



NON-GOVERNMENTAL ORGANIZATIONS' COMMUNICATIONS BEST PRACTICES

BACKGROUND

The Communications Directors of ten global health or similar non-governmental organizations (NGO) were asked how they deliver communications on behalf of their organizations, how they promote their corporate brand and how they are structured to do this work. In addition, the way that they support both donor relations and government relations was probed. The use of social media was a focus of questioning as were measurement and evaluation techniques.

ON KEY MESSAGES THAT INSPIRE SUPPORT

Familiarity with the issue and a reason to connect are critical. Ethical behaviour and transparency of message are of paramount importance to NGOs. Their reputations are linked with their partners, be they donors, advocates or collaborators. Messages must stress accountability and successful outcomes.

Innovation messages must not be about the features of the discovery, but of the benefits to patients and public health in general. In particular, the impact must be discussed in the context of access by developing nations, which goes beyond the discovery to patient delivery in non-optimal conditions.

ON TRUSTWORTHY SPOKESPERSONS

The organizations consistently identified two “trustworthy” individuals to speak on its behalf. The CEO / Executive Director or other senior executives were top of mind, followed by the Chief Science Officer and technical subject matter experts when the message concerns scientific discoveries. Many mentioned the importance of a PhD or MD in adding credibility to the message. There was a caution, however, of over-exposure to the CEO as the only face of the company.

Especially in developing nations, people connected to a project – the local head of the project, volunteers, patients and local physicians – were seen as highly credible spokespeople for the project. Conversely, celebrity spokespersons, unless long-time supporters or patrons, were seen as eroding trust with the audiences.

KEY FINDINGS

ALL ORGANIZATIONS STRIVE TO BUILD VISIBILITY IN A DISTINCTIVE WAY. THIS IS A CHALLENGE AS MANY ARE COMPETING FOR THE SAME SOURCES OF FUNDING WITHIN THE GLOBAL HEALTH AREA.

DISCOVERIES MUST BE FRAMED BY HOW THEY IMPACT THE LIVES OF THOSE IN THE DEVELOPING WORLD, NOT BY THE DISCOVERY ITSELF.

FACE-TO-FACE DIALOGUE WITH CEOs AND SUBJECT MATTER EXPERTS IS STILL MOST EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATIONS CHANNEL WITH MAJOR DONORS.

BEST-IN-CLASS ORGANIZATIONS USE THEIR STAFF FOR COMMUNICATIONS WORK AND OWN THE MEDIA RELATIONSHIPS. AGENCIES ARE FOR SPECIFIC TASKS LIKE GOVERNMENT RELATIONS AND MAJOR ANNOUNCEMENTS (ESPECIALLY IN LOCAL MARKETS).

SOCIAL MEDIA ARE POWERFUL TOOLS THAT ARE ONLY BEGINNING TO COALESCE INTO A STRATEGY. AT THE MOMENT, MOST ORGANIZATIONS ARE FOLLOWING EACH OTHER AND THE MEDIA. THOSE GROUPS THAT INTERACT WITH THE PUBLIC ARE FINDING GOOD SUCCESS IN BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS ON TWITTER AND FACEBOOK.

WELL-ESTABLISHED ORGANIZATIONS MEASURE AND EVALUATE THE IMPACT OF THEIR COMMUNICATIONS EFFORTS ON THEIR CORPORATE REPUTATIONS.

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ON THE ROLE OF THE COMMUNICATIONS FUNCTION

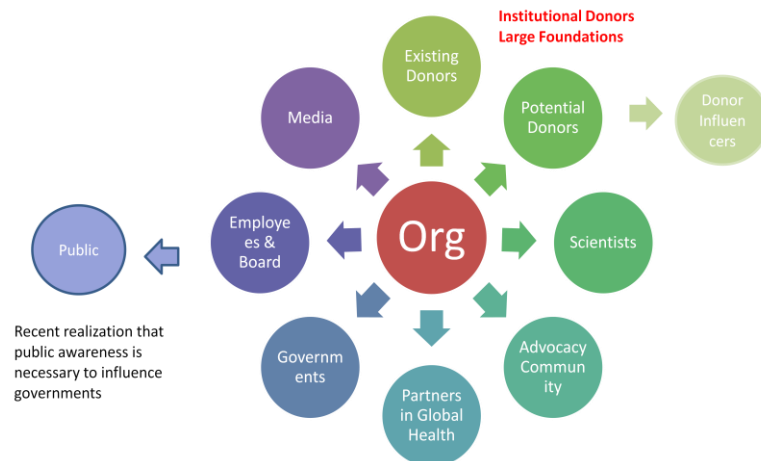
The sizes and structures of the Communications departments in the organizations interviewed obviously vary but there are common themes:

- Communications Directors all have very close working relationships with their CEOs and, for many, this is a major part of their role. Larger organizations are more likely to have a VP level, with the Communications function reporting to them. In smaller organizations, the reporting relationship is direct.
- There is little emphasis on internal communications. A few (larger) organizations have a Manager reporting in to Human Resources function. The intranet is generally the most common internal communications channel.
- Support of project teams actively involved in field work (often in developing nations) uses a large amount of communications resource. Larger organizations often embed communicators directly into major projects. Local country agencies are sometimes called in for media relations or events related to major announcements. If that is not possible, communications support is allocated along an internal agency model.

ON THE STAKEHOLDER NETWORK

When asked who they considered their main stakeholders (audiences) for communications efforts, responses varied. The stakeholder map (Figure 1) illustrates the diversity of the audiences. Not all organizations consider all of these groups as key stakeholders, but the majority of them do. Most

organizations did not mention the public unless they elicited donations or volunteer hours from them.



