

## **Creating a Communications Strategy**

### **Introduction**

Public Relations, like any other key function within an organisation, needs effective planning and resources to ensure that it meets the objectives for the organisation. This seminar looks at how to plan a communications strategy focussing on public relations, tools for effective planning and project management and ways to develop appropriate key messages for your organisation.

### **Why is a strategy necessary**

One of the main benefits of developing a communications strategy is that the organisation has the opportunity to assess their current situation with regard to communications activity, establish aims and objectives and develop an effective programme. This ensures communications are planned and managed, rather than simply reacting to events coming up.

### **Steps in Establishing a Communications Strategy**

The following descriptions represent key steps in establishing a communications strategy.

#### **1. Situation Analysis**

A good place to start any planning process is to look at where the organisation currently is. A situational analysis is commonly used in all aspects of strategic planning. It is likely that if your organisation has recently produced a business plan or marketing strategy then this process will have been undertaken.

For the communications plan you will need to focus this on your current position in providing communications for your company, such as strengths and weaknesses in this area, what is it you are offering and therefore communicating, what is the current perception of stakeholders of your organisation and how has this been formed.

There are a variety of tools available to undertake this and include SWOT analysis, benchmarking activities and a communications audit. The detail and extent to which the situation analysis is undertaken will depend on resources and time however, even a few hours spent considering these issues will be valuable in contributing to the communications planning process.

### Completing a SWOT analysis

- Consider and list the strengths and weaknesses of your organisation in terms of communications and public relations activity.
- Next list the opportunities and threats that face your organisation in terms of communications and public relations activity.

An example has been put in each category to show the types of issues that a SWOT can contain.

<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Strengths</b></p> <p>Eg Good relationship with local journalist on x paper</p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Weaknesses</b></p> <p>Eg no dedicated member of staff to deal with press enquiries</p>
<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Opportunities</b></p> <p>Eg Festival launch event to invite key media to</p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Threats</b></p> <p>Eg Weather affecting events planned and no wet weather communications plan in place</p>

Take the time to complete the SWOT analysis

Use the results of the SWOT analysis to indicate areas to develop and address when developing the Communications Strategy

## 2. Establish Communication Objectives

It is essential once you are aware of your current situation to identify your communications aims and objectives. These will underpin and drive all of your public relations activity and ensure there is a consistent and proactive approach.

Objectives should be SMART, which stands for the following:

**S**pecific  
**M**easureable  
**A**chievable  
**R**ealistic  
**T**ime-based

### Examples of Communications Strategy objectives

- To communicate effectively with all of the diverse groups of stakeholders of [organisation]
- To raise the profile of [organisation] amongst the wider communities within which they work
- To secure audiences for public exhibitions of work and performances
- To develop effective ways to work with partners to disseminate a wider awareness of [organisation] and its work
- To provide a professional and timely response to all enquiries from the media, and the public through establishing an effective internal communications system

Communications objectives are the 'high' level strategic description of what you want to achieve. They should all be achievable and the strategy should also include the tactical ways in which to achieve the objectives through a detailed action plan.

### **3. Identify Your Audience**

In Seminar 1 we briefly talked about the range of 'publics' that public relations activity could be aimed at. A communications strategy should contain information identifying these groups and ways in which they can be segmented into smaller groups which can then be targeted.

Furthermore, it is also possible to consider how these groups will be 'managed' and the level and frequency of communications that they require. Whilst this feeds into the wider communications process, it is a useful exercise to apply and consider the role that public relations activity can play in supporting this.

The process of 'stakeholder mapping' is commonly used in project management however it can be adapted for the purpose of communications strategies and planning. It enables an organisation to identify its wide range of stakeholders and prioritise the communications effort towards the most important groups identified. This is especially valuable when resources are limited.

#### **Undertaking Stakeholder Mapping**

A Stakeholder is defined as:

- any person, group or organisation that has an interest in an activity, project or programme.

Stakeholders can be divided into two types:

- Primary – those who are directly affected by activity
- Secondary – those who are not directly affected but have an interest or influence

Amongst stakeholders, key stakeholders are:

- Those who can significantly influence the outcome of the proposed activity or project

It is important to be aware of what key stakeholders think about your organisation or project and how best to communicate with them. Questions to consider include what motivates them, what information do they want from you, how do they want to receive information, who and what influences their opinion of your organisation.

