

PART I
Focus on Strategic Planning

1. Planning for Communication Success

A Strategic Approach

Environmental organizations are in the business of encouraging change and don't need to be sold on the value of effective communication. But – as do all organizations seeking to alter attitudes and behaviours – those aiming to create action to protect the environment face an array of challenges. How to communicate issues that many people view as distant from their day-to-day concerns? How to give immediacy to issues that involve longer-term impacts? How to break through the sheer weight of information that people receive on a daily basis? And how to achieve lasting change given the constraint of limited resources, both human and financial?

Part of the answer lies in creating a strong strategic context for your communications – which is the focus of this handbook. A “strategic context” means, in part, that your communications function is fully integrated into your organization's fundamental planning processes so that consideration for how, when and to whom you are going to communicate – and why – is incorporated from the start, that is, as your programs are being developed.

How might this differ from your current approach? It might, for example, influence your research agenda so that you elect to focus on that aspect of the issue that has the broadest public interest or implications. It might mean simply that you ensure your reports are written from a layperson's rather than an academic's perspective to facilitate broader dissemination. It might mean that you don't engage in a

In 1993 the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) launched GreenCom¹, an Environmental Education and Communications Project. Its mission: “change human practices to improve the environment.” In developing their approach they recognized that effective environmental communications incorporate four different communication disciplines:

- ▶ **Social Marketing** – which applies traditional marketing techniques to encourage behaviour modification.
- ▶ **Public Education** – which focuses on creating knowledge of issues and offering suggestions for how to affect change.
- ▶ **Communication** – which draws on social marketing theories but which also encompasses media work.
- ▶ **Public Participation** – which engages citizens in the decision-making and solution-building processes.

new opportunity that – upon close examination – won't help you to move your fundamental goals forward as effectively as another approach. It also means that your communication plans are built on your fundamental goals and objectives, ensuring that your communication efforts are always in service of advancing your mission.

Strategic communication also incorporates an understanding of the cycle involved in taking an issue from the background to the foreground, from the back pages to the front pages, and of how public opinion is formed, although as is discussed below, there is no one simple formula. Finally, being strategic means giving full consideration to how communication – in *all* its forms – can help your organization to move the public agenda and public opinion in favour of the responses you seek on your issues. Here are two fundamental steps that you can undertake to move your communications forward.

Step One – Involve Your Organization

Building Your Communications Team

As a first step you may want to build a working group or communications team. Your staff, your board members and your volunteers – or, if you're involved in a collaborative effort, the coalition of groups you're working with on the issue – each have a unique perspective, as well as valuable expertise, resources and insights. So involve them in the planning process. The plans your organization develops will be immeasurably enriched if this is taken into account. The person who answers your phones, for example, might have the best insight into the kinds of public enquiries you receive; your program heads, the most comprehensive handle on the issue; your board members, a range of useful contacts. Draw on these assets. Depending on the issue at hand, you may also want to involve an outside strategist to facilitate meetings and to keep your planning work moving.

This communications working group will help you to develop a consistent approach and ensure that you have people in place to respond to opportunities to promote your issues and your organization. As this team works to promote your issues and programs, it will develop valuable skills and expertise. It will also build relationships with journalists and other members of the media that will serve your organization well over time.

Step Two – Recognize How Issues Gain Prominence

Understanding the Context for Public Opinion and Behaviour

Researchers of all stripes – from sociologists to corporate marketers – have long sought the answer to what influences people's behaviour. Naturally, a conclusive formula would greatly simplify the communication process; however, people cannot be that neatly explained. What we do know is that public opinion is influenced by a combination of factors, including media exposure and sources closer to home.

- 1. The media set the public agenda – and provide the frame.** Myriad studies over the past 30 years have found that the media set the public agenda. The prominence they give to certain issues affects our perception of the relative importance of those issues. In addition, by virtue of both what is and what isn't included in their stories, the media also affect *how* we think about the issues. (The jury, however, is still out on whether the media provides us with our actual opinion on the issues!)
- 2. There is a cycle through which issues move to prominence.** According to the authors of *Strategic Communications for Nonprofits*², tracking studies have shown that important issues typically move through a seven-stage cycle – starting small and moving in fairly predictable stages to prominence (and subsequently back to obscurity), with public opinion largely following the same pattern. Here's a closer look at the cycle they describe.

As might be anticipated, discussion of new issues typically begins within an industry – appearing on the pages of in-house publications, in industry speeches and papers and in other organizational forums. In stage two, issue coverage moves into the industry's nationally circulated professional journals, specialty or trade books, and commercial newsletters. Then, beat reporters that follow the trade publications pick up the scent and the issue begins to appear in various sections of the daily papers. As the issue begins to generate critical mass, editorial writers start to take up aspects of the issue. From there an issue will move to the front pages of the daily paper. Then the network news – which typically takes its cue from the front pages of the dailies – starts to provide coverage. Finally, once the issue has generated thorough coverage by a range

of influential media, the issue may enter pop culture – for example, showing up in TV movies, soap operas, feature films and other TV events.

