

### 17. GOVERNMENT SPEAKING IN ONE VOICE

In some instances, government leaders seem to be speaking in many voices in dealing with important national issues. This challenges government to plan better for communications and manage the direction of modern government and the ability of South Africa to address development concerns.

The structures involved in communication and information dissemination are heterogeneous, both within and outside government. Successful government communication will thus depend on good coordination between all spheres and with other structures engaged in ensuring effective and coordinated communication that will result in a government speaking in one voice.

#### 17.1. Achieving one voice for government

The ultimate goal for government is to always speak in one voice and pursue a unified policy rather than a disjointed approach which might damage the image and reputation of government.

The following will assist to achieve a government speaking in one voice:

##### **Content Development**

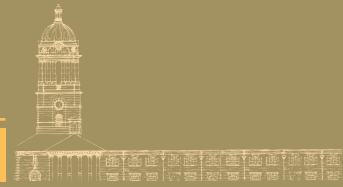
Content development includes:

- Improving the quality of information – clearer messages written in shorter, plain language.
- Improving the capacity of existing communication channels, for example by using face-to-face meetings for something more valuable than just information exchange.
- Reducing the amount of information going out by limiting the number of producers of messages and limiting their access to communication channels.
- Stopping central production and taking an advisory role to help managers achieve their objectives.

#### 17.2. A communication strategy

A comprehensive strategy in communications can result in effective, integrated and coordinated communications, ensuring that all elements of government speak in one voice. Managing public perceptions and realising these goals is a key challenge facing all government departments. Fire-fighting responses to internal and external communication problems are not strategic and endanger the corporate mission.





### 17.3. Key messages

One easy way to get government speaking in one voice is to develop your key messages. Limit the number of these to three or four and support them with a few bullets that illustrate or enhance the message. Use simple language and brief phrases that can prompt more personal stories or examples. Ensure that all those who speak have these messages in their speeches – as such there is a need to share them with all communicators.

Key messages are the most overlooked element of communications planning.  
What is a key message and why do I need one?

### 17.4 What are key messages?

Key messages are part of the strategising for communication process. They are neither statements, briefings nor comprehensive statements of information. They articulate the essentials of government's position on critical issues.

A key message is what you want the public to know about a given issue. Typically, a set of key messages will have one or all three purposes:

- Inform the public about an issue, programme or crisis.
- Generate or rebuild public confidence; and/or
- Stimulate citizen action.

A key message serves as the **core content for all our communications tools** and what government wants the public to remember after they've heard a speech, read an interview or visited the website.

They should inform all communication on the issue: interviews; statements; articles; posters and pamphlets, etc.

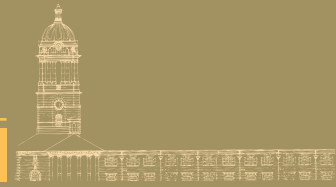
A key message is not a fact or statistic, but rather a statement that succinctly communicates what the public needs to know about government's role in, or responsibility for, the issue.

- The key messages help to extract key aspects of a government programme, issue or reports that help the communicators to 'stay on message'.
- The key message set supports government's five priorities: education, health, the fight against crime and corruption, creating decent work as well as rural development and land reform.
- It also reflects the credibility in government's planning and implementation of the PoA.

Key messages shape the way we speak about topics and ensure uniformity, and they

- are guiding tools for politicians and officials on how to shape their communication.
- are essential tools in all communications work.
- are the core of your writing.
- open the door to direct communication with your audience, because they bridge what your audience already knows and where you are trying to take them.





Effective key messages help crystallise thought and opinion about your organisation. The words and phrases you use in media releases, media interviews, marketing materials, websites and sales pitches should all be based on your organisation's key messages.

### **Key messages:**

- a. should be tied to the overall business strategy of the company and support activities by marketers, salespeople and the leadership team.
- b. are not advertising taglines. They are bite-sized summations of more complex brand, company and product messages.
- c. are a means to an end. They assert your viewpoint. They are opinions that you can back up with proof and case examples, which you demonstrate within your writing. By prompting your readers to ask questions, key messages immediately get audiences involved in your issue.
- d. prompt your audience to ask "Why"? "How"? They get your audience curious about what you have to say. Curiosity is the first step to participation.

### **17.5. Key messages in written material**

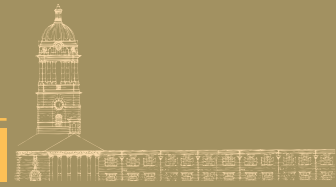
Every piece of writing should have a key message. Is it obvious? If a particular section of your writing does not have a key message, why is it there? Because of the nature of reading, your key message should lead the page. Readers should not struggle to find it. Summarise the intent of a particular piece of writing in one sentence and you have the rough beginning of your key message. In effect you are asking yourself: "What is the one thing I want my readers to know, to consider, to think about?"

### **17.6. How are key messages created?**

It is perhaps easiest to approach key message creation by stepping back from an issue and thinking out the story you want to tell your audience. Key messages over time generate a body of discourse that consistently reflects government's positions. Consistency of style and terminology is therefore critical. Consistency of positions is critical – drafters should always check previous messages on related topics. Consistency in formulation on key issues helps communication – but formulations should also be sensitive to the current environment.

You'll probably have several audiences, each of which will better understand the issue if key messages are tailored specifically for their interests and motivations. For example, publication of the Control of Marketing of Alcoholic Beverages Bill, 2013 will generate different responses from parents/ guardians, business, alcohol industry and health workers. While it may not be necessary to develop a specific set of messages for each target audience the key message set needs to address some of the key issues each target audience may have.





