approach. Supplying information — or making it accessible as and when it is needed — is clearly also part of the demand cycle in that it ensures your information is easily found when people are looking for it.

A strategic approach to communication ensures greater impact

But a key nuance in terms of a supply and demand strategy lies in the decision whether to proactively anticipate and drive demand or not. This relies on intelligently scoping the external environment to identify key communication 'hot spots' and creating an enabling environment for change. In communication theory we talk of 'push and pull' strategies. One focuses on 'pushing' information out to target audiences, while the other is about 'pulling' the target audience in — engaging them, involving them and having a relationship with them in a more proactive way.

The Strategic Communications Framework provides four broad strategic approaches to communication: two leaning towards a 'push' strategy, and two towards a 'pull' strategy. They are built around your objective of communication — whether you are communicating to influence policy change, engage or mobilise communities, share information, or raise your profile (see Table).

Depending on the size of your communication challenge or your specific goals, you may need to deploy some or all of these approaches. Doing communication work for a whole organisation, you will likely use all four; for an individual project, you may be better off prioritising a single approach.

1. Communication to influence policy change

Possibly the least tangible in terms of a set of activities, this is one of the most important strategies, particularly for those working in policy arenas.

Communication processes are not linear and communication for influencing is the least linear of all. Change is achieved through a complex set of interrelationships and consistent engagement with a range of actors, all of which must be nurtured and targeted with relevant, context-specific messages and dialogue.

Communication for influence is usually delivered by word of mouth but it must be backed up by relevant, authoritative information and evidence. Trust is vital to influence change through communication. It does not come overnight but is built over time and is placed in organisations and individuals where strong relationships exist. These vital relationships create an enabling environment for change.

Communication for influencing must identify moments of leverage and help empower those who can catalyse change in that moment. Building up the pressure to drive a policy change is often best achieved by working with other actors such as the media, professional campaigners, lobbyists and information multipliers that aggregate information for further dissemination.

Effective approaches and activities — particularly in a policy environment — will draw on communicators' abilities to:

- produce relevant, timely, credible and rigorous research and evidence;
- present key findings and lobby effectively;
- publish short, policy-relevant briefings;
- work effectively with the media;
- conduct good horizon scanning and scoping; and
- map key stakeholders well.

Table. The Strategic Communications Framework

Communication objective	Push or pull?	Types of communication activity or channels
1. Influencing policy change	**Pull**: bringing key audiences into discussion and dialogue and supporting this with robust, concise information and evidence. Working with the media and others to build pressure for change.	One-to-one lobbying; short, snappy presentations, verbally or in print; context-specific briefs; working with media and other opinion formers; building strong trusting relationships; and identifying 'hot' spots.
2. Engaging or mobilising communities	**Pull**: providing platforms for engaging in debates and sharing ideas. Listening to audiences and adapting approaches accordingly.	Building networks and coalitions; carrying out consultations and surveys; inviting calls to action; collective lobbying; campaigning; feedback loops; co-creation; crowd sourcing; and using participatory methodology.
3. Sharing information	**Push**: ensuring good flows of clearly presented, robust information that is accessible, engaging, easy to find and easy to read, hear or watch.	Myriad of options, both virtual and physical, for presenting material; full range of visual or audio visual treatments and styles; and marketing, search engine optimisation and dissemination.
4. Raising profiles	**Push**: ensuring a clear voice for the organisation or project — one that matches the identity you wish to portray with the one that your audience perceives. Clearly presenting brand values. Strong messaging about values and activities.	Institutional literature; websites; brochures; annual reports; newsletters; magazines; and presentations.

2. Communication to engage or mobilise communities

Often, achieving change or communicating new messages relies on engaging or mobilising whole communities, be they communities of practice, wider communities of interest, or communities within a geographic area at local, national and international scales.

For communicators, strategies to mobilise communities are about providing opportunities for listening and engagement. It is about getting buy-in or building people's capacity to join the debate. Genuine participation requires participatory methodologies and a real appetite and ability to respond to emerging issues. You must be committed to maintaining and building relationships — to genuinely listen to your audience, respond appropriately and adapt your style and approach as needed.

This kind of communication can be unpredictable and challenging, and it requires both time and effort to succeed. Done well, it is particularly suited to working within networks and coalitions. Communication activities for this approach must recognise the need for people within the network to feel able to contribute and the need for feedback. Communicators must:

■ nurture different actors' engagement by encouraging and responding to individual contributions;

■ feed the group as a whole with new information and continued inspiration; and

■ provide clarity on purpose and direction, while changing pace if needed.

New social media — from Facebook and Twitter to blogs and podcasts — and more interactive media such as participatory video and online discussion fora are particularly well suited to facilitating debate and enabling a broad set of actors to participate. As such, they present exciting opportunities to more effectively engage and mobilise whole communities.[1]

3. Communication to share information

These strategies are all about making sure your information is as accessible as possible for your target audiences. They recognise that organisations often have a broad audience and must speak to a wide range of interests.

Herein lies a major challenge. In poorly resourced environments we tend to choose a product that we believe will reach the widest possible audience — often a report or book. But while such products can be vital to build a backdrop of trust and credibility, one size does not fit all. A range of tailored outputs from the same piece of work may be more effective in prompting readers to take up, or act on, key messages.

