

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. We need, early on, to give critical attention to two elements – Objective and Message – to ensure that our work will not be undermined.

Strategising is about how to achieve objectives but if we are unclear about our objective or get it wrong, then all the rest will be of little or no value. We also need to correctly define what we want to say.

The communication strategising process entails the following core elements: Background; Objectives; Environment; Communication Challenges; Messages and Themes; Messengers; Audiences and Channels; Types of Event; A Phased Communication Programme; Structures and Processes, and Action Plan.

- **Background**

Outlines what has led to the need for the communication strategy in order to ensure that we are on the right track

- **Objectives**

Clarify intended outcomes and purpose of the campaign. It may be to educate, reassure people, receive feedback about a departmental programme, change perception, etc.

- **Environmental analysis/
Communication Environment**

This will define the terrain and environment in which you choose to communicate. It should deal with issues like the public mood, the media agenda, concerns and attitudes of varying sectors and forces, potential for improving environment, etc.

It is critical to understand the environment before implementing the communication strategy. In fact, the exercise of scanning the environment contributes greatly to the effective development of a communication programme. Such a scan may require a number of areas not clearly understood by the public and therefore needs further research.

- **Communication Challenges**

Having considered broad OBJECTIVES in the context of a defined ENVIRONMENT will lead you to identify specific communication CHALLENGES which have to be met successfully in order to achieve the objectives.

Once challenges are clarified, it will be possible to know exactly what it is we must communicate and how that should be done.

- **Messages and Themes**

It is critical to indicate the themes and concepts that are associated with the communication effort being undertaken. A distinction can be drawn between core themes and sub-themes.

Once this has been done effectively it will be possible to formulate a core message.

When adopting a core message it is critical to integrate it with the Government core message for the year. For instance, recent key messages were Unity in Action for Change for 2001 and A Nation at Work for a Better Life for all in 2000.

The Government's core message is particularly important because it communicates the central message adopted by the Cabinet in the national communication strategy.

• **Messengers, Audience and Channels, Types of Event**

A campaign should always have its own voice. Who is to speak for it? To whom? And in what ways? Through which channels?

• **Phased Communication Programme**

There are two parts here: phasing of a campaign and the broad outline of a communications 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 millennium, 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 beginning, to map out a broad communication programme.

• **Structures and Processes**

Implementing the communication strategy requires consultation with various structures. It has to be well articulated who the partners in the programme are and what their role will be.

• **Communication 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, and also 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 persuasive, 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 best set out in a table format (see example below).

A critical part of the action plan is to identify other supporting plans needed, for example:

- media liaison strategy consisting of a detailed plan of interviews, press briefings, media/journalists to be targeted, opinion pieces, etc. Most importantly, a statement of key messages, and Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) and Answers, should be developed for use by communicators and writers, 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 the 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.

4.4 **Politics and a government communicator**

Case Study: Take the dilemmas of Mike McCurry, Clinton's spin-doctor. 'He had a masterful tact, a profound understanding of the ebb and flow of the fungible commodity called news. He would deflect questions with artistic ease, sugar-coating the messes into which the Clintonites most often found themselves. While he at times relied on sometimes deceiving and scolding some reporters as a tactic, he never lost sight of the need to establish relations with them.' He understood one thing, that many of the messages relating to issues from policy to scandals about campaign fundraising, reporters formed the core of mediators of messages that would flow from the White House. His changing tactics were always based on an understanding of where Americans were in relation to each story. If there was fatigue on the side of the citizenry in regard to the campaign funding story for instance, he would adopt a hard line to those reporting. But his job entailed a persistent dilemma, as he stood 'squarely at the intersection of news and propaganda, in the white-hot glare of the media spotlight, the buffer between self-serving administration officials and a cynical pack of reporters'. At all times he was guided by what he believed were his fundamental principles; telling the truth, giving citizens a sense of the White House, and protecting the President. Like all communicators he understood that the complexity of his job was the fact that every syllable he uttered was transcribed by news agencies. In the same manner, every communicator must learn the skill of never to compromise the truth, but 'tiptoe up to the line separating flackery from falsehood without crossing it.' (Kurtz, H: Spin Cycle: 1998)

If there is one area of governance which fully represents the political and administrative interface and dilemmas, it is the task of communication. The communicator straddles the delicate and precarious balance of political and administrative operations, harmonises the varying emphasis of these two Siamese fraternities to emerge with messages which reflect their unity of purpose. It is usually a government communicator who must deal

with packaging messages in a manner which harmonises the administrative and political arms of government. This difficulty of the administrative and political interface is represented by individual Ministers on the one hand, and the Departmental Heads on the other.

