

Research Notes Issue CRN1 April 1999

Communicating with the public



Monitoring report

Summary

Effective communication with the public is often vital to the success of countryside initiatives. Research shows that a fully professional approach is just as valuable for communication as it is for technical and managerial tasks.

The main characteristic of effective communication with the public is a strategic approach to each exercise, with each step carefully planned in relation to the aims set.

The main steps in the process are devising a message, selecting and defining a target audience, choosing the media to deliver the message, setting targets for what the whole exercise is to achieve, allocating a realistic budget and monitoring effectiveness.

It is important to be clear about the reason for communicating in the first place, including what the audience is to do in response to the message. The expectations of the audience and how receptive it will be are important considerations: as is who else is competing for its attention.

Main findings

This Note summarises research commissioned by the Countryside Commission initially to help its own staff better to target messages on the public. The results are likely also to be useful to other organisations and individuals.

Communicating with the public is normally just one part of the action required to carry out a countryside initiative. This research focuses on the specific communications part of the process and provides pointers to achieving effective communication with the public.

Aims

Setting clear aims for the communications exercise was found to be fundamental to success. Clarity is helped if aims are **SMART** (**S**pecific, **M**easurable, **A**chievable, **R**ealistic and set within a **T**imeframe).

Different kinds of programme have different kinds of communications aims - for example raising awareness of new access opportunities (enjoyment), encouraging particular user groups to consider others (responsible behaviour), or encouraging community groups to become involved in a Millennium Green project (involvement).

The communications need may change during the course of the work on a programme. At the beginning it may be to raise awareness; later to generate action (for example applying for a grant); and later still to communicate different messages to new audiences (for example, to use a Parish Paths Network).

Message

Successful communications ensure that the message is clear and relevant to the target audience, with complex messages broken down into a number of simple messages. It is helpful to stress the benefits of what is proposed, and the call to action should be easy to remember and to do. Strong images are more effective than lots of words.

Successful communications also maximise the appropriateness of the message for the communications

medium. For example a television interview can get across little more than sound bites, but a magazine feature can cover messages in more depth.

Target audience

Research shows that the wider context is important - in particular, the expectations of the audience and the actions of others.

The greater the understanding beforehand of the target audience, the more effective the communication. Information to be sought includes who they are (age, sex, location, lifestyle etc.), their perceptions of the programme, and what motivates them.

Such data underpins an effective strategy for a message to be delivered at a time and place when the intended audience is likely to be most receptive. In particular, it helps to identify the publications, radio and TV programmes that are likely to be watched by that audience.

A Target Audience Matrix can help to focus thinking - see example in Figure 1. Such a matrix can guide the strategic approach before thinking in detail about targeting the intended audience and selecting the best way to reach them. A matrix similar to that illustrated could be created for other audiences such as policy makers or practitioners.

Figure 1 - Target audience matrix: countryside information for the general public

	Market segment	Organisations	The public	Businesses
	Leisure users	Ramblers Association, British Horse Society, Mountain Bike Federation	Frequent users, Occasional users, Tourists, Non-users	Tourism businesses, Leisure equipment manufacturers, Publishers
	Economic resource users	National Farmers Union, Country Landowners Association, Forest Enterprise	Farmers, Foresters, Landowners	Food industry, including food retailers, Timber processing, Mineral extraction
	Countryside residents	Parish Councils, Local community groups	Residents	Local services, Manufacturing and tradable services
	Conservation interests	CPRE, Wildlife Trusts, Woodland Trust, National Trust	Members and supporters	Trust shops, Visitor centres
	Education interest	Schools, Universities, Colleges	Students	Education suppliers, IT providers

It is necessary to know how aware the audience is of the programme and the issues which affect it. A view can then be taken on how receptive to the particular message the audience is likely to be and the way in which it is likely to receive the message.

Audience expectations are likely to be affected by previous communications activity and communications from other organisations. The latter may be projecting messages which are different to the message, which compete with it or even which question or confuse it. An effective communications strategy addresses this possibility.

**Figure 2 - Comparing the cost effectiveness of different media:
Newspaper Advert vs. Television**

	Newspaper (local)	Television (regional)
Cost per advert	£250	£940
Audience	100,000	1,000,000
Cost per 1,000 hits	£2.50	£0.94

Delivery mechanism

Information on the relative merits of different communications media is given in the Communication Methods Table.

In selecting the communication media to use, the main characteristics to take into consideration are:

- the reach of the medium - the number of individuals who will be exposed to the message
- the frequency - the number of times each individual is exposed to the message.

