

Agency Roadmap: Building Strategic, Evidence-Based Communications Plans

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1. How does it work? Understanding your communications infrastructure

Is there a team in your institution dedicated to communications? What capabilities do they have? Consider staff, time, and budget.

What is the procedure for obtaining approval for a public-facing communications effort? Who is your point of contact?

How do your goals, timelines, and resources align with those of the communications team? How do they differ?

What concrete steps can you take to improve your understanding of your institution's communications, and build a long-term partnership?

- In 2 weeks?
- In 1 month?
- In 3 months?

What additional assistance do you need to reach your institution's communications and policy goals?

2. What are your communications goals? Identifying your vision of success

What are the evaluation findings or evidence-related stories you want to share in 2019?

You may consider:

- Government policy priorities, including evidence that led to their prioritization
- Facts and statistics that reveal the scope of a problem or the need to act
- Budget or resources committed to a cause
- Design or implementation plan of a new policy or program
- Opportunities for citizens to share feedback or get involved
- Updates on implementation, including evidence of progress
- Results of a program evaluation - either positive or negative

Why do you need to share the information? What are your goals?

These may include:

- Convey information to stakeholders
- Influence opinions or shape dialogue
- Mobilize supporters to take action
- Seek input from citizens or partners

What does success look like? What do you want your target audience to:

- Think?
- Feel?
- Do?

3. Who do you need to communicate with? Specifying target audiences and stakeholder groups

Who is your target audience for the evaluation findings? Think through targeted policy audiences in addition to key influencers on this issue – both potential champions and detractors of your approach. Who will support vs oppose you, and how much power do they have?

Your audience may include:

- The target population, or groups whose behavior needs to change
- Other stakeholders who will benefit from the change (the winners)
- Supporters and advocates of the change
- Leaders and implementers of the change
- Those who will be harmed by the change (the losers)
- Other stakeholders who will oppose the change

What are the priorities of your target audience? What will they find most convincing? What do they need to know?

Are these target audiences internal to your institution (e.g. leadership, civil servants, budget officers) or external (e.g. the media and other public influencers, a specific community or demographic, businesses or international partners)? How does that affect your strategy to engage with them?

What additional information do you need to collect about your target audiences?

4. What's the story? Creating compelling messages and engaging allies and message carriers

Make sure your message is clear and consistent – what are the top three talking points that should be stressed and repeated?

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Can you convey the message in a compelling way? Think about the essential elements of a story and how they relate to your message. Who / what is the:

- Hero:
- Villain:
- Problem or conflict:
- Mission and journey:
- Twist / element of surprise:
- Killer statistics or emotional anecdote:
- Resolution and what comes next:

What's new about this story, and how is it relevant and urgent to your target audience? Why should they care? Why should the media publish the story?

Who can help you tell your story and get the message out? For example, who are your best champions, spokespeople, and surrogates to reach out to the media or policymakers – including senior leaders, program participants, local or national allies, and high-profile political or community leaders who can effectively advocate or amplify your message?

Who can help you make your message credible, and how can you add their voices to yours?

5. How can you communicate with the right audience at the right time? Selecting tools and channels

Where do your target audiences and stakeholder groups get their information? Which channels do they find credible and easy to access and understand?

Examples include:

- Official policy memos, press releases, or information on your website
- Newspaper articles and blogs: written by you, other policymakers, or professional journalists
- Charts and graphs, or eye-catching infographics
- Radio or TV announcements and interviews
- Posters, fliers, billboards, and other physical products
- Mid-size or large events, such as town hall meetings, conferences, speeches, parades, or festivals
- Small events, such as meetings with key stakeholders
- Social media posts and online videos
- Digital tools such as mobile apps and SMS surveys

Consider the relevance of the communications tools and channels above, the timing, resources required, and pros and cons of each one, including their reach, depth, and credibility. Then use the matrix below to match your target audiences and stakeholder groups with the most appropriate tools and channels. For example, health professionals and providers may be best reached with articles in credible online health journals, such as *The Lancet* or PLOS.

Target audiences → Tools & approaches ↓			

What are some strategies and upcoming opportunities for your institution to communicate evidence using:

- Social media:
- A public event or presentation:
- A small meeting with stakeholders:
- Media that you create, such as a public newsletter, infographic, or radio or TV clip:
- Media that another organization creates about your work:

Tips for writing clear policy briefs:

- Length: focus on a single topic in 2-4 pages
- Audience: what are their priorities? What will they find most convincing? What do they need to know?
- Goal: what do you want the audience to think, feel, and do?
- Evidence: focus on relevance, credibility, utility, with a few memorable statistics
- Language: clear, compelling, and urgent, free of technical jargon
- Organization: executive summary, introduction to the problem, study or policy approach and results, policy implications and recommendations
- Format: use underlined or bold text to help your audience easily find the main points
- Title: include main point or recommendation, pique audience curiosity