Indirectly, the communicator is likely to be embroiled in party political expressions as he/she communicates policy positions most of which, if not all, are associated with a ruling party. In this way a government communicator stands in conflict with opposition parties. It is this political trajectory that poses a great challenge for a government communicator.

More often than not, government communicators find themselves in a dilemma, with political representatives who want them to play roles of communication which may seem party political in nature. But government communicators are public servants, whose operational code is impartiality and professionalism as encapsulated in the public service regulations.

It must also be noted that communication tends to be an embodiment of politics and government administration with messages emerging from the administrative-political melting pot. The following is an abridged version of guidelines regarding the conduct of government communicators during elections.

4.4.1 Guidelines on government communication during an election period

The period of elections is usually a testing time for government communicators because it requires a government communicator to identify the fine line between party political communication and government communication. It is normal practice in most democracies that, during an election period, particular attention is paid to ensuring that government communication structures and officers do not act in a way that advantages or disadvantages participants in the electoral contest.

Prior to the national elections in 1999, the GCIS developed Guidelines on government communication during the formal election period.

On 31 March 1999, the Cabinet decided on a possible 'framework to be formulated to regulate against the dissemination of government information during election periods' in a way that is to the advantage of one political party and to the disadvantage of others. It adopted the Guidelines on 28 April 1999.

The Guidelines remain relevant and are meant to assist government communicators and other relevant public servants in determining the specific parameters within which they should conduct their work during an election period.

4.4.2 Scope of Application

According to the Independent Electoral Commission (IEC), an election period is the period during which the IEC's Code of Conduct and the Independent Communication Authority of South Africa's regulations apply. For the municipal elections this period will be determined once the date for the election has been announced, and party lists are

submitted and participating parties and candidates confirmed. The period will end when election results are certified and announced.

The regulations state that during an election period: 'State-financed media shall not be used for the purpose of promoting or prejudicing the interests of any political party.' What is State-financed media? 'State-financed media means any newspaper, book, periodical, pamphlet, poster, media release or other printed matter, or statement, or any audio and video material, or any information in electronic format such as CD-ROM, Internet or e-mail which is produced and disseminated to the public, and which is financed by, and directly under the control of government'. Examples of State-financed media include *BuaNews* Online, internal government newsletters and magazines.

These regulations apply only to communicators and other relevant public servants. Ministers, other political representatives, contractual workers and employees in role-playing posts in government are regulated by the Ministerial Handbook.

4.4.3 Public Service Act

In terms of the Public Service Act, 1994 (Act 103 of 1994), public servants are prohibited from acting in a manner that is intended to promote or prejudice any political party. In particular, Section 36 (c) of the Act reads: 'an officer or employee may not draw up or publish any writing or deliver a public speech to promote or prejudice the interests of any political party.'

According to Section 20 (g) of the Act, 'an officer, other than a member of the services or an educator or a member of the National Intelligence Services, shall be guilty of misconduct and may be dealt with in accordance with public service regulations if he or she makes use of his or her position in the public service to promote or to prejudice the interests of any political party.' This includes the use of government resources.

During an election period, these and other provisions of the Act continue to apply to all public servants. Communication agencies and components of government and their employees have to exercise special care to ensure that their media products, statements and public events do not promote or prejudice any political party. It is this political trajectory that poses a great challenge for a government communicator.

4.4.4 Constitutional Rights and Obligations

Government communicators and their departments should continue meeting the obligation of government to provide information to the citizenry. Thus, they should continue exercising their responsibility to articulate, promote and defend the policies, programmes and actions of the Government. Like all other citizens, communication officers have the freedom of association: to belong to any party of their choice.