Usually this information is contained in a media pack available from publishers, broadcasters, and other providers.

Facts on reach and frequency allow calculation of the cost of different media per 1,000 hits, i.e. the number of times one person is exposed. For example, Figure 2 shows that although advertising in the newspaper is cheaper than a television advert, the cost effectiveness of the latter is greater because the reach is ten times that of the newspaper.

Cost effectiveness is not the only criterion to be considered. More difficult to define is the quality of the exposure to the message. As a general guide, more fleeting types of exposure (e.g. television and radio) are only suitable for simple messages while longer exposures (e.g. newspapers, direct mail, the Internet) are better for more complex messages.

Resources

Resources (finance and staff time) required to achieve the communications outputs are crucial with this as with any task, not least reconciling aims with budgetary constraints. Aspects of the communications exercise to be budgeted include design, reprographics and printing, the cost of delivering the message (e.g. mailing, advertising, Internet page, etc.) and the cost of monitoring.

Effective communication has to be managed and implemented. This means deciding which individuals will do which tasks – planning, delivery and monitoring – and whether the necessary skills exist within the team (or, if not, elsewhere in the organisation, through a partner or bought in).

Monitoring

Monitoring is often forgotten or ignored but monitoring work and reviewing the results enable communicators to learn lessons for maximising the effectiveness of future communications.

Often it is possible to build in some simple monitoring technique. A code could be included on any tear-off return slip on literature or an advert to trace where the response is coming from. Those who respond can be asked how they found out about the project. By identifying the level and origin of the responses, the cost per inquiry and the cost per action provoked as a result of the communication activity can be established.

Target Outputs

Effective strategies set clear, quantified and qualified target outputs for each communications exercise. The impacts can then be rigorously assessed and evaluated, using the results of monitoring.

Communicators sometimes find target outputs difficult to set (though the results of others' previous projects can be studied) but their task becomes easier as experience builds up.

The clearest target outputs are expressed simply.

A project, for example, might be intended to encourage community groups to apply for a grant to carry out certain eligible projects, with direct mail thought to offer the most cost effective mechanism. Experience suggests that for every group receiving an information pack, only one in 10 will respond, and that only if there is also some awareness-raising activity through articles in relevant specialist magazines. The target outputs might be:

- To raise awareness by securing one press article in each of three specialist magazines
- To direct mail material to 1,000 groups
- To encourage 100 groups to apply for a grant.

Another project might involve the promotion of a new access opportunity, primarily to visitors to the area, with a leaflet distributed through tourist information centres (TICs) and other attractions as the most cost effective mechanism. Experience here suggests that there will be a high wastage rate with leaflets failing to be displayed, and that for every leaflet taken only a fifth of visitors will actually visit the new facility. The target outputs might be:

- To produce 20,000 leaflets
- To distribute them to 5 TICs and 20 other attractions
- To attract 1,000 additional visitor parties to make use of the new opportunity.

Conclusions

Not only are many initiatives aimed at public enjoyment or at the education of the public to understand and respect the countryside, but the number of projects involving public participation has increased dramatically in recent years as participation becomes the mainstream approach to decision-making. None of these will be fully successful without effective communication.

Research shows that a fully professional approach is just as valuable for communicating as it is for technical and managerial tasks. Those planning initiatives, especially those without specialist public relations or marketing staff, are encouraged to take such a professional approach. The key questions, in summary, are:

- What am I trying to achieve?
- Is my message as simple and positive as possible?
- What is my target audience?
- What is their condition, will they be receptive to my message, and is my message relevant to them?
- Which medium or combination of media will be most effective?
- Is my message well designed for the chosen delivery mechanism?

- How many actions am I trying to provoke?
- What is the cost per response?
- How can I monitor the effectiveness of this work?

