



Building a Communications Strategy: Tips for Non-profits

We have all experienced the frustration of communicating without getting the desired results. We spend copious amounts of time putting together content using all manner of communication channels, trying to get constructive or productive attention to no avail. We easily get into the routine of making daily posts on social media about this and that topic, producing quarterly newsletters, hosting PR events, sending thank you cards and the like -- but in the end, we are groping in the dark and have little to show for our efforts.

More often we have lost sight of the strategic picture - the communications strategy.

With a communications strategy, you have an underlying view and guide as to why you are doing what you are doing. A communication strategy improves your effectiveness by aligning goals and content. It ensures that you bring the right content to your target audience and, finally, a communications strategy assists you to become more focused and targeted with your organisation's communications.

There are several ways to build a communications strategy; all with their inherent strengths and imperfections. In this post, we look through the essentials of a communications strategy to help you build your most effective one.



1. Let us start with an audit

You audit by looking at each communication channel used and candidly evaluating how you are using it. Your team should review the variety of communications from each channel in the period under review. The result should be a summary of channels used and how they are working. To help move forward, you conclude this exercise by determining the why – reasons for success as well as for the challenges experienced.

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2. Then set your goals and objectives

There are many ways to set communications goals and objectives. Your goals should all lead toward the broad outcomes you seek through your communication activities and products. These may include programme awareness, brand recognition, fundraising, advocacy, and engaging your communities and stakeholders.

Your communications strategy objectives identify the mechanisms by which you intend to achieve the goals and the benchmarks at which you are aiming. For example, you may want to add two hundred recipients to your email list and get invitations to speak at four international conferences in your area of specialisation. Be as specific as possible: clarity will help create a winning strategy.



3. Know your audience

One of the keys to creating an effective communications strategy is in identifying a highly targeted audience. You need to know who they are; their communication needs and the habits that they have in common. For NPOs, your audiences are programme participants, donors, policymakers, opinion shapers, activists, and so on. You then research each category, creating an audience profile for each group identifying the levels of education, messaging needs, media consumption habits, engagement opportunities, etc.



4. Create a messaging guide

It is time to think and talk about messages, the mainstay of our communication strategy. What messages do you want to pass on to your audiences to achieve your communications goals? For instance, what key message do you need to pass to policymakers to effect change in a law that impacts your SME lending programme? Consider breaking down key messages into sub-messages that complement the key communication points.



5. Time to make a tactical plan

So far, you have the bed of your communications strategy ready, and the seeds planted. These now need to be watered to germinate and be tended with care, so they mature fruitfully. For each channel, refer to your communications audit to see what you have been doing in the past. Agree on what you intend to keep doing and with what results. For new tactics, you want to incorporate them into this plan. Similarly, ensure that the goals and objectives match with specific communication channels, and audience segments and have targeted content.

6. Put it on a timeframe



The next step is to bring your strategy alive: create a calendar of your planned communications actions. This timeframe ought to be manageable and predictable. Depending on organisational exigencies, a communication strategy calendar can range from a few months to three years. Your decision: but make sure you remember to create a practical 'next ninety days' plan before the current one ends.

Ensure that dates for production, campaigns, programmes are delineated; holidays, transportation and other logistical events are captured. When ready, there are digital tools to manage your communications calendar such as spreadsheets as well as numerous online apps. For day-to-day monitoring, however, the good ole whiteboard is ideal.

7. Budget the plan

At this point, you probably have a pretty good idea of your communications workload. You also have a sense of how much it is going to cost you to bring it to fruition. You can now devise a budget for your communications plan for costs like research, copywriting, design, print materials, promotional items, digital production, and freelancers.

8. Measure your results

To measure success, you need to include key performance indicators (or KPIs) in the communications plan. These are monthly metrics that will help us know whether we are on track. You can do this on your personal device using legacy planning software, a spreadsheet or in the cloud. To evaluate your communication activities and plan the future, you need to track and analyse the metrics defined in recurring monthly or quarterly timelines.





In a larger team effort (up to ten people), it takes up to two days minimum to go through this exercise. For smaller teams of less than five, allow a full day to build your next communications strategy. Let's get planning!

*Cege Mwangi is a content and communications associate at Deft.
cmwangi@developmentfrontiers.org*



MNG Apartments
Block A, A1, Office Number 3
Ndemi Road, Off Ngong Road, Kilimani



+254 20 234 7207 / 20 529 5701
+254 100 129 025 / 794 896 663



admin@developmentfrontiers.org
www.developmentfrontiers.org