4.5. UNDERSTANDING GOVERNMENT POLICY

The Government policy to communicate with the people is founded on the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996 (Act 108 of 1996). Section 32 (1) of the Act states that:

- (1) Everyone has the right to;
 - (a) any information held by the state

- (b) any information that is held by another person and that is required for the exercise or protection of any rights.
- (2) National legislation must be enacted to give effect to this right, and may provide for reasonable measures to alleviate the administrative and financial burden on the state.

The Promotion of Access to Information Act, 2000 (Act 2 of 2000) seeks to give effect to the right of the public to access information, as provided for by the Constitution. It is imperative for government communicators to have a firm grasp of government policies to be able to articulate government's position confidently.

4.6 **GOVERNMENT COMMUNICATION AND ENVIRONMENTAL SCANNING**

Communication in government is political in nature and character. While it sometimes happens in government bureaucracy, it is pursued to fulfil the mandate and duty to inform the public. As a government communicator, you are expected to understand the chain of events in the government communication system. Moreover, you should be able to examine all objective and subjective conditions that characterise the environment. Government communication takes place in an environment that must be changed, improved, sustained or encouraged.

The above illustration suggests that a communicator pursues the function of communication to alter certain environments in favour of his/her political objective in the fulfilment of government's mandate. It is, therefore, of paramount importance that as a government communicator, you make serious attempts to analyse the environment in which your messages will be communicated.

As a government communicator you must realise that your function is directly linked to the function of meeting the information needs of society. The key messages are, among others, communicated to satisfy this need. Therefore, every communicator must seek to execute their function with the knowledge that the messages are to satisfy a public expectation. Various media may also mediate these messages. The challenge for a government communicator arises because these mediators are not devoid of interest groups agendas, some of which might be in conflict with those of government or any State department. A communicator must understand these dynamics that are always at play within the environment.

The next challenge for a government communicator is to understand the journey taken by the messages to be communicated. What and who deals with these messages before they reach those they are intended for? More often, those who communicate tend to lose sight of the intended receiver of the message. Before messages are disseminated, as a government communicator you must analyse the probable line of your message from its exit point to the target audience. In this way you will understand possible distortions and mediations, and their effect on your original message.

It is critical to understand the following key components of communication (see structure below).

As a government communicator it is critical that you understand that the messages you communicate may reach your target audience through the interpretation of those who

are mediating them. Hence your communication strategy must take this into account. The key issue to deal with is the possible changes in the message and how your strategy will minimise distortions to the content of your message.

GUIDELINES FOR DEALING WITH THE MEDIA

Although GCIS regularly arranges media briefings on behalf of clusters or departments, communicators are often required to respond to issues raised by the media or in response to requests by principals. Depending on the nature of the issue being addressed, communicators may have to decide on the best way to respond. Some of the options at the disposal of the communicator are:

A media statement: This might be a simple statement correcting a report in a particular newspaper or broadcast. On the other hand, such a statement may have to be directed to a range of media houses if a story has been widely and incorrectly carried. There is often no guarantee that the information will be used as media houses are reluctant to publish apologies or corrections unless there are legal consequences which compel them to do so. Even then, media retain legal counsel for such purposes and in certain instances will choose to go to court if they are convinced of the strength of their information.

A letter to the editor: This could appear on the letter's page in the name of the principal or the communicator. A stronger response can be achieved if the corrective information is put in the public domain in the name of a third party not seen to be in government. It is advisable that communicators cultivate contact with third-party endorsers who can be requested to respond to certain issues. There is generally a strong likelihood that such a letter will be published as the letter's page is a media institution recognised as the columns through which the public has its say on matters of current affairs. Such letters do, however, have to conform to laws governing libel, defamation, etc. before consideration for publication.

An opinion-editorial (op-ed) piece: An op-ed piece is perhaps the strongest response a communicator can use in correcting inaccurate reporting. As the name implies, the content of such a piece is a combination of both opinion and editorial and does not conform to the conventions of the 'objective hard news' report. Space in newspapers for such pieces cannot be booked and involves negotiations with editors.