For additional guidance, see: <https://www.idrc.ca/sites/default/files/idrcpolicybrieftoolkit.pdf>

Tips for making compelling oral presentations:

- Hook: urgent and compelling story or argument that captures audience attention
 - Introduction and purpose: include main message upfront; should be immediately clear to the intended audience what they should think, feel, and do
 - Content: no more than 2-3 main points with clear, simple language and a few memorable statistics or emotional anecdotes
 - If relevant, frame using storytelling elements: hero vs villain, conflict and mission, element of surprise, resolution, what comes next
 - Recommendations: should follow logically from content and ask audience to take a specific action
 - Delivery: speak loudly and clearly, maintain good posture and eye contact with audience, use simple visuals (props or slides) sparingly
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6. How will you know whether your communications efforts are successful? Measuring results

Strategic communications should be focused on results / outcomes, not activities / inputs. Revisit your vision of success – what you want your target audience to think, feel, and do. What are your intended results, and how will you know if you achieved them?

Think beyond the number of views on social media or clicks on a website. What indicators can tell you whether your messages got the specific audiences you desired, and influenced them to change their opinions or behavior?

How will you get feedback from your target audiences?

How will you know whether they, or others, are using your work to inform decisions and take action?

More Strategic Communications Planning Resources:

- Elements of a Strategic Communications Plan. http://fngovernance.org/resources_docs/Communication_Plan_Template1.pdf
- Caroline Cassidy and Louise Ball, “Communications monitoring, evaluating and learning toolkit.” ODI, January 2018. https://www.odi.org/sites/odi.org.uk/files/long-form-downloads/odi_rapid_mel_toolkit_201801.pdf
- Strategic Communications Plan Template. The Rasmuson Foundation and the SPIN Project, 2006. https://www.rasmuson.org/_attachments/SCptemplate_Oct_06_3-07.pdf

Exercise: Convincing Key Stakeholders with Oral Pitches

What do you do when a rigorous evaluation of a promising social program shows disappointing results? How can you clearly and honestly communicate the findings, and simultaneously highlight the program's positive attributes? Can you make the case for programmatic improvements, followed by another evaluation in the future?

What do you do when key stakeholders have outdated information that is causing them to misunderstand a problem or its solution? How can you most effectively bring new evidence to bear to change their minds? What combination of facts, emotions, and storytelling will be most convincing?

For each case study exercise think about the:

- **Audience:** what are their priorities? What will they find most convincing? What do they need to know?
- **Goal:** what do you want the audience to think, feel, and do?
- **Evidence:** killer stats or emotional anecdotes? Relevance, credibility, utility
- **Story:** hero vs villain, conflict and mission, element of surprise, resolution, what comes next
- **Language and Hook:** clear, compelling, urgent

Case #1: The Limits of Rural Electrification

Authors: Kenneth Lee, Edward Miguel, Catherine Wolfram

Published January 18, 2019 on <https://voxdev.org/topic/energy-environment/limits-rural-electrification>

[The Problem]

In sub-Saharan Africa nearly 600 million people – or 70% of the population – live without electricity. While access to energy is widely touted by African leaders and major international aid organizations as integral to reducing poverty in the region, there is little rigorous evidence on the impacts of investing in electricity infrastructure in rural areas. It was with this in mind that the International Growth Centre (IGC) began its project to examine the social and economic impacts of connecting rural communities in Kenya to the national electricity grid. [...]

[The Experiment]

Kenya has been making major progress in connecting public facilities, such as markets, schools and health clinics, to the national electricity grid – much of it driven by the Rural Electrification Agency (REA) which was established in 2007. However, while REA announced in 2014 that 89% of the country's public facilities had been electrified, the national household electrification rate was lagging far behind at 32%. We worked closely with REA to develop an experiment to

discover what happens when rural households are connected to the electrical grid for the first time. We identified 150 clusters of “under grid” households – households that were located close to but not connected to a grid – in Western Kenya. These clusters were then randomly divided into two groups. In the first group, we worked closely with REA to connect the households to the electrical grid for free or at various discounts. In the second group, no changes were made.

[The Results] Connected households no better than unconnected ones

After 18 months, we surveyed people from both groups and collected data on a range of economic and social outcomes identified before the study, including levels of household energy consumption, wealth, employment, health, education, and political awareness. [...] While one might expect to see some benefits, in our data we found that the households we connected to the electricity grid were, when assessed against these benchmarks, no better off than the households that remained unconnected. REA had spent more than \$1,000 to connect each household, but in this case there was no evidence that supplying households with access to electricity had any social or economic benefit.

[Why is this?]

