

Communication Handbook - Factsheet 2

Version 1 – April 2012

Message Development

- ⇒ The importance of good messages for your project communications
- ⇒ The key elements of a good message
- ⇒ How to construct effective messages



Messages

Messages have a special meaning in public relations. A message is not the same as an advertising slogan or a marketing line; a message is a simple and clear idea that acts as a guiding principle for all kinds of communications, from the content of leaflets, brochures and websites to the agenda for a media interview, to conversations with stakeholders.

Messages are a solution to three basic constraints on the way people take on new information.

<i>Problem:</i>	<i>Solution:</i> Make your message...	<i>Goal:</i> Ensure that people...
<i>Information overload</i> People are frequently faced with more information than we can handle.	Distinctive Few in number	Notice
<i>Objective limits</i> People can only take on a limited amount of information at once	Clear Concise Simple Consistent	Understand Remember
<i>Subjective limits</i> People only take on new information when they are interested and motivated	Interesting Relevant Personal	Care Act

Distinctive

A good message will be immediately appealing to its target audience: it should be strongly worded to stand out from everything else that is competing for their attention.

For instance, a journalist who receives several hundred press releases by email or fax every day is much more likely to write a story based on a press release where the message is powerful and immediately obvious. Otherwise, he or she is likely to discard your project press release and look at the next one instead.

Few

MED projects all have a great deal to say, because they are all doing useful things. Having a lot to say can be a problem, though. If you try to communicate dozens of

ideas at the same time, your audience will suffer from “information overload” and end up failing to grasp any of these ideas properly at all. Too many different messages cause confusion, and you risk losing focus.

For instance, if a project website contains dozens of unfocused messages on different topics competing for attention, readers are unlikely to take away a clear view of the project’s benefits. Or if an influential policymaker receives an invitation to a MED Programme end-of-project event, he or she is less likely to accept if the letter contains many different competing messages.

⇒ **“Less is more”**

Do not use more than three messages at any time.

Concise, clear and simple

Communication will never get results if it is delivered in a form that requires your target audience to sit down with a strong cup of coffee, a dictionary, a table of acronyms and a calculator just to understand it. The simplest messages are the best. They require no effort to understand.

Consistent

You stand the best chance of determining what impression your audiences will take away of your project if they hear the same message from different sources and on different occasions. Without consistent messages, communication lack clarity and

⇒ **When different activities say different things about your project, the effect is diluted. When they all say the same thing about your project, the effect is multiplied.**

A good public relations programme will approach its key audiences in many separate ways: by generating newspaper coverage for news events like launches, by promoting case studies and features to magazines, by placing a project profile in a trade publication, by lobbying policymakers – and dozens of other potential approaches.

If a policymaker who is among your key audience reads a magazine profile about an aspect of your project, then sees a letter to the editor in a newspaper about the same aspect of that project, and is then called on the telephone to be lobbied about

the same thing, she can't fail to get the message. That's the power of consistency: the whole is more than the sum of the parts.

- ⇒ **Say nine things – they remember none**
- Say three things – they remember one**
- Say three things three times – they remember all three**

Simple

There is a strong "bottleneck effect" in most public relations activities: no matter how much you say, only a small amount of information will make it to your audience. You can only write 500 or so words on a press release before people stop reading. You can only talk for 20 minutes in a speech before your audience lose interest. A 30-minute television interview may be edited down to 30 seconds.

Messages help to ensure that the important information makes it through the bottleneck. By making messages simple you remove all secondary, less important information that you can afford to live without. Simplicity is especially important in the world of ETC programmes, where it is a challenge to explain the ideas and structures behind inter-regional cooperation – before we even start talking about projects themselves.

What does a message look like?

- A message is a statement, idea, or assertion. E.g.
 - "(x) is a problem and (y) is the solution."
 - The work of project (x) is valuable because (y) and (z)
 - "It is essential to share knowledge among regions on the issue of (x) because..."
 - "(x) must take action on the issue of (y) otherwise (z) will happen."
- Messages are based on facts and information.
 - Messages are unlike marketing, advertising, or media "sound bites".
- Messages must align with the project's overall goals.
- Few:
 - Maximum three messages in total
- Concise:
 - Ideally one sentence per message; maximum two sentences;
 - Maximum 25 words per sentence.
 - One idea per message
- Simple
 - Easy for anyone to understand

- Free from jargon
- Strong, active, positive language
- Interesting
- Credible

Making messages

Begin by generating a large, unorganised mass of information– everything you want to say – then select and refine only the most essential, powerful and effective ideas remain.

Brainstorm

Get together a broad range of people who are involved with your project for an open discussion about what you want to communicate and to whom. Together, list your target audiences. For each audience, state your objectives – what you want to achieve by communicating with them – and also what ideas and information you need to convey to achieve those goals. This is the raw material for your messages.

Look for themes

Usually similar objectives and ideas will appear across several audiences. Group these together under thematic headings. Each of these may be the basis for a key message.

Rank and select

List your draft messages and decide which are the most important. If you could only say one thing, what would it be? If you could say two things, which other message would you choose? And so on.

Refine the language

Can you say the same thing in fewer words? Remove all unnecessary words. Can you say the same thing using simpler words? Remove any complicated vocabulary. Look at each word and ask whether it would be understood by someone who is not fluent in your language, or who knows nothing about the EU, or who knows nothing about the subject matter of your project.

Eliminate overlap

If you find the same basic ideas repeated in more than one of your messages, shift the ideas around between messages so that nothing is repeated. This will make space to say more. Make every word count.

Think media

What media will reach your key audiences? What would be the best possible headline about your project that you could imagine being published in those media? The answer is a good pointer towards a key message.

Think impressions

For non-media tactics such as meetings and lobbying, think: what three things would I like the audience to remember and tell someone else about my project later?

Test them out

Show your messages to people outside your project. Friends and family will do, but journalists or people close to your target audiences are better. Do they understand? Are they interested? If not, try again.

Choose the ones

Select the best three messages. Look at the best of the rest and see if they contain any truly essential ideas. If so, can you incorporate these ideas in your chosen three?

Put them to work

Circulate and promote your messages proactively within your project and be sure that everyone is familiar with how to use them. Every piece of external communications should be planned and executed in line with your key messages. Review, revise and rehearse. Monitor output to be sure that this is taking place.

Audit and feedback

Periodically, take a look at any press coverage that has been generated and gauge what messages your key audiences are receiving about your project. Are your messages getting across? You will need to be persistent and should generally not change messages very often, but if they are not working that can be a sign that it's time to think again.



IN SHORT

Don't rush the process. Messages take time and effort to create.

Get them right, and ensure everyone involved agrees and "buys in".

They need to be universally accepted and used.

Deploy the same messages through all of your communication efforts, from press releases and media relations activities to websites, brochures, event themes, and lobbying.

Adapt them for different target audiences and occasions, but don't change them fundamentally.

For messages to have impact, they have to be repeated over and over again.

Support and substantiate each message with evidence and examples ("proof points").