

Communication Handbook - Factsheet 1

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The Communication Strategy

- ⇒ The three ingredients for well-planned communication strategies: objectives, audiences and messages
- ⇒ How to define your communications objectives
- ⇒ What types of analysis you can use
- ⇒ How to involve your teams and stakeholders in the process



MED projects want to improve their communication skills. As effective partnerships, we must have strong internal communications. Most of us also have good experience with external communications: conveying information through the media or directly to the public and other audiences. Communication comes naturally.

We have the opportunity to make the most of our communications skills and knowledge at a time when strong external communications can give practical support to our implementation and outputs. To do this, we need to think strategically: what are the ingredients for good communications?

It may help to look at examples of other European territorial cooperation projects. Many have been extremely successful with external communications in their closing delivery phase, using it to achieve practical goals like influencing policy and changing behaviour. Others have been disappointed. What makes the difference?

A few themes emerge:

	Successful projects...	Disappointed projects...
Objectives	Communicate with a clearly stated goal in mind	Communicate for broadly defined or unclear objectives
Audiences	Communicate to clearly defined groups of people	Communicate without first defining and understanding the people who should listen
Messages	Communicate a small number of clear, concise, consistent and memorable ideas	Communicate a large number of different ideas, without sufficient focus, and inconsistently

⇒ There are three ingredients for well-planned communications: **objectives, audiences and messages**

Objectives

Communication needs to be goal-driven. We do not communicate for its own sake: we communicate to achieve or change something. PR tactics such as press releases, events and media relations activities can be straightforward to organise; the skill lies in ensuring that something useful happens as a result.

A universal mistake in external communications is neglecting to define communications objectives properly in advance. This happens in almost all kinds of organisations, and MED projects are no exception.

For instance, it is not sufficient for a project to define its objectives as “to raise awareness” or “to communicate our activities and results”. Communications objectives need to be clearly defined, detailed, achievable and measurable.

So that project should take it a step further. Why raise awareness or communicate its outputs? What views or behaviours does it want to influence? Perhaps one of its ultimate goals is to influence or inform public policy on a particular topic in order to improve public services; or advance technical knowledge on a certain issue and so to improve people’s quality of living.

Well-defined objectives give guidance and structure to all dimensions of public relations activities. The starting point is to understand what you want to achieve.

⇒ Define your objectives by asking: What do I want to happen as a result?

Communications planning

By this stage MED projects should already have a strong communications strategy: you know your target audiences, you well defined communications objectives and clear messages that will help achieve them.

After reviewing and finalising your project communications strategy, the next stage is to use it as the foundation for a detailed a communications plan. You can create a long term communications plan covering all activities until the end of your project, or a short term plan for a specific event or priority. Depending on the scope, a communications plan may be as short as one page, or as long as 20 pages.

A good communications plan defines how the strategy will be expressed through practical public relations activities. It brings together in one document all of the fundamental ideas that should be driving communications, including objectives, audiences, messages, and an overview of how your goals will be achieved. It sets a clear framework for PR activities and allocates roles, tasks and goals to individual members of the team.

Following are the key ingredients for a communication plan:

1. Strategic overview
2. Situation analysis
3. Audiences
4. Objectives
5. Messages
6. Tactics
7. Media
8. Timeline
9. Responsibilities

Section by section: how to develop a communications plan

Strategic overview

For the benefit of everyone who will be part of the plan, explain briefly the importance of taking a structured and strategic approach to communications.

Summarise your project's overall communications strategy: give an overview of why you are engaging in communications activities, and what you hope to achieve.

Then define the scope and purpose of this specific communications plan.

Situation analysis

Perform a SWOT analysis for your project: list all of its Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats in terms of the scope of communications activities covered by this plan. Many organisations of all kinds use a SWOT analysis to audit and assess their current situation as a starting point to determine the best course of action. Use a SWOT to look realistically at your project's communications environment and plan accordingly.

Strengths

What are the strengths of your project and its communications activities?

Weaknesses

What are the potential weaknesses of your project and its communications activities? What could be damaging or negative?

Opportunities

What communications opportunities are there? Is there anything new, different, interesting or unique in your project that you could capitalise upon for publicity?

Threats

Are there any potential threats that your project could face? What might go wrong? How could this affect your communications and PR activities?

Objectives

Refine and restate your project's overall communications objectives for the purpose of the particular scope of this communications plan. These should be in short bullet point format and clearly indicate what your communications will bring to the project. It is important to define these objectives in order to be able to measure the success of PR activities afterwards. Set goals that are specific enough to be measured, but broad enough to allow flexibility and room to adapt to changing circumstances.

Target audiences

If you know your audiences, you can tailor your news and messages to coincide with what matters and interests them. If you don't, you might not like the coverage you receive.

Messages

State your key messages.

Tactics

Define the activities that you will undertake in order to achieve your objectives. How will you go about reaching your audiences? What activities will you undertake to emphasise your messages and meet your objectives? Potential PR tactics include media relations projects such as press events or publicising newsworthy developments, as well as non-media PR activities such as lobbying and seeking speaking opportunities. (See sections below for more details about tactics).

Media

Summarise your target media for media relations activities. This should not be a full media list, but an overview of target media categories. Through what media do your target audiences get their information? Which of these media will be most influential for them? Which do they pay most attention to and which do they trust most?

NOTE: If your key audiences are small or select, consider whether it might be more effective to contact them directly rather than through the media. For some audiences such as politicians and opinion-formers, non-media tactics such as lobbying could be considered instead

Timeline

Create a timeline that identifies when each activity will happen, along with advance milestones that you will need to meet during the preparation process. This will help to ensure that deadlines do not slip, opportunities are not missed, and that activities are fully prepared.

Responsibility

Allocate responsibility for each activity and milestone to a named team member. If one person is accountable for a measurable result, it is more likely to be achieved.

Evaluation

It is important to evaluate the success of PR activities, in order to learn which activities worked well and which should be improved in future. Evaluation also creates useful feedback to share with others in the Programme, so that they can learn from your experience. State in your communications plan the criteria by which you will measure its success.



**IN
SHORT**

These are the key ingredients for a communication plan, make sure that you include all of these elements in your strategic communication plan:

Strategic overview

Situation analysis

Audiences

Objectives

Messages

Tactics

Media

Timeline

Responsibilities