University of
Reading

DEVELOPING A COMMUNICATIONS PLAN FOR YOUR RESEARCH

Communication is a fundamental part of successful research and can take many forms, from sharing preliminary data with colleagues or recruiting study participants, to promoting research outcomes at a conference and influencing policymakers.

Most research is funded by publicly accountable bodies, and it is often a condition of the award that the research outputs and outcomes should be communicated as widely as possible.

The Research Communications and Engagement Team exists to support researchers in identifying the best ways to communicate research at all stages of the research process, to maximise its impact and to raise the profile of the University of Reading as a research-intensive university.

This guide gives an overview of how to develop an effective communications plan that will help to ensure your research has the greatest possible impact. It provides a framework, and should be adapted to suit your individual project.

For further information and advice, please contact Caroline Cross (c.e.cross@reading.ac.uk) in the Research Communications team.

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GUIDING PRINCIPLES
The who, what and why of communications planning

Why?   Set simple objectives
- Begin your plan with a set of objectives that are clear, simple and measurable.
- Ensure that the objectives of your communications plan don't simply restate the objectives of the research itself.
- Build in some simple evaluation measures at the start so that you'll know if and how you have succeeded in meeting your objectives.

What?   Be clear about what you want to communicate and why
- Develop clear concise messages, including a 'call to action' where possible.
- Write a top-line summary in just 1or 2 sentences to capture the essence of what you want to communicate.

How?   Keep the message clear
- Set out your key messages in clear, accessible language and avoid jargon – audiences such as journalists and policymakers are overloaded with information and may not remember your messages if they are too complex. Even researchers working in related fields may be unfamiliar with technical terminology and acronyms.

Who?   Know your audiences
- Prioritise your target audiences and user groups according to their importance and influence relative to your objectives.

Where?   Find your audience
- Think about how best to reach your target audience and the communication channels that your audience prefers.

When?   Set a plan and budget
- Draw up a project plan that includes all the activities you intend to carry out, with deadlines, responsibilities and costs.
- Don't underestimate the time and money involved. Remember to include staff time as a cost.
- Ensure value for money by focusing on high-impact/low-cost activities and buying in specialist help where necessary.

DEVELOPING A COMMUNICATIONS PLAN

A communications plan is designed to help you maximise the outcomes and impact of your research.

This step-by-step guide can be used and adapted as necessary to suit your project. It takes you through each stage of the communications planning process, including setting objectives, developing key messages, identifying your audience, getting them involved, and measuring success.

Communications opportunities (and opportunities for having an impact) may arise at any stage during or after your research project. It is important that you have a plan in place so that you can increase the chances of such opportunities occurring and can take advantage of them when they do.

Your plan is meant to be a living document and we recommend you revisit and update it regularly (at least once a year).

Set clear objectives

The objectives for your communications activity are quite distinct from the objectives for the research programme itself. Communications objectives revolve around getting your research known and used among those who can benefit most from it.

A typical set of objectives might be to:

- Build awareness of the project among a target audience, such as potential end users
- Secure the commitment of a target group of stakeholders to the project aims, e.g. new funders
- Influence specific policies or policymakers on key aspects
- Encourage participation from groups or organisations, such as researchers from other disciplines, or potential collaborators, or partner bodies.

The following questions provide a useful starting point:

- What are the likely outcomes of this research?
- Who will benefit from this research?
- How can you involve potential beneficiaries in this research?
- How will they benefit from this research?
- Who might help strengthen the impact of this research?

Develop succinct messages

An effective plan needs to have clear, succinct messages that summarise your research and the purpose of your research programme.

If your research project is long and complex, it may be difficult to set out these key messages at the beginning. But it is useful to consider whether there are any overarching messages about your research programme that can be used in the early phases and while it is underway, or any specific messages that relate to particular parts of the project. For projects running over many years these messages may change over time – we recommend reviewing them annually.

Understand your audiences

Who are the audiences you wish to communicate with? What do you know about them; how influential are they; how do you want them to respond?

## Prioritising your audiences

It is vital to know who your key audiences are. You should already have an idea of this, but it is worth taking time to ensure that you have considered all those who may have an interest in your research.

As there can be many audiences or stakeholders, it is helpful to differentiate audiences in your plan. Stakeholder mapping in this way will help you to target your resources – particularly in the early stages.

We suggest you start by listing all the different audiences you want to reach. Be as specific as you can and list organisations, or departments within organisations, and even individuals if possible. It helps to group them in a way that makes sense to you (perhaps local, national, international; or academic peers, policymakers, business/private sector, civil society, media, public).

Next, use the grid to decide which are your priority audiences or organisations – and rank which are your most important audiences. You can then use this information to decide how best to reach them:

1) **Key players** – who are both interested in your research and are important in your field/have influence. These are the people you will want to engage and consult regularly to increase the likelihood that they will use and promote your research.
2) **Key audiences** – who perhaps don't yet know so much about your work but who are important in your field/have influence. These are the people you want to engage with regularly to increase their interest in your work.
3) **Secondary audiences** – who may be very interested in your research but don't have real influence in the field. You will want to keep them informed and feeling positive as they have the potential to be an ambassador and tell other people about your work.
4) **General audiences** – these are the people who you want to be aware of your work but you are not sure what they can/will do with what you tell them. You should try to find ways to communicate with them regularly so that they become more interested and engaged over time.

