

Communications for Social Good

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Discussion Guide

This discussion guide contains six sets of questions designed to help foundations, and the nonprofit organizations they support, to plan effective communications campaigns. The questions are excerpted from the paper, *Communications for Social Good*, by Susan Nall Bales and Franklin D. Gilliam, Jr., and cover the key elements in the design of successful campaigns: defining the problem, audience, messenger, medium, and evaluation strategy. The questions are included here for the convenience of readers who wish to use them for individual review or group discussion purposes.

Why Communicate? (Problem Definition)

The initial step toward a solid communications plan is to define the problem the organization wishes to address. Also, at the outset, it is important to identify the organization's policy agenda or other solutions to ameliorate the problem, determine the organization's theory of change, and establish the precise role that communications can play as part of an overall strategy for solving the problem.

At the problem identification stage of planning a communications strategy, the questions that organizations need to address include:

- What is the social problem we are addressing?
- What are its characteristics?
- What do people already know about it, and how do they think about it?
- What have been the dominant frames of media coverage of the issue?
- What do we think should be done to improve/solve it?
- What do experts believe should be done to improve/solve it?
- What is our policy agenda or what are our objectives in tackling this problem?

- What is our theory of change, e.g., how do we think our efforts can prove helpful?
- What objective indicators would suggest to us that opinion/policy/behavior is moving in the right direction?
- What is the appropriate role for communications in the broader strategy?
- What schools of communications practice seem best oriented to this problem?
- How does our problem definition reflect our understanding of agenda-setting, framing, and persuasion?

Communicate to Whom? (Audience)

The more definitive an organization can be about the audience it hopes to reach, the more likely it is to plan a very targeted and efficient campaign. The questions to be addressed about audiences are:

- Which people are critical to achieving our goals?
- Are there subsets of this group that make more sense to our campaign goals than others?
- Are there sequences of groups that can build from one another?
- Are there important intermediaries that already reach these audiences?
- What other organizations, groups, and individuals are vested in this issue?

Communicate What? (Audience)

Crafting a message is often the first task groups set out to tackle in creating a campaign, when it should be the logical end-product of an organic strategy development process. Effective messages result from taking the audience's pulse on an issue, gauging its predispositions, and determining how to effectively redirect its position, attitude, or behavior to a new position more closely aligned with the campaign goals.

The key questions about messages for a communications campaign are:

- What are we asking people to do, think, or feel as a result of this communication?

- How do we know this message will yield this result?
- Does our message strategy take into consideration the dominant frames of media coverage of this issue?
- Does our message strategy reflect what we know about public opinion in general and the particular opinions of our target audience?
- Have we adequately translated the message from the language and complexity of expert understanding to suit the educational level, perspectives, and values of our target audience?
- How will our messages stand up to confrontation and criticism?

Who Is Communicating? (Messenger)

The importance of the messenger to the public's acceptance of the message is well documented. In choosing who should represent the communications sender (the messenger), as opposed to the receiver (the audience), organizations must answer the following questions:

- Who is both knowledgeable and trustworthy on our issues?
- Who is likely to be perceived as an honest messenger by the target audience?
- Who is likely to be able to satisfy these criteria AND generate media attention?

How To Communicate? (Medium)

The choice of media for a communications campaign should be made on the basis of matching the medium to the communications goals and targets. The questions an organization needs to address in selecting effective media are:

- Is our placement strategy consistent with our theory of change?
- Have we chosen media that make sense for our message and our audience?
- Is the mix of media driven by our campaign goals?
- Have we ensured adequate frequency or exposure to accomplish our goals?

What Are the Communications Outcomes? (Evaluation)

Campaigns need to evaluate the degree to which their communications result in a better understanding of, and support for, the policies being advanced. However, it is critical to set realistic goals for the effects of a communications campaign. Taking too much responsibility for broad-scale social change is a common problem in communications evaluation.

The questions to be addressed with respect to communications effects are:

- How will we know we are having an impact?
- Are there different indicators for short-term and long-term impact?
- Are our outcome goals in line with our theory of change?
- What specific actions/beliefs/outcomes will we monitor as indices of improvement?
- Have we set our goals too high for the budget associated with our campaign?

Additional Resources from the Authors

- *Making Communications Connections: A Toolkit and Animated CD-ROM*, FrameWorks Institute for the Annie E. Casey Foundation
- FrameWorks Institute Web site (www.frameworksinstitute.org)
- FrameWorks Institute online course (accessible at www.frameworksinstitute.org)
- *Context*, the occasional magazine from the Center for Communications and Community, University of California, Los Angeles (www.sscnet.ucla.edu/issr/cc)
- Center for Communications and Community Web site (www.sscnet.ucla.edu/issr/cc)