

STRATEGISING FOR COMMUNICATION

- A PROCESS IN OUTLINE

INTRODUCTION

THE PROCESS

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INTRODUCTION

Why strategise for communication

A thousand voices speaking without a common message and single purpose will in the end just make an indistinct noise that few will hear.

We communicate in a noisy world competing for attention with voices that have objectives that are different and often opposing. And we do so in a world made up of a vast array of interests and concerns, and a world in which everyday concerns weigh heavily on most people.

We must therefore speak with shared purpose and clarity of message. Our actions must be informed by an understanding of the environment we are working in, of who we are trying to reach, what they are thinking, how they are best reached.

In other words we must strategise for communication, translating our ideas into a concrete programme of action that promotes our objectives.

The strategising process

There are many ways of approaching this challenge – what follows is a process that has emerged out of GCIS own experience in strategising for communication and serves us well. It is formulated in nine steps. But this is not a mechanical process that yields automatic results – it needs hard work and lots of thought.

These steps are the elements of developing strategy for communication and implementing it. Each step is of critical importance, and interlinked. But there is a logical order and we need early on to give critical attention to two things or our work will be undermined. Those two things are objective and message.

All strategising is about how to achieve objectives. Individuals and organisations are all able to strategise. But if we are unclear about our objective or get it wrong then all the rest will be of little or no value. And the same goes if we have not correctly defined what we want to say.

As we translate our broad objectives into achievable goals; as we interrogate our environment and sharpen our understanding of how different sectors of society relate to our objective and as we formulate our message, it is critical that we have at hand some form of research results about the issue. Research must inform communication strategy because it gives insight to the dynamism of the environment and the challenges it brings.

1 BACKGROUND

To be sure that we engage in the right terrain and fight the right battle we need to start by understanding what has led to our need for communication action. This is the pre-history of the campaign, facts that locate it within broader and longer term developments.

Perhaps a policy process has reached a stage that needs the public to be informed; perhaps difficulties in trade negotiations needs public support to be built; perhaps floods have caused havoc and people need to be informed of what is being done to address the disaster and how to get help if they need it.

2 OBJECTIVES

Time and care spent on clarifying and defining objectives will be repaid many times. If we get this wrong all the rest of our work will be undermined.

What are we trying to do: Inform? Educate? Build support for a policy proposal? Reassure people? Dispel misleading information? Halt or reverse the acceptance of misleading information by others? Persuade opponents of a policy to change their minds? Change dangerous behaviour? Encourage participation in a campaign or election?

As we clarify our objectives we may return to the BACKGROUND. At this stage the objectives remain strategically broad – they will get sharper, more concrete and more specific after the next stage of scanning the ENVIRONMENT and as we move on to defining COMMUNICATION CHALLENGES and MESSAGE.

3 ENVIRONMENT

This defines the terrain in which we have chosen to communicate.

Understanding our environment requires thinking about the particular matters we need to deal with: what is the public mood; the media agenda; what are the attitudes and concerns of the varying sectors and forces at play; what are others doing or likely to do; how can we expect things to develop; what historical factors may be brought into play? What resources are at our disposal or the disposal of those who might join as partners in action?

Scanning of the communication environment makes it possible for the communication strategist to take action that is appropriate and therefore effective. It allows us to anticipate changes and make timely intervention. What we scan is the current environment and the likely future environment. There are different ways of approaching this task – what matters is that we take into account whatever it is that makes up the landscape and the climate for this particular communication campaign.

4 COMMUNICATION CHALLENGES

Our broad OBJECTIVES considered in the context of the communications ENVIRONMENT will lead us to IDENTIFY specific challenges that we will face and which we will have to meet successfully in order to achieve our broad objectives.

Challenges can be of almost any kind. It could be a matter of obstacles in the form of misinformed beliefs that have to be changed through an awareness campaign. It could be the challenge of activating to the maximum support that is there but only latent – or of bringing together in a single campaign sectors that are supportive but for different reasons. It could be a problem of insufficient resources. It could be the task of making the most of “good news” that has not been well-publicised, or putting complex information into easily understood forms. It could be overcoming apathy or opposition.