Of note, one research-based organization has begun raising its profile with the public as part of its government relations strategy, even though it does not interact with the public in its daily business.

Figure 1: Stakeholder Map

ON COMMUNICATIONS CHANNELS

Members' preferences on receiving information vary, so all channels are used. (See Table 1.) Despite the emergence of social media, when questioned, most organizations stated that **the most effective communication channel is face-to-face**, especially with large institutional donors and policy makers / regulators. Organizations were selective in conference and think tank participation, ensuring there was a good return on effort.

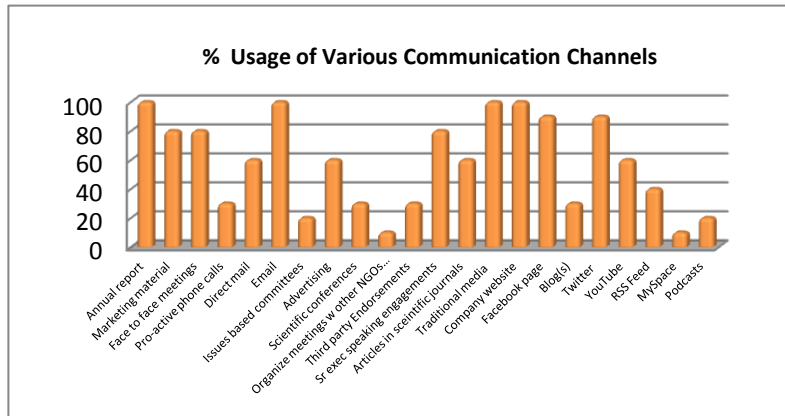


Table 1 Communications Channels Used by Respondents

Social media are components of everyone's communications strategies, although the extent to which they align with strategic goals varies. Various media are used, with the most popular being Facebook, Twitter and YouTube (in addition to the company website).

Facebook is seen as useful to connect those with common interests with the organization.

Three organizations are blogging

with good success. YouTube is a good emotional tool especially to showcase some of the field work being done and is generally used in conjunction with Facebook, Twitter or blog postings.

Twitter is especially good at finding and linking the social network of like-minded audiences. It is a very powerful tool that must be kept active and is used to promote the organization's brand (but not in-depth) and unite followers around a cause or issue.

ON MEDIA RELATIONS

There is a shift in how organizations view media relations. Some are moving away from issuing traditional releases and instead focus on providing position papers and comments on newsworthy issues. These are seen as more likely to either generate a story or position the organization as a source of expertise for future articles.

Most organizations begin with establishing good relationships with the scientific media as their stories are often picked up by mainstream national media outlets. The need to establish and nurture relationships with key media is still important and is often a challenge for understaffed communications departments. There is consensus that relationships should be held by the organizations, not by external agencies.

Twitter also crosses into traditional media relations. Most organizations interviewed follow and get key reporters to follow them on Twitter as experts in the area. A couple of interviewees talked about the

media finding them on Twitter when they research for a story and believe these connections are more impactful than press releases.

ON COMMUNICATIONS CHARACTERISTICS THAT BUILD TRUST

Stakeholders decide to form trusted relationships with an organization, in part, based on the perceptions created by their communications. These relationships are the foundation of good reputations and ultimately lead to support by governments and potential donors needed to reach strategic goals. In the book *Fame & Fortune: How Successful Companies Build Winning Reputations*, the authors Fombrun and Van Riel looked at Fortune 500 companies with top reputations. They discovered that communications' visibility, sincerity, distinctiveness, transparency and authenticity were the hallmarks of companies with excellent reputations. Interviewees were asked to rate the communications of their own organizations. Table 2 shows the average of the responses.

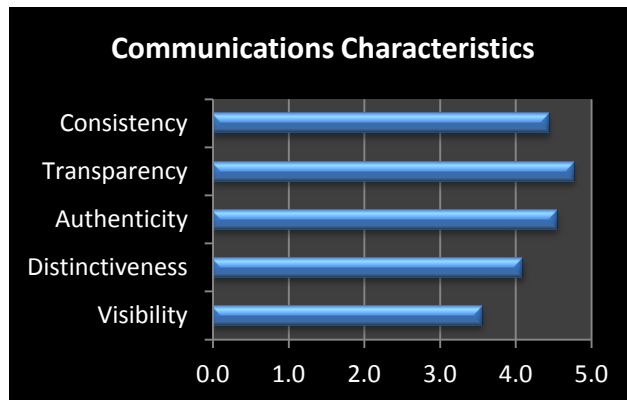


Table 2: Ratings of Communications Characteristics that Build Reputation

Not surprisingly (and correctly) many commented that communication is just one of the tools that builds relationships – personal interaction is another important one. As a result, they gave their efforts a neutral 3 out of 5 (not shown on Table 2). This may be reflective of the overall feeling that, if they had more resources, they could do much more, as that was another recurring theme in the conversations.

ON MEASURING & EVALUATING COMMUNICATIONS

Many of the organizations interviewed assess the impact of their communications efforts on employees and external audiences. Although done consistently in the larger organizations, some smaller organizations also monitor and measure. Some measured communications activity (media monitoring and (some) content analysis, followers). Some went further to look at the results of the communications work (membership surveys, brand awareness polling). The measurement of social media impact was particularly weak as groups seek to understand how best to find meaning in the data available. Measurement was an area in which most interviewees felt they should do more, but lacked the time and resources to do so.