

A practical guide to writing a stakeholder communications strategy

This guide is designed to help you through the process of writing a stakeholder communications strategy. It's split into six main areas, which link to the sub headings of a strategy. We've used the same example throughout so that you can follow how a stakeholder communications strategy is created. There are exercises for you to do along the way so, by the end, you will have the makings of a stakeholder communications strategy for your own organisation.

The process is not dissimilar to that of business planning, which you may already be familiar with. But rather than giving structure to broad thinking about where you want to go as an organisation, it gives structure to more specific thinking about how communications can help you get there.

Before beginning, you need to identify who your stakeholders are and which are most important to you. There are four exercises in the Identifying and prioritising stakeholders section within the CD, which will help you do this. If you haven't already completed them, please do so before working through this guide.

Situational analysis

A situational analysis is important as it tells you where your organisation is currently. A popular way to do this is to conduct a SWOT analysis. This abbreviation stands for Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats and is often used in the business planning process.

Think specifically about your organisation's objectives and the relationship you currently have with your stakeholders. What are your strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats? (A blank grid can be found at the end for you to use).

So now you've completed this task you should have a full piece of paper. We've filled out a couple of ideas on our grid (again you can find this at the end) to allow you to follow the process easily. Remember these are just for illustration purposes and may not be true of your organisation.

As you can see, we've said that the strengths of the organisation are:

- We already provide quarterly statistical evidence on local problems to our local authority.
- MD of local business is mentoring agency manager.

The weaknesses we've identified are:

- We are confident our advice work represents a cost saving to the local authority but we cannot prove it yet.
- Unmet demand for advice is increasing, which may reflect poorly on us even though the number of clients we have seen has grown.

The opportunities we've identified are:

- For the first time we have a volunteer dedicated to communications work.

- An informal conversation with our grant holder indicated an increasing importance being placed on partnership work.

The threats we've identified are:

- Advice agencies in our local area tend to view each other as competitors.
- The Local Authority has to reduce its spending.

You should be able to look through a SWOT analysis and pick out some obvious themes. Looking at our example, many of the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats relate in some way to the need for cost-effectiveness and the importance, but lack, of partnership working. As well as themes, the exercise will probably generate a list of 'enablers' and a list of 'barriers'. These are more logistical. In our example, an enabler might be the fact that we are receiving mentoring from a local business mentor. And a barrier might be our inability to prove the cost savings that advice services represent.

Before you move on to the next section, try to pick out those themes, enablers and barriers from your own SWOT. This will help you with the rest of your strategy.

Objectives

The themes that run throughout your SWOT analysis should draw your attention to the key issues – both positive and negative – that you need to either exploit or address with your communications work.

You should set yourself an objective relating to each. Taking the themes from our example – the need for cost-effectiveness and the importance, but lack, of partnership working – our objectives might be to:

1. Be seen to lead partnership work.
2. Prove cost savings and demonstrate efficiencies.

So we started with a SWOT analysis, which told us where we are now. What our objectives clarify, is where we want to be. They give us our direction; all of the activities we plan later will contribute to achieving them.

Strategic approach

Your strategic approach sets out, in broad terms, how you will get from where you are now to where you want to be. There is never a single answer to the question of 'how?' so this stage is about settling on your approach – finding one that feels right for you and that is realistic too. When thinking this through, you will need to be mindful of the enablers and barriers that you identified in your SWOT analysis. So far as possible, try make use of your enablers and remove any barriers.

It's important not to get into too much detail yet – the specifics are your 'Tactics', which we'll come on to later. (Your enablers and barriers will come into play in that section too, so you don't necessarily have to deal with every single one of them now.) Your strategic approach is simply about getting clear on the bigger picture. You could almost think of it as strands of work, or headings for everything that follows to fit under.

Looking at our example again, we might take the following strategic approach to our objectives:

Be seen to lead partnership work:

- Convince other local agencies of the value of partnership work.
- Demonstrate joint working despite an absence of existing partnership success stories.

Prove cost savings and demonstrate efficiencies:

- Acknowledge unmet demand frankly and explain what we are doing to tackle it.
- Find an affordable way to quantify the cost savings that advice services represent (removing a barrier).

Key messages

In light of the strategic approach you have decided to adopt, it's time to think about what you need to be saying, and to who, in order to achieve your objectives.

When completing this section, think about your stakeholders' frame of mind. Do they have pre-conceived ideas that you need to change? Do they need to be convinced of something? What interests them?

There are generally two types of messages: motivational and inspiring messages, and messages that tackle concerns and worries. Both are equally important.

Looking again at our example, our key messages might be as follows.

For other local advice agencies:

- The future success of all of our agencies is dependent on partnership working.
- We are willing to share our contacts and resources to facilitate it so that we can all enjoy the benefits.

For Local Authority and grant holder:

- Advice services represent a cost saving to the local authority and are therefore an investment.
- Demand for advice is increasing but we are working more efficiently and seeing more clients than ever.
- We are working with other local agencies to help you meet your agenda, and better understand your community and its needs.

