

CONTENTS

1. Preface
2. Introduction
3. Government Communication in Context
 - 3.1 The national communication environment
 - 3.2 The media environment
4. The Government Communicators' Toolkit
 - 4.1 Government Communication as a co-ordinated function
 - 4.2 National government communication strategy
 - 4.3 Generic framework for developing a communication strategy - a process in outline
 - 4.4 Politics and a Government Communicator
 - 4.5 Understanding government policy
 - 4.6 Government communication and environmental scanning
 - 4.7 Development Communication
 - 4.8 Marketing and Advertising
 - 4.9 Managing the corporate identity of the government
 - 4.10 Campaign management
 - 4.11 Media liaison and management
5. New Media and Information and Communication Technology
6. Addendum
 - 6.1 Generic Key Performance Areas for the Heads of Communication
 - 6.2 *Imbizo* Manual
 - 6.3 Addresses and media contacts

'INCREASING THE CAPACITY OF THE STATE TO MEET ITS OBLIGATIONS TO THE CITIZENS, READY TO SERVE'

The new political dispensation has posed numerous challenges and opportunities to both the Government communication system and government communicators specifically. The democratic breakthrough of 1994 signalled government's commitment to society – a commitment to create space for every member of society to participate in building our new democratic state, based on the respect of human rights and human development.

It is this paradigm that compels a government communicator to view communication as a strategic element of service delivery. Because this challenge is new to all of us, it is a critical and challenging period of great learning.

One of the core decisions taken by the Cabinet in September 2000, was that 'a handbook on Government Communication will be published by Government Communications (GCIS), to entrench the new ethos and approach'. This Government

Communicators' Handbook is designed to assist government communicators to locate themselves in the overall government communication system in a rapidly changing working environment.

In a sense, this Handbook seeks to provide the government communicator with simple guidelines and reference tool around government communication. These guidelines include among others, Government Communication Strategy (GCS), media liaison and management, campaign management, Development Communication, understanding of government policy, marketing and advertising, and managing the corporate identity of the government.

In the First Decade of Democracy we have witnessed the dawn of many positive changes with respect to providing a professional, effective and efficient government communication service. The establishment of the GCIS has ushered in a new approach to shape the integration, co-ordination and improvement of government communication.

This includes among others, promoting policies and mechanisms, which encourage diversity of the media, communication and information resource management, professional, effective and creative communication service, broadcast production, content development and production, distribution channels and media placement.

Strategy and planning remain key elements for effective, integrated and co-ordinated government communication. The capacity to communicate with one voice is manifested in such practices as pre-Cabinet meetings, Government Communicators Forum (GCF), Media Liaison Officers (MLO) Forum, Communication Clusters, post-Cabinet briefings and joint communication around programmes and campaigns undertaken collectively by some Ministries.

However, there is still a number of challenges lying ahead for government communicators and the country at large. As stated earlier, the central challenge is to infuse an appreciation of government communication as a strategic element of service delivery. Related to this is the challenge to grapple with managing public perceptions. Essentially, citizens who experience government's performance in all spheres of governance form their own perceptions about the implementation of government's Programme of Action.

It is within this context that government communication is based on the premise that access to development information enables people to become active and conscious participants in the complex process of social transformation.

Key among these is the commitment to intensify direct and unmediated communication with the public and professionalising all aspects of our operations with an emphasis on planning and implementation, sharpening media response mechanisms and nurturing the relationship between the media and government.

It is hoped that this Handbook will add value and further equip government communicators with requisite skills and knowledge to broadly locate themselves in the entire government communication system.

Mdu Lembede

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Introduction

This Government Communicators' Handbook seeks to provide government communicators in all spheres of government, with an overview of a government communication environment, practical guidelines and quick reference relevant to their work. It is also written with sufficient flexibility to be adapted as and when required to enable government communicators to be effective and innovative in their day-to-day work. Emphasis will be on accessible and succinct guidelines to provide the communicator with quick reference, a one-stop-shop solution to challenges, which transcend all government communication areas.

The Handbook covers the history, the paradigm and the political framework within which government communication in South Africa takes place. It also provides an overview of the communication structure and the role of the GCIS in co-ordinating government communication.

The Government Communicators' Toolkit within the Handbook also, as its main objective, provides the communicator with simple practical guidelines relating to the challenges facing a government communicator generally, and a South African communicator in particular. The Toolkit is followed by attached relevant documents of significance to the work of a government communicator.

To help the communicator in a complete manner, the last section is a list of names and addresses of media companies. There is also a list of relevant websites providing quick information service for communicators at work and of late, a new editorial styleguide for government publications.

Government Communication in context

The current context of government communication takes cue from the constitutional imperative of freedom of information founded on the objectives to make a visible shift from the Apartheid state to a truly democratic state. The free flow of information, open dialogue, openness and accountability and media freedom are all fundamental tenets of a thriving democracy.

This compels government to ensure that it maintains a continued interaction with the citizenry. This communication guarantees an informed and appropriate response to people's needs in order to enable all South Africans to become active and conscious participants in the process of social transformation. It also ensures that government is sensitive to the needs of the people.

3.1 The National Environment

Government's Programme of Action for each year is outlined by the President in the State of the Nation Address (SONA) and the Budget Speech by the Minister of Finance. They both serve as agenda and tone setters for the government's priorities that shape the content of government communication. All of these fundamental imperatives essentially create and present communication implications, opportunities, space and challenges to government communicators in an ever-changing environment. Therefore, it becomes necessary for government communicators to regularly assess the

communication environment and identify communication opportunities that may need to be exploited in order to communicate a coherent and cohesive message to the public.

South Africa has a government of the people, founded on democratic principles, and with democratic majority rule entrenched in all spheres.

There is a general optimistic national mood, with a marked acknowledgement of the democratic gains of the country's transition. While the registered changes are irreversible, this mood exists alongside the view that there is also a sense that the historic fault-lines in our society still persist. This mood provides communication with a solid foundation, an enabling space for Development Communication to thrive and an exciting time and challenge for every government communicator.

The Programme of Action, with its purposeful character, creates a sense of a decisive shift and presents a welter of challenges for government communication in that it demands from government communicators to have a firm grasp of government policies and priorities which, essentially, inform the allocation of resources. This includes an objective analysis and understanding of research, media reports and commentary around the quality, pace and comprehensiveness of service delivery which shape people's attitudes and perceptions about government's commitment to improving their lives.

3.2. The Media Environment

It is critical for a government communicator to understand that no political environment is static. For this reason, it is important for every communicator to assess the social, economic and political environment periodically. The function of government communication in the current political dispensation is founded on principles mentioned earlier, and operates within this constitutional and political framework.

While this framework remains a conducive environment for democratic consolidation, ownership and control of the media remain issues that need special attention. These are central challenges that the Media Diversity and Development Agency (MDDA) would address in terms of creating an enabling environment for a multiplicity of voices and diversity of opinions to flourish. So, while government communicators' function or must function within this paradigm, transformation of the newsrooms may not happen at a pace consistent with this democratic paradigm.

The year 1994 was the beginning of irreversible steps in ensuring media freedom. While, generally, the media agenda has been in some respects consistent with the positive national mood, it has tended to be more narrowly negative and heavily weighted towards an oppositional perspective. To a greater extent, this has been a manifestation of a mindset rather than judgement based on verifiable issues.

On the whole, the sensitivity towards criticism expressed on the part of government has also been a manifestation of mistrust rather than lack of commitment to media freedom. In the event where the relationship between government and the media has been strained at times, this has never resulted from any act or intent to silence the media. Nor has it ever led to action or threat to revoke the constitutional obligation to media freedom and the general right to information.