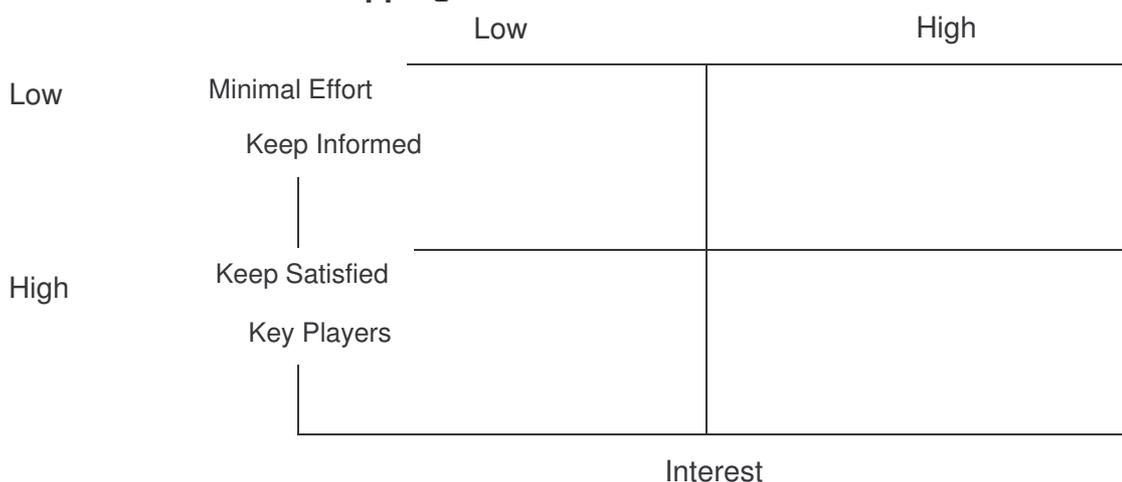
### Stakeholder Identification

The following table is a good way to list the range of stakeholders within your organisation. They can be divided into primary and secondary and their interest categorised. Their impact can also be assessed to summarise their influence on your organisation.

Primary Stakeholders	Interest	Impact +/-
Secondary Stakeholders		

Once the above table has been completed, the stakeholders can then be mapped onto the power/interest grid below.

### Stakeholder Mapping



Stakeholders identified and placed within the grid can be managed as follows:

- **High power, interested people:** key stakeholders for whom the greatest efforts are made
- **High power, less interested people:** put enough work in with these stakeholders to keep them satisfied, but not so much that they become bored with your message.
- **Low power, interested people:** keep these people adequately informed, and talk to them periodically to ensure that no major issues are arising.
- **Low power, less interested people:** monitor these people, but do not alienate them with excessive communication.

Your communications strategy can take account of this.

## 4. Shape Your Message

“Good public relations is about identifying the real message”

*Margaret Larson*

The next section of the communications strategy should consider the messages that the organisation has and needs to communicate.

You can use communications opportunities to shape your image. If you want the public to see your organisation as professional or community-focussed, look for opportunities to display those qualities. Then be sure your target audiences are made aware of what you've accomplished. It is important that you create and reflect a true picture of your organisation and not an idealised image or one which you cannot meet.

### **Mission Statement**

The mission statement of an organisation sets the identity and aspiration of the organisation and will contain the elements that the key messages develop from. Therefore, an effective and appropriate mission is important for all organisations and has a direct impact on communication activity.

“the mission statement encapsulates the company’s identity in terms of what it is, what makes it special, what it stands for and where it is heading”

*McDonald 1998*

Kotler states that the mission statement should be “feasible, motivating and distinctive”. It should include statement of purpose, target markets, statement of philosophy with values and beliefs and a statement of vision

McDonald identifies 6 key issues to consider when looking at setting a mission statement.

- Mission should not be too narrow or broad
- Consider the audience
- Understand the business
- Mission should be unique
- Market rather than service led

- Hierarchy of missions

In supporting the organisations mission there are a number of key messages that are also essential to an organisation. At least one of the key messages should be included in all communications that derive from the organisation at any one time.

Examples of key messages are detailed below:

- [organisation] is an inclusive organisation which works to enable local communities to experience and create arts work
- [organisation] operates independently on a not-for-profit basis
- [organisation] delivers workshops with children and young adults excluded from main stream education

Take time to develop these messages and ensure that they reflect your organisations aims and ethos whilst also meeting stakeholder needs and expectations.

### **Creating the Message Calendar**

Once messages have been agreed on and timetable for events and activities has been identified, a message calendar can be created. The aim of this is to provide a schedule of public relations activity for the organisation. This can be set up through the tools identified in the section on Project Management.

This will give a clear indication of what needs to be achieved and when, to ensure proper resources and time are given to the communications needs of the organisation.