Having understood these challenges we can then face the all-important question of what it is we must say.

5 MESSAGES AND THEMES

To start we define what we want to say, not as words or slogans – that comes later - but the concepts and themes.

In doing so a distinction is drawn between the core themes and sub-themes.

If we do that effectively it will allow us to formulate a core message and subsidiary messages, again not necessarily as the actual slogans and words that will be used, but as simple statements of the content we need to get across.

Once the rest of the communication strategy is completed, it may become easier to devise the overall slogan for the communication exercise.

6 MESSENGERS, AUDIENCES AND CHANNELS, TYPES OF EVENT

A campaign must have its own voice. Who is to speak for it? and to whom? And in what ways? In most case this is complex as different sectors are best reached in different ways, by different institutions or figures, through different media and forums, in different kinds of events.

As we reach this stage we are beginning the practical development of the campaign, and one will need to come back to it after thinking about the next stage, that of PHASES OF THE CAMPAIGN.

It is best to identify the principal spokesperson or persons for the communication action your are planning, someone to represent and reinforce the particular characteristics that define the campaign, its brand attributes.

7 A PHASED COMMUNICATION PROGRAMME

There are two parts here, phasing of a campaign and the broad outline of a communication programme.

Very rarely is there just one stage to a campaign. One may move – as in the case of Y2K – from a first phase of education and awareness to a second of mobilising for action to prepare for the millenium; and then a third one of reassurance that the country is prepared. Each phase has its different needs and challenges.

Then one can begin – and it may be no more than begin – to map out a broad Communication Programme.

8 STRUCTURES AND PROCESSES

By this stage the initial phase of strategising is largely done. To go into a more detailed development of the campaign and to begin implementing will need another kind of process.

Development, implementation and management of a programme require the right structures. Generally something like a Communications Task Team is needed to take responsibility for these things.

At this stage it must be made clear who will have sign-off powers for draft strategies, design of artwork, etc. It is imperative that a spokesperson for the campaign should come from the lead department, whether it is a single department campaign or a transversal campaign.

The first task of the Structure is twofold – the writing up of the **COMMUNICATION STRATEGY** and the development of an **ACTION PLAN**.

Beyond that, the structure managing the campaign will provide strategic management, and monitor implementation and impact as well as continuous scanning of the environment, monitoring and analysis of communication and media coverage of the campaign so that the effectiveness of the campaign can be assessed and its implementation or direction modified if need to be. It will constantly measure the unfolding campaign against **OBJECTIVES** and **CHALLENGES** and ensure it keep **ON MESSAGE**.

9 STRATEGY DOCUMENT AND ACTION PLAN

A well-written COMMUNICATION STRATEGY DOCUMENT is a critical instrument for a good campaign.

The document will be the guide for all future action, the standard against which the success or failure of communication is measured, the most critical means for keeping the campaign on track.

It needs to be clear and concise and well-written in a form that is easily understood and convincing, not as a series of bullet-points but as a logical presentation of the thinking behind the strategising, crisply articulating the core message and the themes.

To put into practice the ideas resulting from strategising requires an ACTION PLAN that spells out in detail what is to be done for each event in the programme; who is to do it; what its specific targets and objectives are, budgets, and so on. This will also serve as an instrument of strategic management and co-ordination to make sure the OBJECTIVES are met.

An action plan is always in a table format (see example below).

Element/Tasks	Date	Responsibility	Remarks
Phase 1:			
Phase 2:			
Phase 3:			

A critical part of the action plan is to identify other supporting plans needed, e.g

- media liaison strategy consisting of a detailed plan of interviews, press briefings, media/journalists to be targeted, opinion pieces, and most importantly a statement of key messages and Questions and Answers (FAQs), for communicators and writers to use.
- especially for campaigns whose objectives are to educate and inform and have a medium term to long term duration, there is a need for a positioning strategy with a clear statement of the type of brand identity to be developed, something related to objective, challenges and message.
- A distribution strategy citing a detailed plan on how the various products/services will be disseminated to the identified target audiences.