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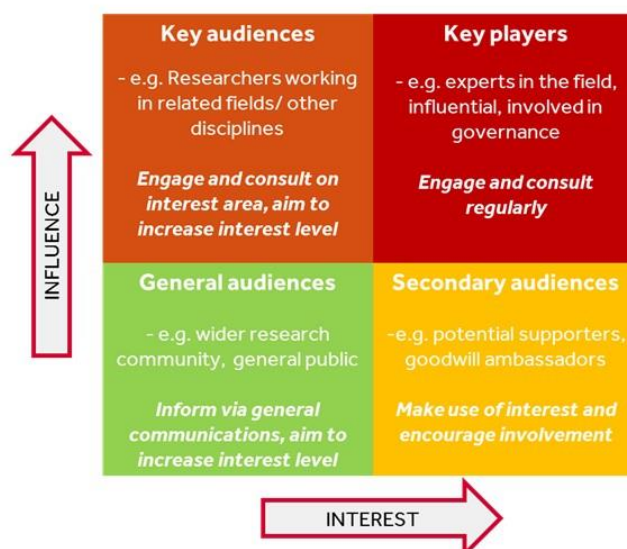
Reaching your key audiences

It is important to consider the most appropriate ways (channels) to reach your target audience – for example through regular user groups, workshops or conferences, a newsletter or blog, or some media activity. This will help you to frame the main activities of your communications plan, for example:

- Why plan an event when a podcast, digital story or photo gallery may convey your key messages more widely?
- Why publish a regular newsletter rather than a more occasional briefing?
- Why organise a large national conference rather than a series of smaller regional seminars?
- Why use an email bulletin rather than face-to-face contact?
- Why invite people to come to you when you can go to them?

Here is a sample grid you could use to help plan how best to reach your different audiences

Example audience/messaging grid

PRIORITY AUDIENCE	DETAILS	COMMUNICATION OBJECTIVE	MESSAGE/CALL TO ACTION	COMMUNICATION CHANNELS
Parliamentarians	e.g. Reach All Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) on specific interest area	Engage/consult on specific interest area to increase awareness and interest	Our evidence supports argument for policy change	- Invite relevant individual to speak at event - Submit evidence to select committee - Develop policy brief
International researchers	Raise profile of particular research findings/ expertise	Increase profile internationally to establish new collaboration/ partnership	We are the experts, work with us	- Attend/speak at international conference - Build digital profile and get involved in online discussions

Achieve your communications objectives

To achieve your communications objectives, i.e. to reach your target audience, engage with them and encourage them to take action, it is important to identify the most appropriate channels to use and activities to employ.

We recommend that you list details of all relevant communications activities, including deadlines and responsibilities. For larger-scale, more complex activities, remember to add key milestones and review dates, and think carefully about the resources required including staff costs and any consultants you will need to carry out your proposed engagement activities.

Below are some suggested groupings for a range of communications activities; the table is led by activity but you may prefer to have one for each year of activity. This table is suggested as a guide for you to adapt in a way that is useful for you.

ACTIVITY	BUDGET	STAFF AND OTHER RESOURCES	DEADLINE/ TIMEFRAME	EVALUATION MEASURES
Internal communications				
Publications				
Digital Communications				
Events				
Stakeholder engagement				
Media relations				
Data archiving				

Evaluate your communications and their impact

Were your activities and communications channels successful? The only way to find out is to build in evaluation from the beginning. Evaluation can help to demonstrate how well an activity worked – whether it is a one-off or on-going – and also to identify areas that could be developed or enhanced. It should take place through the entire programme – from the early planning stages through to final delivery.

There are a variety of ways to evaluate: quantitative metrics including press monitoring or the number of website hits, and qualitative measures such as event feedback and quotes from your research users. Your evaluation metrics will be specific to your programme and the communications channels you use.

Don't forget to review your plan

How will you know if you have met your communications objectives? It will be important to review your activities regularly and see if they are making the desired impact. We recommend that you review this plan at least once a year – so set a target date.

Date to review plan: _____

Further resources

This guide is intended as a starting point for communications planning. Please contact the Research Communications and Engagement Team for further ideas and advice on all aspects of communications planning, profile-raising activities, publicity materials and events planning.

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In addition, most research funders provide advice and guidance on communicating research and what they expect from their grant holders. For example, the ESRC have the following resources.

Planning http://www.esrc.ac.uk/research/evaluation-and-impact/developing-an-impact-strategy/step-by-step-guide/planning-activities

Allocating resources http://www.esrc.ac.uk/research/evaluation-and-impact/developing-an-impact-strategy/step-by-step-guide/allocating-resources

Measuring success http://www.esrc.ac.uk/research/evaluation-and-impact/developing-an-impact-strategy/measuring-success