Writing a communications strategy

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What is a strategy?

- A plan of action designed to achieve a vision.
- All about gaining a position of advantage over adversaries or best exploiting emerging possibilities.
- A detailed plan for achieving success in situations such as war, politics, business, industry or sport.
What is a communications strategy?

- Written document – not just in people’s heads
- Collaboration between the project leader(s) and the communications professional(s)
- A reference document against which to judge progress
- Contains clear and measurable objectives
- Identifies relevant audiences
- A plan of activities and a timetable
- Identifies resources – financial and people
Why is a strategy important?

"Why don’t we just get on with it?"

- Taking time to agree what you want to achieve
- Plan ahead rather than last minute panic
- Exploit all the channels available to you
- Agree responsibilities
- Identify and seek resources
- Identify risks and plan how to deal with them
- A plan against which to measure success
- A process which helps you learn lessons for the future
A comprehensive communications strategy

- Research
- Mission
- Vision
- Aims
- Objectives
- Audiences
- Messages
- Channels
- Timing
- Resources
- Risks
- Evaluation
Background research

- What are your objectives?
- Your strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats?
- Learn lessons from previous projects
- Learn lessons from peers’ and competitors’ experiences
- Look at past media coverage, event attendance, web visits
- Speak to colleagues – experienced and fresh-faced
- Focus groups and surveys among your key audiences
Mission (purpose) + vision (ambition)

University of Oxford

- Oxford’s mission is to provide excellent teaching and conduct excellent research
- Oxford’s vision is to be world leading
Aims

- Engage and persuade audiences of the value (for money) of an Oxford education and the personal and public benefit that flows from it

- Persuade audiences of Oxford’s commitment to improving access and widening participation

- Demonstrate the impact of Oxford research and persuade audiences of the value of public funding for research
Objectives need to be SMART

- **S**pecific, significant, simple
- **M**easurable, manageable
- **A**chievable, agreed, assignable
- **R**elevant, resourced
- **T**ime bound, trackable
Objectives need to be smart

**Not** SMART:

“We need to raise more money.”

**SMART:**

“We want to raise £5million to set up a fund to create an extra 20 graduate scholarships from October 2014.”

There can be one or more objectives
Audiences

- HEFCE, research councils, charities, NHS etc
- UK government, local council
- Your colleagues, the wider University
- Alumni
- Donors
- Future applicants
- Local community: residents, businesses, groups
- Media: local, national, specialist
Audiences

Two considerations…

- Who holds the keys to success or failure?
- And who influences those people?

And…

- Don’t forget the internal audience – e.g. students and colleagues in your department or college, people in your division
Categorise your audiences in relation to your situation and your objectives

- Power/influence + interest + supportive – your partners in achieving your objectives

- Power/influence + interest + opposed – use persuasion and dialogue; accurate coverage of your objectives/views; correct their claims

- Power/influence + not interested – capture their attention; enlist the help of your partners

- Use third parties to help persuade and create interest
Messages

- What do you want them to know?
- What do you want them to think?
- What do you want them to do?
- Why should I care? How does it affect me?
- Tailor them but avoid contradiction and false promises
- Statistics and case studies
- Third party endorsements
Make people sit up and listen

“Oxford offers the most generous bursary package to undergraduate students from the least well off households”

Inspire action

“We need 5,000 signatures on our petition to the local council to save our library”
Channels of communication

Media: local, national, international; print, broadcast, web, social

Lobbying: local and national government, funding bodies, special interest groups

Marketing: brand, website, advertising, brochures, fliers, video

Events: conferences, launch events, public speeches, tours of building sites
Timing

- Work backwards from your deadline
- Accommodate long lead-in times
- Exploit ‘hooks’ to attract interest
- Availability of spokespeople and venues
- Coordinate **who** is told **what** and **when**
- Create a timetable of activities
- Monitor timetable and adjust as necessary
## Timetable

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>September 2012</th>
<th>October 2012</th>
<th>November 2012</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Lobbying</strong></td>
<td>Ask local MP to book venue</td>
<td>Send out invitations</td>
<td>Event in parliament</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Media</strong></td>
<td>Identify key messages and spokespeople</td>
<td>Propose an interview</td>
<td>Issue press release</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Publications</strong></td>
<td>Design invitation and display boards</td>
<td>Print the materials</td>
<td>Distribute the materials at the event</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Resources: people and money

- Who do you **ideally** need to assist you?
- Who is **actually** available to assist you?
- What funds do you **need**?
- What funds do you **have**?
- Do you need to bid for extra? From whom? When?
- Are there conditions attached to the funding?
- Prioritise, and manage people’s expectations
Risks and mitigation

- Identify risks that could prevent you achieving your objectives
- How you will deal with them?
- Identify options – a plan A and a plan B
- Prepare ‘lines to take’ – anticipate audiences’ reaction

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Risk</th>
<th>Mitigation options</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A student protest could threaten the success of your event.</td>
<td>Plan A: Meet with the students in advance to discuss issues.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Plan B: Change the event date/venue.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Evaluation: did you succeed?

- Often neglected
- Did you change understanding, opinion and behaviour?
- How will you measure – and will it cost anything?
- Quantitative
  - Event attendance, website visitors, donations, column inches
- Qualitative
  - Feedback forms, focus groups, key messages in the media
- ‘Wash-up’ with the project team
The written strategy

- Introduction: summary; emphasise added value
- Mission and vision, aims and objectives
- Audiences, messages, channels
- Timetable
- Resources
- Risks and mitigation
- Means of evaluation
- Approvals process
The essentials

- One or two clear objectives
- List of key audiences
- Summarise the key activities and dates
- Agree who is doing the work and who will pay
- Still write it down, even if it’s just a side of A4
And finally…

- Keep a record of the communications strategy
- Electronic and printed copies of material produced
- Record of quantitative and qualitative evaluation
- Minute the wash-up; record lessons learned
- Keep a contacts list
- Share best practice with peers
- Publicise your success
- It’s good PR for our profession!
Questions?