We speculate that there may be various explanations for our findings. For example, connected households ended up consuming very low levels of electricity – less than \$2 worth per month – revealing that they were not buying electrical appliances such as refrigerators and televisions that may be needed for bigger social and economic benefits. This might also mean there is a bigger issue related to budget and credit constraints: i.e. household ability to pay for electricity and buy appliances. The reliability of the electricity could be another factor – 19% of transformers had at least one long-term blackout during the period of the study. It’s also possible that the long-term household impacts cannot be observed in a study only 18 months long.

Your goal: *explain the negative evaluation results, reiterate the importance of bringing electricity to rural households, and convince your Ministry of Finance to fund more research to resolve lingering questions.*

For you to consider: *who is your target audience, and what do you want them to think, feel, and do? As specifically as possible, what would success look like? What are the key messages, pieces of evidence, and storytelling elements you can use in your pitch to convince your audience and achieve your goal?*

Case #2: Disappointing Findings from No Lean Season

Adapted from Evidence Action, “No Lean Season: A Ticket Out of Seasonal Poverty,”
<https://www.evidenceaction.org/beta-no-lean-season#no-lean-season-evidence>

[The Problem]

Seasonality and seasonal income insecurity is a feature of poverty in many parts of the world. In agricultural regions of developing countries, it’s known as the lean season – that dangerous period between planting and harvesting when job opportunities are scarce and incomes

plummet. Food stocks dwindle and poor families regularly skip meals. Around 600 million people are affected by the lean season every year, which also has serious long-term consequences for pregnant women and young children.

Many people from poor rural areas migrate to urban areas for work to cope with seasonal deprivation, and send money back to rural areas to support their families. In Bangladesh, however, researchers observed that many vulnerable households didn't send anyone away to work, thereby risking hunger. Would these households improve their food security if they were to send a migrant to these areas during the lean season?

[The Experiment]

The NGO Evidence Action launched a pilot program called No Lean Season that gave workers a loan of about \$20, the cost of a round-trip bus ticket to nearby urban areas, where they could find job opportunities during the months before the harvest. It worked: they found jobs in the city, sent money home, returned for the harvest season, and even made the trip again in later years without another migration subsidy.

A randomized evaluation conducted in 2008 found that 36 percent of households in the comparison group reported at least one person migrating during the 2008 lean season. In households that received a migration loan, that number was 57 percent. The seasonal migration induced by this intervention increased household food and non-food expenditures by 30-35 percent, and an additional 550-700 calories consumed per person per day, relative to the comparison group. In another experiment conducted in 2014, offering loans again led to increased seasonal migration: households in 47 treatment villages (where 50 percent of the landless population received a loan) were 40 percentage points more likely to send a migrant than those in comparison villages. Households receiving a loan had incomes increase by an average of 19 percent during the lean season.

[The Results]

In 2017, the NGO Evidence Action and its partners delivered and rigorously tested a program, No Lean Season, which gave workers \$20 so they could migrate to urban areas where there are job opportunities during the months before the harvest. The program was delivered "at scale" for the first time, in about 700 villages in 2017, but the results were disappointing: a randomized controlled trial showed no effect on migration and therefore no effect on household consumption and income. However, Evidence Action believes that these results may have been caused by implementation issues that it has since resolved.

Your goal: *explain the study results to your program officer at GiveWell, the donor that funded No Lean Season, and convince her to support a second attempt of an "at scale" program and evaluation.*

For you to consider: *What are the key messages and storytelling elements you can use in your pitch to convince your donor? How can you complement the recent, negative evaluation results with other evidence?*

Case #3: The False Narrative of Teacher Absenteeism (Op-ed)

Author: Anurag Behar

Published April 27, 2017 at <https://www.livemint.com/Opinion/gf6BADNyaDO0gPullRfH1M/The-false-narrative-of-teacher-absenteeism.html>

[The Problem]

Almost all my columns in this newspaper are based on experiences involved with the work that the Azim Premji Foundation does in school education. [...] We are focused on the professional development of teachers, principals and other functionaries of the education system. [...] The past 16 years of these engagements have taught us a lot. Perhaps the most important learning has been that most government school teachers are committed to their work. In my assessment, their commitment is markedly more than that of the average employee of a business organization to their work. This reality of teachers is in sharp contrast to the popular narrative, which paints the average government school teacher as irresponsible and disengaged. At the core of this popular narrative is the notion of very high teacher absenteeism. Meaning that a large number of teachers just don't show up at work. People easily talk of absenteeism ranging from 25- 50%. This matter has such grip over the popular imagination that it is often talked of as the single biggest problem in Indian school education. Many of our policy-makers tend to believe in and feed this narrative, and use it to inform policy action.