Editors subject such pieces to a number of tests to decide whether they are worth publishing, including the test of newsworthiness. The op-ed allows a communicator to develop a reasoned response to an issue or a new development in order to explain it to the public more clearly.

Although some of the suggestions in this section of the manual are based on a reactive response to messages in the public domain, the op-ed allows government to be pro - active in placing new issues on the media agenda before they enter the communication environment. As with letters to the editor, a third-party endorser or expert often is a better signatory for such a piece than a government communicator or principal.

Communicators can invoke a media convention known as the 'right to reply' to ensure publication of such a piece. This can be particularly useful if no government communicator or representative is quoted in the story. On the other hand, if media

made unsuccessful attempts to elicit government response because of a slowness to respond to media queries or evasiveness on the part of the communicator, the likelihood of such a piece being placed diminishes.

An advertisement: Often used by government to respond to issues or to bring new issues to the public sphere and civil society, this is the weakest tool at the disposal of the communicator. It is weak because of the high cost of advertising in both electronic and print media. Secondly, the credibility of information in an advert is often treated with scepticism by the public. Finally, it indicates that the communicator was not successful in packaging the information in a manner newsworthy enough to attract the attention of a journalist. Although a weak option, there are times where unmediated communication in the form of adverts can be used, but this should be seen as necessary only when required as part of a broader communication strategy or a last resort.

An advertorial: Like an advertisement, advertorials (advertisement + editorial = advertorial) are paid-for media space. The difference, however, is that they appear to the reader as news copy, although often branded as 'advertorial'. Apart from the costs associated with advertorial, it might be possible to negotiate with media houses that they carry advertisements and not brand advertorial (i.e. the editorial stuff) as such. Although creating the *effect* of greater credibility, advertorials still carry a high cost factor and, where they are detected, an image of low credibility.

While the above represent some of the tools in the communicator's toolbox, one of the most effective ways of dealing with the media is through direct contact. Direct contact can be structured in a number of ways:

One-on-one briefings with journalists: These often arise as a result of requests from media houses, but can be effectively used for proactive communication. As media are driven by the psychology of the scoop or the exclusive story, this can be very effective on certain issues particularly where communicators have strong relationships with individual journalists covering their beat. This can also work well where a particular journalist has been consistently incorrect or off-message on an issue.

Beat briefings: Although government is generally covered by political journalists, it might often be required that certain beat journalists be targeted for special briefings. These could be from health, transport, finance, agriculture, etc. Such briefings are important as these specialist journalists have a finer (and sometimes more troublesome) understanding of a particular area. Keeping them constantly aware of developments on their beats is vital to government.

General briefings: GCIS frequently arranges briefings for the media on specific issues and some that affect government in general. Departments and clusters also conduct briefings from time to time and these have had the effect of reducing speculative reporting around some issues as pertinent information has been placed on record for media.

Presidential Press Corps (PPC) briefings: Although the PPC was established to enhance relations between The Presidency and the media, various line-function departments often find that, from time to time, they work very closely with the Presidency. On such issues it might be useful to lead a briefing of the PPC, as it would

complement The Presidency's work. Arrangements for such a briefing can be made through the GCIS.

Parliamentary Gallery Association (PGA) briefings: The PGA comprises reporters whose dedicated beat is Parliament. Located in Cape Town, briefings with the PGA are regularly organised by GCIS. The most frequent briefings with the PGA take place following Cabinet meetings and during the Parliamentary Media Briefing Weeks following the Opening of Parliament and various *makgotla*.

Lock-up briefings: Most frequently conducted by National Treasury, the lock-up briefing is based on the idea that complex information requires assistance for media with interpretation. The release of statistics or complex results of studies might require a lock-up style briefing during which principals explain the information and field questions on information presented to manage the manner in which it enters the public domain. Usually information presented during such a lock-up is embargoed until the end of the lock-up. GCIS can assist line-function departments in the protocols required for such a briefing.