3. While the media “set the agenda”, sources closer to home may have a greater influence on actual attitudes and opinions. Citing the “circles of communication effectiveness” model developed by Vince Breglio, a Republican research analyst and public opinion expert, the authors of *Strategic Communications for Nonprofits* also posit that while the media has a great deal of influence, people seek validation for their opinions closer to home³. According to Breglio’s model, people seek validation first from their nuclear and extended families, then from close friends and associates, and finally from those in positions of trust (e.g. clergy and doctors), prior to referencing the mass media. Breglio also differentiates among the media: he views newspapers, direct mail and the Internet as being more influential than radio, TV or cable.

4. There are four stages of engagement. An important strand of research – see the box on this page – posits that there are four stages to engagement. While this model remains key in describing the general progression from inaction to action, in their contribution to the *GreenCOM Handbook for International*

Practitioners, authors Martha Monroe, Brian Day and Mona Grier also point out that “research in the field of environmental education and in commercial marketing have shown that there is no cause–and–effect progression from knowledge to attitude to behaviour as educators have long believed.”^{5,6}

The Four Stages of Engagement⁴

One strand of research identifies four distinct stages to engagement – and posits that people *must* go through each of these stages before they’ll take action.

This means your messages must match where your target audience is currently “at” on your issue. There’s no point in bombarding them with information if they’re not yet paying attention, or in trying to persuade an audience to act when they have not yet taken a position.

As such, your communications campaign must aim to accelerate your audience through one or more of these stages:

Stage 1: Awareness (no engagement)

- ▶ People need a reason to care and to feel your issue is relevant to them.
- ▶ Your campaign introduces people to the issue and aims to put it on the public agenda.



What this means is that while there must be an impetus (awareness, knowledge and attitudes) for behaviour, organizations should also be prepared for the fact that Mary might be ready to act based on little knowledge (basic awareness) while John might not act even when faced with all of the facts.

Also in the GreenCom Handbook, in the chapter called “Thinking about Behavior”, authors Monroe and Orlando Hernandez make clear that the reasons for this are as complex as the actors (and the non-actors)⁷. Perhaps, for example, saving energy accords with Mary’s fundamental values (which might be concern for the environment or perhaps simply economic) so she is ready to act without full knowledge.

And maybe, because someone she trusts has mediated the biodiversity issue for her, she is ready to contribute to a campaign without fully understanding the concept. Meanwhile John might face barriers to action on a particular issue despite his knowledge – for example, he may feel he doesn’t have time to sort recyclables or might not understand the recycling rules.

Finally, as Monroe *et al.* point out – and this is key for any environmental campaign – research shows that people who take environmental action not only have a level of awareness about the issue, they have a clear understanding of *how* to affect change.⁸ All of these issues should inform your thinking as you develop the programs, communications and campaigns that will move the public to act on your issue.

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**Stage 2: Attentiveness
(low engagement)**

- ▶ People are ready to become informed – or more knowledgeable about your issue.
- ▶ Your campaign gets people to listen to and believe your information.

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**Stage 3: Judgment
(moderate engagement)**

- ▶ People must be persuaded to support your position on the issue.
- ▶ Your campaign speaks to their values and emotions.

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Stage 4: Action (high engagement)

- ▶ People must be motivated to act in support of your position.
- ▶ Your campaign motivates and supports political and/or consumer actions.

References:

¹ GreenCOM is the Environmental Education and Communication Project which was launched by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) in 1993 to govern its approach to communicating on environmental issues.

² Kathy Bonk, Henry Griggs, and Emily Tynes, *The Jossey Bass Guide to Strategic Communications for Nonprofits* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1999), 14-17.

³ Ibid, 13-14.

⁴ GreenCOM is the Environmental Education and Communication Project which was launched by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) in 1993 to govern its approach to communicating on environmental issues.

⁵ Hines, J.M., H.R. Hungerford and A.N. Tomera (1986-1987). "Analysis and synthesis of research on responsible environmental behaviour: A meta analysis." *The Journal of Environmental Education* (18) 2, 1-8.

⁶ Martha C. Monroe, Brian A. Day, and Mona Grieser, "GreenCOM Weaves Four Strands," in *Environmental Education & Communication for a Sustainable World: Handbook for International Practitioners*, eds. Brian A. Day and Martha C. Monroe, (Washington: Academy for Educational Development, 2000), 3.

⁷ Orlando Hernandez and Martha C. Monroe, "Thinking about Behavior" in *Environmental Education & Communication for a Sustainable World: Handbook for International Practitioners*, eds. Brian A. Day and Martha C. Monroe, (Washington: Academy for Educational Development, 2000), 7-15.

⁸ Ibid, 5