[The Experiment]

With all our experience, across years, with hundreds of thousands of teachers, we have never seen absenteeism rates even close to the numbers that are often talked of. So, a few months ago we decided to conduct a field study to systematically assess the rate of teacher absenteeism. While there are nuances to the method, it basically involved going to schools unannounced on an average working day and noting down how many teachers were not in school and for what reason. The study involved 619 schools across six states, and is available on our website under the title Teacher Absenteeism Study.

[The Results]

The study observed a teacher absenteeism rate of 2.5%. This is similar to the conclusion of other research studies when looked at closely, with their observed absenteeism numbers not more than 5%. These numbers are clearly not even remotely close to the numbers in the popular narrative. [...] In our study, the overall percentage of teachers not in school was 18.5%. As mentioned before, 2.5% were playing truant, 7% were out of school on other official work, including attending training, and 9% were on bona-fide leave. [...]

The kernel that has been used to feed the frenzy of teacher absenteeism is the overall number of teachers out of school. Absence from schools for legitimate reasons has been conflated with absenteeism meaning rank truancy. This is done inadvertently and also deliberately. Fortunately in these post-truth days, filled with alternative facts, I don't need to attempt to explain how such a false notion can grip the popular imagination. This false narrative is deeply damaging to Indian education. It vilifies and demotivates teachers, who are the most important actors in education. It often leads to ineffectual policy actions, all about controlling and monitoring teachers, rather than enabling and supporting them. [...]

Your goal: explain the study results to leaders at the Ministry of Education, change their minds about the perceived problem of absenteeism, and win their support for programs that put more trust in teachers.

For you to consider: What are the key messages, pieces of evidence, and storytelling elements you can use in your pitch to change the minds of your audience? How will you know whether they changed their minds – what would success look like?

Case #4: More Effective Approach to War on Drugs?

Adapted from Maria Micaela Sviatschi, “Making a Narco: Childhood Exposure to Illegal Labor Markets and Criminal Life Paths.” http://papers.nber.org/conf_papers/f116096.pdf and <https://voxdev.org/topic/labour-markets-migration/making-narco-childhood-exposure-illegal-labour-markets-and-criminal-life-paths>

[The Problem]

In 1999, Colombia was the world’s largest cocaine producer. That same year, it implemented Plan Colombia, a military-based anti-drug enforcement intervention that involved the aerial spraying of coca crops. This intervention shifted coca leaf production to neighboring Peru, where production doubled in districts with the optimal ecological conditions. By 2012, Peru had become the largest producer of cocaine in the world.

Due to Colombia’s anti-drug policy, coca prices in Peru rose, causing parents in areas suitable for coca production to significantly increase their use of child labor to take advantage of more earning potential. Between 1997 and 2003, the 70% increase in coca prices in Peru led to a 30% increase in child labor in areas suitable for coca production. Peruvian children between the ages of six and 14 were more affected than older children, and the high earnings in the cocaine industry induced some to drop out of school. Next, the children who grew up in coca producing areas and experienced high coca prices during childhood were 30% more likely to be incarcerated during the ages of 18 to 30 than children who did not grow up in those areas. These results show how exposure to the cocaine industry can make children more likely to engage in criminal activities as adults, both because they have acquired skills specific to illegal activities like cocaine production, and because their lower formal education could decrease other employment prospects.

[The Intervention]

Around the same period of high coca prices, Peru introduced a conditional cash transfer (CCT) program, consisting of a monthly payment of about 30 US dollars, given to mothers as long as their children maintain 85% school attendance and complete vaccinations. The program targeted children between the ages of 6 and 14 and was not intended to reduce drug production. By 2014 about 1,400 districts — about 80% of the coca-growing districts in Peru — benefitted from the CCT program.

[The Results]

Coca-growing districts that received the program experienced a significant reduction in both coca production (by about 15%) and child labor, despite the high coca prices. The CCTs also mitigated the negative effects of high prices on schooling and incarceration, making children

more likely to be enrolled in grades 8 and 9, and less likely to be incarcerated as adults. In 2012, the CCT program cost about \$1.4 million to implement in each coca district (at about \$340 per household per year). Spending \$1.4 million on the CCT reduces coca production by about 100 hectares. Achieving the same impact through a coca crop eradication program would cost between \$2.5 and 3 million, according to research from 2015. Thus, programs that reduce parents' incentives to use child labor, such as cash transfers conditional on school enrollment, may be a more cost-effective way to reduce coca production than enforcement alone. Reducing children's exposure to criminal activities could also help keep them in school and out of jail later in life.

Your goal: *explain the study results to leaders in the UN Office on Drugs and Crime, change their minds about the cost-effectiveness of coca crop eradication, and advocate for programs that reduce incentives to engage in coca production in the first place.*

For you to consider: *What are the key messages, pieces of evidence, and storytelling elements you can use in your pitch to change the minds of your audience? How will you know whether they changed their minds – what would success look like?*