Foreign Correspondence Association (FCA) briefings: Some foreign correspondents based in South Africa are members of the FCA. Through analysis of stories in international media and requests from the FCA, GCIS regularly arranges media briefings for FCA members and line-function departments. Because not all foreign reporters are members of the FCA, GCIS maintains a database of foreign reporters in South Africa to facilitate contact with international media.

Formats for briefings

Briefings of the kind described above can take many formats. Communicators need to establish the format with the principal (s) leading a briefing prior to its commencement. The chair of a briefing should then announce the format before the briefing begins. The formats are:

On-the-record briefings: As the term suggests, all information at such a briefing is for broadcast, is printable and is attributable. In other words, the person (s) leading the briefing can be quoted by name by the media in attendance and all the information is considered a matter of public record. Although this might be obvious, it needs to be clarified at the start that such a briefing is on the record and attributable by name and designation to the principal (s) conducting the briefing. This format needs not be announced in advisories to the media as it is generally assumed that briefings are on the record.

On-the-record, but not-for-attribution: This is a trickier briefing to conduct and manage. Media need to be given a clear indication that the information being discussed can be used in coverage, but the source cannot be named. A clear indication needs to be made on whether the source can be referred to as 'a senior government official' (i.e. anonymously) or not at all. These are sometimes referred to as 'background briefings' and the format and terms of the briefing must be announced both in the advisory (as a background briefing) and at the briefing itself.

Off-the-record and not-for attribution: As the term suggests, this is intended to be a background briefing for the information of the media and the material can neither be used, nor can any reference be made to the source by name, by designation or

anonymously. The format and terms of such a briefing must be made clear both in the advisory and prior to the start of a briefing. These are sometimes called 'deep background briefings'. The advisory sent to media can describe it as a 'deep background briefing', but might want to omit the name of the principal conducting the briefing. Such briefings require high levels of trust and are best done on a one-on-one basis.

On-the-record and for anonymous attribution: It is often necessary to prepare the communication environment for certain important developments. In such instances it might be useful to brief the media on the record but not have a principal quoted by name. Media should be given an indication on whether the source of the information can be described in general terms or more specifically within the idea of anonymous attribution. For example, would the attribution 'senior official in the Department of Foreign Affairs' or 'a representative from the Ministry of Health, speaking on condition of anonymity' lend more credence to a particular story than 'government official' or 'senior ministerial official'? The statement "speaking on condition of anonymity" is usually associated with negative or leaked information and communicators must ensure that such briefings do not lend themselves to such a description of principals. This format needs to be announced at the briefing and should not form part of the advisory.

As the above formats make clear, there are some rules of engagement with the media that make the task of communicators a little clearer. One of the most frequently made errors in briefings is the failure to announce the format of a briefing before it begins. This confuses media and sometimes leads to unintended publication of sensitive information. It is therefore vital that formats are announced, both where necessary in the advisory and prior to the commencement of a briefing.

Another frequently made error is the tendency to move between on-the-record and off-the-record formats. Briefings should be consistent with the stated format or constructed in such a manner that principals are clear, within the time frame of a single briefing, on where on-the-record ends and off-the-record begins. Erratic skipping between the two increases the likelihood of damaging communication appearing in the public domain and the consequent erosion of trust between government and media.

As a rule, some principals do not make off-the-record statements that are not defensible in an on-the record context. Others, who have strong relations of trust with the media, comfortably impart information in an off-the-record, not-for-attribution context.

It is the task of the communicator to establish the preference of his or her principal and the specifics of the content on which media are to be briefed.

Rapid Response Unit

GCIS, in conjunction with the International Marketing Council's (IMC's) Communication Resource Centre (CRC) – which is responsible for daily monitoring of international media – convenes a daily Rapid Response Unit teleconference intended to empower line-function departments to address challenges faced in the communication environment. As an aspect of a number of government communication cycles, the outcomes of the teleconference are communicated to a number of line-function departments, external stakeholders, GCIS project teams and senior government officials. A key objective of the teleconference is to make recommendations and implement them in time for departments to respond to issues raised by media.