

BEST PRACTICE GUIDE

HOW TO DEVELOP A COMMUNICATIONS PLAN

Effective communication is crucial to maximising the reach and impact of your research. Opportunities to share your work and generate meaningful engagement can arise at any stage of a project - during its development, upon completion or even long after it's finished. Having a clear communications plan in place increases the likelihood of identifying and capitalising on these opportunities. It ensures that your key messages are delivered to the right audiences, through the most appropriate channels, and at the right times. A communications plan helps prevent valuable research from remaining confined to academic circles and instead promotes broader understanding, application and impact.

Why develop a communications plan

- To **raise the profile** and **drive understanding** of your research
- To **build partnerships** and **find collaborators**
- To find and **secure funding**
- To **influence change** in industry, policy or practice
- To achieve or demonstrate **impact**
- To build your **reputation**

The following six steps will help you to develop an effective communications plan. Your plan should be a living document and you should revisit and update it regularly (at least once a year).

1. Set communications objectives

Begin your plan with a set of communications objectives that are **SMART** – Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, Timely.

Communications objectives are different from the objectives of your research/activity itself. Instead, ask yourself:

- What are the likely outcomes of this research?
- Who will benefit and how?
- How can I involve potential beneficiaries?
- Who might help strengthen my research's impact?

A typical set of comms objectives might be:

- build awareness of the project among a target audience
- secure the commitment of a target group of stakeholders
- influence specific policies or policymakers on key aspects
- encourage participation from groups/organisations/partner bodies

2. Identify your audiences

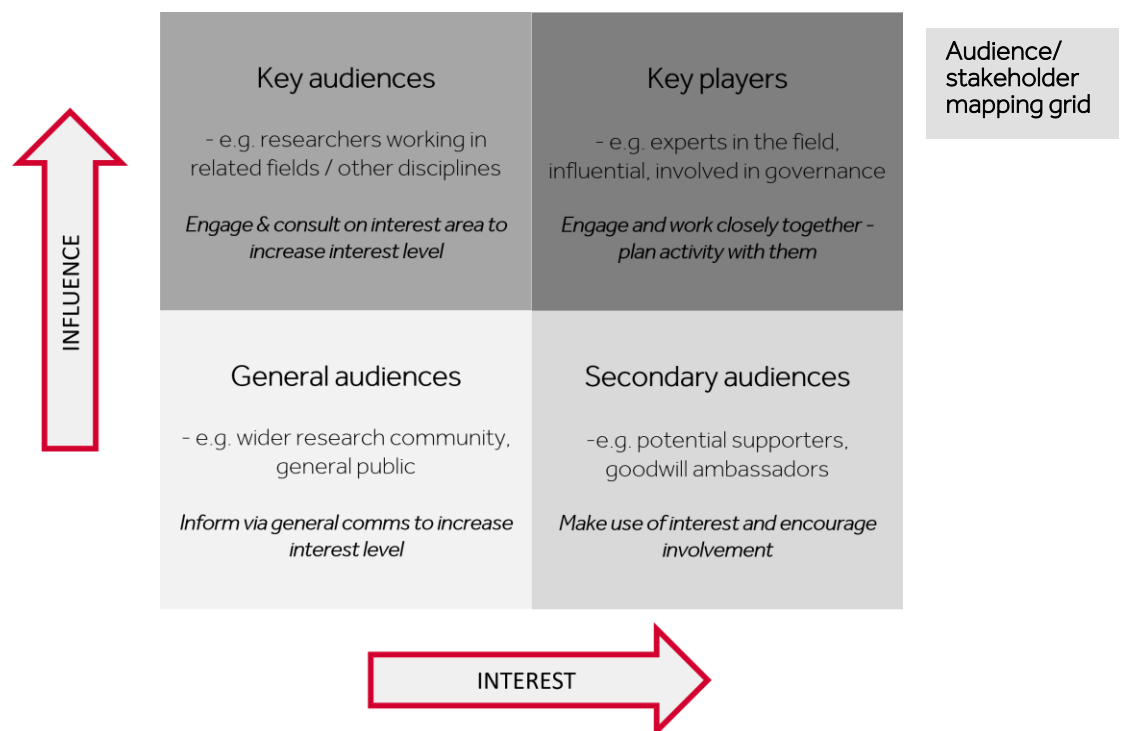
Audience/stakeholder mapping done well will help you:

- Prioritise who you want to engage with
- Prioritise resource
- Understand the needs of your target audience/stakeholders, tailor your messages in response and choose the most appropriate channels to get your messages across

Use the audience/stakeholder mapping grid to:

- Think carefully not just about who you want to reach but why - a simple list of audiences/stakeholders is meaningless
- Prioritise them according to their interest and influence relative to your comms objectives
- Review your audiences/stakeholders on an annual basis (at least)

Remember that audiences are not static. People/groups/organisations can move around the grid depending on circumstances – their levels of interest and influence can change.



3. Develop key messages

- Develop an elevator pitch – a top line statement describing your research – covering:
 - What's the problem?
 - What's your solution?
 - Why is it important?
 - What do you hope to achieve?
- Develop key messages for each of your priority audiences/stakeholders considering:
 - Who you are talking to
 - What you want to say to them
 - What you want them to do
- Your messages should be clear and concise, including a 'call to action'.
 - Use simple, accessible, active language and avoid jargon
 - Start with the most important information
 - Be creative and tell a story
 - Why is it important? Why should the audience care?

4. Choose the right channels

Think about how best to reach your target audiences. What communication channels will be most effective? Remember that to reach your audiences, you need to go to them.

Where you feel comfortable might not be where your audience is engaged. Consider:

- **Research engagement:** conferences, workshops, events, The Conversation
- **Website:** case studies, blogs, video, podcasts
- **Digital profile:** email footer, social media, staff profile
- **Public engagement:** public talks, festivals, outreach
- **Policy engagement:** policy briefs, submitting evidence, working groups

University channels

University channels can help support your comms activity but should not be your first choice/main activity because they have broad audiences and are not specifically targeted.

- University Press Office
- Connecting Research blog
- Social media
- Public lectures and University events

5. Plan your activities

Use the comms planner to bring together your audiences, messages and channels into an implementation plan with key dates and measures of success. The template is available to download.

Priority audience	Audience-specific communication objective	Message & call to action	Communication activities / channels	Timeframe	Key Performance Indicator(s)
EXAMPLE: Parliamentarians <i>e.g. All Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) in a specific interest area</i>	Engage/consult on specific interest area to increase awareness and interest	Use my evidence to support your argument for policy change	Invite relevant individual to speak at event	March 20XX	E.g. preferred speaker attends event
			Submit evidence to select committee	April 20XX	E.g. called as expert witness
			Develop policy brief	June 20XX	E.g. policy brief mentions
EXAMPLE: International researchers	Increase profile internationally to establish new collaboration/partnership	We are the experts, work with us	Attend/speak at international conference	March 20XX	E.g. speak at preferred conference
			Build digital profile and get involved in online discussions	April 20XX	E.g. online engagements

6. Evaluate, reflect and learn

Regularly monitor and evaluate the effectiveness of your communications activities to ensure you are meeting your objectives. See our guide 'Measuring and evaluating your communications activities' for more information.

- Set specific indicators for each activity and monitor success
- Use qualitative as well as quantitative measures
- Use analytics tools to monitor online engagement e.g. Altmetric
- Log invitations, comments, positive feedback
- Review your audience/stakeholder mapping once a year

Your plan is a living document that you can adapt and update. Review your activities regularly to ensure you are making the desired impact and getting the required results.

For more information, please contact: research@reading.ac.uk