Communications methods:

Message Suitability Grid

Method	Purpose: Raise awareness	Purpose: Respond to interest	Purpose: Encourage involvement	Info capacity	Notes
				*	
Posters	✓			n	To raise awareness, to remind or build an image. Can have powerful visual images
On site e.g. signs		✓		n	To raise awareness or to remind. For simple messages particularly about behavior or news
Leaflets		✓	✓	n	Best used for responding to an existing demand or interest rather than for creating the interest in the first place. Can contain complex messages
Publications	✓	✓		nnn	Own publications and those for professional audiences can carry complicated messages
Magazines	✓	✓	✓	nn	For news or more complicated messages for specific audiences
Local newspapers	✓	✓		nn	For news or general messages. Can develop a story over a long period of time. Charismatic individuals or attractive locations/subjects get covered
National newspapers	✓			nn	For stories of national relevance, or local/regional stories with major impact
Local radio	✓	✓		n	For news items. Chat shows for more complicated messages
National radio	✓			n	To deliver specific messages to targeted audiences e.g. through natural history or transport programme
Television	✓			n	For awareness. Need attractive locations and/or charismatic individuals. Danger of losing the message in the presentation.
Ceefax/Oracle		✓		nn	For delivering news of events etc.
Films/video	✓	✓		nnn	To explain, educate or create awareness of a complicated subject
Internet/World Wide Web		✓	✓	nnn	Content unlimited (except by cost). Allow users to use at superficial and in-depth way for maximum effect
On-line info. systems		✓		nn	To deliver information on places to visit, events etc.

Events and exhibitions	✓	✓	✓	nnn	Platform to distribute messages and literature, also speak to people. To support other communications activity
Training courses and conferences	✓	✓	✓	nnn	To deliver detailed information to an interested audience
Direct mail	✓		✓	nn	To create awareness, encourage participation. Opportunity to trigger a response and to develop and manage a database of professional or consumer contacts
Personal contact	✓	✓	✓	nnn	Most effective form of communication, also expensive. Use selectively

* n=Low nn=Medium nnn=High

Communications methods:

Audience Reach

Method	Area: Local/Regional	Area: National	Potential Audience **	Notes
Posters	✓		m	Commerical sites e.g. bus shelters, shopping centres; free sites e.g. libraries, schools, workplaces, hotels, village halls. Can target audience through site selection; high frequency of exposure to small or medium-sized audience
On site e.g. signs	✓		m	Locate on notice boards, trees, etc. Can reach small audience to deliver message at a relevant time e.g. at start of visit
Leaflets	✓		mm	High wastage. Success depends on distribution. Can reach people when they are responsive to messages e.g. providing information on access at tourist information centres or holiday accommodation
Publications	✓	✓	mm	Message can be 'lost' amongst many others. Difficult to control tone of message in others' publications
Magazines		✓	mm	Consumer and professional titles. Limited but regular readership. Readership usually well targeted e.g. particular interest group
Local newspapers	✓		mm	Readers tend to be loyal, reading every day/week. Each copy read by several people (consider circulation and readership). Readership well targeted geographically
National newspapers		✓	mmm	As local newspapers. Sunday papers often carry more in-depth reports. Readership targeted by lifestyle or socio-economic group
Local radio	✓		mm	Listeners change throughout the day e.g. mornings/evenings: people at home, commuters in cars; afternoon: housewives, retired people. Listeners well targeted geographically

National radio		✓	mmm	As local radio. Listeners targeted by lifestyle group or by interest (e.g. preferring news and sport or different types of music)
Television		✓	mmm	National and regional news programmes and advertising. Limited targeting possible on geographical basis and through advertising timed with particular programmes
Ceefax/Oracle		✓	mm	No targeting possible
Films/video	✓	✓	mm	Effective distribution governs success. Education and affinity groups are likely to respond to this medium
Internet/World Wide Web	✓	✓	mm/mmm	Some targeting possible through website links and pro-active use of e-mail
On-line info. systems	✓	✓	mm	Access points include libraries and tourist information centres. Possible to 'share' existing delivery systems
Events and exhibitions	✓		m	For face-to-face contact with limited audience infrequently. Audience likely to be targeted by geography and interest; also likely to be receptive to information or messages
Training courses and conferences	✓		m	Opportunity for in-depth communication with small, normally professional audience on infrequent basis
Direct mail		✓	mmm	Purchase addresses by lifestyle, age, geographical distribution, postcode area, profession, membership, interest, purchases made etc. Very effective targeting. Total control over reach and frequency
Personal contact	✓		m	Can be regular on site. High quality, but very small audience

** m=Small mm=Medium mmm=High

Note:

This [Countryside Research Note](#) is based on research prepared for the Countryside Commission in 1998. The views summarised here are not necessarily the policy of the Countryside Agency.

Further reading

Kotter. *Marketing Management*. Prentis Hall.

Kotter. *Marketing for Non Profit Making Organisations*. Prentis Hall.

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Jim Dunn. *Successful Public Relations*. Hawkesmere.

Anne Gregory. *Planning and Managing a Public Relations Campaign*. Institute of Public Relations.

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