Your key messages are a fantastically useful reference when you are planning the detail of your communications with different audiences (as we will do in the next section, 'Tactics'). Be reassured that they don't necessarily have to be stuck to rigidly, though. You will end up adapting them as appropriate, depending on the communications channels you choose and the context.

Tactics

This section can be thought of as 'putting the meat on the bones' of your strategic approach. So you want to quantify the cost savings that advice services represent. Or you want to demonstrate joint working despite an absence of existing partnership success stories. To arrive at your tactics, ask yourself questions like:

- What actions do I need to take to make these things happen?

- Which messages do I ultimately need to communicate to which audiences? When and how would it be best to do that?
- What resources will all this require? Can I find them? If not, what resources do I have, and how can I use them creatively? Think broadly here; your trustee board, for example, is a great resource. Perhaps they have useful contacts or a particular area of expertise.

We might decide to quantify the cost savings that advice services represent by pitching it as a research project to local university students; scientific rigour is important to us but we can't afford paid-for research. We would need to do that at the very start of the academic year, so would have to have prepared a tight research brief by then.

And we might decide to convince other local agencies of the value of partnership work by offering the services of our business mentor to facilitate a round table discussion. This would demonstrate generosity on our part. We could also invite local elected representatives and LA officers to show them that we are willing to work with others, and them directly, to help them meet their agendas. This tactic illustrates the importance of always keeping in mind your enablers. We identified in the SWOT analysis that our business mentor was a strength of ours. Here, when planning our tactics, we are making sure that we put that strength to good use.

If you need more of a steer, we have suggested other tactics in the fully-worked example at the end.

Targets and controls

This is the last section of your stakeholder communications strategy. It's also the most important: it's where you commit to exactly what you hope to achieve, and by when, and where you set out how you're going to monitor and review the effectiveness of your strategy.

The targets that we might put in place for our sample strategy are:

- Four out of six local agencies and two local elected representatives to attend the round table event, with one piece of joint work identified to take forward.
- One student to take up the research project and prove cost savings by month 12.

In the fully-worked strategy at the end you will find other targets relating to the additional tactics mentioned earlier.

The monitoring and review techniques for these particular targets are very simple, but this isn't always the case. If you had a target relating to perception change for example, then you might need to undertake a benchmarking survey initially and a follow up survey on completion of your strategy.



SWOT grid

Strengths	Weaknesses
Opportunities	Threats



Example of completed SWOT grid

Strengths	Weaknesses
• We provide quarterly statistical evidence on local problems to our local authority. • MD of local business is mentoring our agency manager.	• We are confident our advice work represents a cost saving to the local authority but we cannot prove it yet. • Unmet demand for advice is increasing, which may reflect poorly on us even though the number of clients we have seen has grown.
Opportunities	Threats
• For the first time we have a volunteer dedicated to communications work. • An informal conversation with our grant holder indicated an increasing importance being placed on partnership work.	• Advice agencies in our local area tend to view each other as competitors. • The local authority has to reduce its spending.



Objective	Strategy	Activity	Target audience	Messages	Timing and resources	Lead	Success measures
Be seen to lead partnership work	Convince other local agencies of value of partnership work	Ask local business mentor to facilitate a round table session with advice agencies, local elected representatives and LA officers	Local elected representatives and LA officers	We are willing to work with other local advice agencies to help meet your agenda.	Within first 3 months. Suitable venue required and planning time to identify clear objectives and structure	Agency manager	4 out of 6 local agencies and 2 local elected representatives to attend. 1 piece of joint work identified to take forward
Be seen to lead partnership work	Demonstrate joint working despite absence or existing partnership success stories	Initiate a combined quarterly evidence report to the LA from all local advice agencies	Initially grant holders and service development departments (with a view to expanding audience through forwarding and others opting-in)	We have joined forces to help you better understand the local community and its needs.	From month 4 onwards. Labour intensive to collate. Needs laying out and an accompanying narrative written and agreed	Agency manager	Double initial circulation from 25 to 50 between months 4-16.
Prove cost savings and demonstrate efficiencies	Find an affordable way to quantify the cost savings that advice represents	Give talks to students at the local university to pitch it as a research project	PhD/ final year social science students	Make a difference to a local charity at the same time as completing your course.	Month 2 at start of academic year. Requires tight research brief prepared in advance and provision of data.	Comms volunteer	1 student to take up research project and prove cost saving by month 12.
Prove cost savings and demonstrate efficiencies	Acknowledge unmet demand frankly and explain what doing to tackle it	Create a publication which demonstrates impact in human terms as well as numbers	All stakeholders	We are a cost-effective investment for a happy healthy community.	Months 8-12 to allow for inclusion of research results. Budget needed for professional design and print. spreadsheet of stakeholder contacted needed for mailing.	Comms volunteer	200 copies of the publication distributed to local stakeholders.