Key messages are informed by the strategic directions of government policy. Therefore in drafting do not rely just on desk research – drafters need the guidance of those informed with strategic perspectives. While HoCs should be so informed, other senior officials and policy makers are often best placed – behind every successful drafter there is a good network. Drafts will always reflect the brief given – a good drafter must be a good briefer.

In addition to articulated key messages on issues which relate directly to the strategic intent of government programmes and positioning, it is equally important to contextualise the key messages, within the current communication environment. We live in a world in which everyday concerns weigh heavily on most people. A key element of the key messages is to uplift and highlight how citizens and communities will benefit from the programme and also to encourage public participation in drawing on citizens to actively contribute towards the development of the economy and country.

These messages are then supported by facts and statistics in the form of 'Fact sheets' or 'Questions and Answers (Q&As)'. Key messages are time bound. Good communication is on time: a proactive step ahead or an instant response.

### 17.7. How are key messages delivered?

For government communication to be effective various techniques and styles must be adopted to ensure that communication is received with understanding. Content infuses meaning into communication. From a strategic perspective, it is the means through which positioning is created and affirmed.

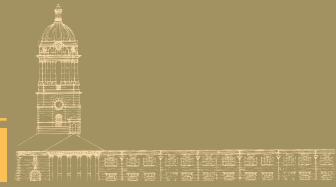
The only way to find your key message is to repeatedly ask yourself “Why? How?”, until you come to the core, the very reason for something happening. Asking yourself these questions will reveal to yourself the information you can take for granted that your audiences need to know and understand.

Key messages are:

- **Concise** – avoid jargon and acronyms.
- **Active** – make every sentence active.
- **Positive** – talk about what one can do, not what you cannot do.
- **Short** – one memorable sentence, 10-15 seconds to say.
- **Specific** – address a particular challenge and audience.

It is important to emphasise the scope of 'content' as the literal and implied messaging which prevails in any form of communication. This means that the written word as well as graphical presentations (design, images, photographs, etc.) form part of content.





The government-wide communication system uses various communication tools, newsletters, magazines, websites, social media, fact sheets, Q&As, public participation engagements, media interviews, activations, presentations, print and broadcast media and many others.

These tools all offer communication opportunities for government to relay its key messages. Each medium/channel/platform is unique in how it delivers the key messages. Although each platform presents its own communications challenges and benefits, they all have the ability to reinforce key messages. Supporting those messages with facts, examples, anecdotes and third party endorsements adds credibility to the position and story government is relaying.

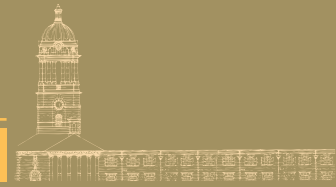
Key messages are also critical for media interviews because they provide the core content; and this ensures that the journalist is no longer setting the media agenda.

### **17.8 Benefits of key messages**

Key messaging offers many benefits for officials, on both the personal and agency levels. For an elected or appointed official, key messaging:

- a. Sums up the key points in sound bites that work for all media.
- b. Gives you a new and strategic way to think about your projects or issues.
  - Key messages are particularly helpful if you are new in your role and working to establish yourself within the organisation. You can use the messages to clarify staffing and budgeting decisions, emphasise the staff/public input process you used for a project, and highlight your thorough understanding of the issue.
- c. Provides you with answers to tough questions.
  - Ready access to key messages for every important city project, initiative and controversy enables you to respond thoughtfully and knowledgeably in virtually any setting.
- d. Helps you gain a clear picture of developing stories.
  - As a city leader, you must be ahead of the curve on new issues. Key messages provide you with the important elements of a situation and can help you more efficiently formulate the city's response.
- e. Brings consistency to issues or crises.
  - Responses by the mayor often differ from responses by the city manager or a department head during a controversial situation. Key messages help staff stay on point so the public receives the same information from all officials who represent the city.
- f. Focuses staff discussion to gain consensus.
  - Citywide management team or department staff meetings can easily become bogged down by compelling situations. Making key message development part of the discussion will help distil thoughts and lead to a deliberate response to the issue.





- g. Provides the basis for media contacts, web content, Q&As, etc.
  - Lengthy staff reports are rarely the best way to help reporters or members of the public understand an issue. Key messages allow you to focus your interviews, tailor your website and create documents such as Q&As, fact sheets and speaking points, which help the public learn about the issue.
- h. Ensures that the public hears key points from a variety of sources.
  - Cities typically designate one expert as a spokesperson for a given issue, often because others in the organisation are not able to articulate impacts, options or status. Key messages provide a method for others (city council members and planning commissioners, for example) to communicate the city's point of view in multiple settings.

### 17.9 The thrust of key messages

The next step is to determine the key messages that you want stakeholders to understand and act upon.

Consider what outcomes your messages are intended to achieve:

- a. Guiding and educating – to be aware of and to do things in a particular way (e.g. when a law or policy is made or changed).
- b. Reassuring and informing – about what is being done (e.g. when there is a change in an organisation's structure or when there has been a change that people need to know about and act upon).
- c. Consulting to understand – what people think about a particular action or decision (e.g. when you need people to respond to or participate in something).
- d. You should be able to identify the three or four key messages that will be used constantly and consistently throughout the campaign.
- e. These messages should be framed from the perspective of the receiver, not the sender. They should be brief, in plain English and relevant to your aim.

Key messages are simply key messages and not something else.

- Key messages are not statements. They are also not briefings or comprehensive statements of information.
- They articulate the essentials of government's position on critical issues.
- They should inform all communication on the issue: interviews, statements, articles, posters, pamphlets, etc.