Marketing matters

Marketing is associated with the kind of communication activity you need if you are trying to encourage people to buy your products. It clearly has commercial connotations but this set of skills is just as relevant to the voluntary sector when it comes to ensuring people are aware of your products — either for sale or for free distribution. No matter how good your product is, it is no good if nobody reads, watches or listens to it because they do not know it is there.

Marketing is about getting the right goods to the right people, at the right time and in the right way. You must be able to identify key audiences and alert them to the availability of new material. Marketing focuses on understanding how your target audiences receive information and decide whether to act on it, and how they continue a relationship with you. This relationship is usually managed through a customer relationship management (CRM) database. After its staff, a good CRM database is one of the most valuable assets an organisation can have.

A thorough understanding of appropriate and effective marketing can greatly improve impact.

Thinking carefully about audiences at the beginning of a project and choosing the right channel for presenting information can help use resources more effectively and deliver stronger outreach. In fact it is critical to ensuring maximum impact. It requires a strong understanding of key audiences and how they behave. For example, a policymaker may well prefer a short, printed sheet they can carry around to meetings, while an academic or speech writer may need longer, more in-depth online information.

Good information sharing also needs good marketing and dissemination (see Marketing matters). If you are relying on people to access your information they need to know it is there and how they can find it. Across all sectors and businesses we are great at producing things and bad at sharing them. Working with infomediaries can really help widen the opportunities for information access.

4. Communication to raise profiles

These strategies are about raising awareness about an organisation or project. It is here where all the potential for communication work getting a bad reputation resides — resources can be easily wasted if it is unclear what is needed. It is where all the contentious issues around branding, marketing and promotion come into play — particularly for the non-profit sector — and where there is least understanding about the interplay between different marketing and communication strategies.

The 'right' kind of profile raising is absolutely critical to an organisation's success and ability to achieve impact. In the voluntary sector we mistakenly assume that because we do not like everything that the corporate sector stands for we should not like any of the strategies they use. But businesses and corporations have simply used communication tools appropriately for their business. There is no reason why we should not do the same, for more altruistic ends.

Six ways to use the framework

■ Identifying which approaches will deliver your project or organisational goals

■ Differentiating with colleagues the different kinds of communication strategy available

■ Setting priorities for different kinds of communication activity

■ Assessing what kind of relationship you need with your end users or beneficiaries

■ Explaining to supporters and donors the relevance of your communication activities

■ Supporting your monitoring and evaluation processes through a more nuanced identification of outputs to outcomes

Trust and credibility are vital to achieving impact. Communication work will fall on deaf ears if the audience does not trust an organisation or think it credible. 'Branding' is the word that describes your personality or identity — both the identity you wish to portray and also the one that your audience perceives. If these two identities differ, you will lose trust and credibility.

Communication for profile raising must ensure a match between how you present your identity and how you are seen to present yourself in the eyes of your audience. It is all about ensuring your visibility in the most appropriate way. Visibility often determines reputation — and a good reputation can help garner recognition and support. This applies not only for the organisation or project concerned but also for associated partners and stakeholders.

In practice, organisational profile raising and branding are often crafted through public relations — by ensuring strategic engagement of key spokespeople and organisational messaging. But other communication activities routinely included here focus on producing organisational literature such as annual reports, brochures and retrospectives.

Using the framework in practice

The Strategic Communications Framework should be used at the very beginning of a project or activity (see Six ways to use the framework). As a practical tool, it can help you decide which approaches are most relevant and offer the most value for money in terms of desired impact. It will also help you articulate the purpose of each communication activity chosen and resource it appropriately.

The framework provides a particularly useful tool when it comes to thinking about research communication.

Research communication is essentially about getting research into use — either in the policy arena, to inform new policy, or into the hands of practitioners, to inform new ways of doing things.[2] The Strategic Communications Framework contributes to the growing understanding about how to do research communication — and how it differs from other communication strategies — by getting us to focus on communication to influence change.

Research communication demands a strategy for influencing that sits alongside the production of good research — be it original, applied or action research. The challenge lies in presenting complex research findings in a relevant and useful way.

For policymakers, this means making it clear and succinct, while intrinsically evidence-based. Policymakers simply cannot deal with long reports — although they must have confidence that key messages are based on rigorous evidence and findings found in such reports. They also need regular updates on new and evolving thinking. Good research communication strategies must support researchers to engage with policymakers throughout their research project and provide relevant and timely information as required. Sometimes this can be in direct conflict with a researcher's own need to hold back information for publication in peer review journals that build their own credibility.

Getting research into use to change practices relies more on getting new ways of working tried and tested on the ground. The evidence may suggest a different approach but until communities have tried it out in practice, it will not be adopted. Getting research into use in this way also needs communication strategies that bring different stakeholders together to share learning as well as disseminate mass media messages.

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Notes

■ [1] See Carlile, L. 2011. *Development online: making the most of social media.* IIED briefing. IIED, London. ■ [2] The UK's Department for International Development (DIFD) has a strong focus on 'Research and Evidence for Policy' and 'Research into Use'. See www.dfid.gov.uk/Global-Issues/Research-and-evidence and www.researchintouse.com.

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