

Communications Guide

Produced by the BIA Communications Advisory Committee

This guide to communications has been produced for BIA members by the BIA Communications Advisory Committee (CAC). It draws on the collective expertise and professional know-how of CAC members, all of whom are senior communications professionals from our industry sector. Aimed primarily at SMEs and start-ups, the guide is not intended as a substitute for professional advice, nor is it a complete guide to communications: our aim is to introduce various communications concepts and show you how they can be applied to drive positive outcomes for your organisation. We also highlight some of the common pitfalls.

Why organisations communicate

Effective communications play a key role in helping an organisation's success. Whether the objective is fundraising from investors, attracting the best talent, developing an engaged workforce or expanding partnerships and collaborations with universities, an organisation must communicate about what it is doing in a compelling and an effective way. Understandably, some organisations can easily fall into the trap of communicating in an ad hoc and scattergun way, and so waste precious resources on communications activities that are ineffective. Equally, it is important to remember to be selective in what you communicate – not everything is newsworthy. Learn to focus on outcomes not outputs. For this reason, it is important for the leadership to take time to carefully think through what the organisation is trying to achieve, and plan a communications strategy that is aligned to those objectives.

Measuring success

Who are you trying to influence and why? What is the call to action from your communications? A communications plan should have, at its core, a deliverable and preferably measurable outcome. In the past, communicators measured success or return on investment by using quantitative measures such as “column inches” or “advertising value equivalent”. Both measures are now regarded as outdated. Current best practice is to measure outcomes such as an increase in enquiries, a change in opinion, or increased uptake of a service.

Vision and mission

More than an advertising strapline, strong vision and mission statements succinctly define and encapsulate the aspirations, goals and values of an organisation (the vision) and how the organisation plans to deliver that vision (the mission). Vision and mission statements are useful because they provide an essential focus for all communications – “this is who we are, and this is what we do”. Most companies publish their vision and mission statements and a quick internet search will give you ideas for how to develop your own.

Understanding your audiences

Once you have agreed your organisation's vision and mission, the next step is to define your audiences and the message for each. Ask yourselves, "Who do we want to reach and what do we want them to do, think or feel?" This step is critical, as it will give you a good indication of where to focus your communications efforts. For example, if your primary objective is to raise funds from private investors, then your communications should be targeted at this group through channels that will enable you to reach them. If on the other hand you have a planning application coming up, you may want to focus your effort persuading the local council and your neighbours to support you. Every organisation will have several audiences that it wants or indeed needs to influence. In the bioindustry these could include customers, employees, potential investors, shareholders, politicians, councils, grant giving bodies, regulators, collaborators, new talent, activists, payers, insurers. The list is potentially endless and will be unique to each organisation. It is important to note that once your communication is public, however it is targeted, it is likely to be seen by a wider audience.

Branding and corporate identity

Who are you? Your brand is what people think of when your name or product is mentioned. This is important in our sector. We tend to assume it's all about the science or market share. But brands have an intangible 'brand equity' too. The threatened sale of AstraZeneca provoked such a response in the non-science community because of it being a 'British' brand. Whether considering your corporate or product brands, ask why you/the product exists and why it is different to the market or competitors. It's not an easy thing to do but consider our sector – what differentiates one company from the other – disease focus, intent? Consider expert help.

Regarding identity – don't do it yourself. Unless you have a real talent for design, your own or 'crowd sourced' attempts will never match that of a professional designer. Think about your investors. Do they want a CEO who fiddles with the logo rather than looking at the strategy, growing the business and operational necessities? Reputation and appearance matters – invest in it.

Traditional media

When engaging with the media it is important to remember that a journalist is only interested in writing a story that will appeal to their readers, viewers or listeners and companies should be prepared to be realistic about likely coverage of news. This also means thinking carefully about the type of journalist being dealt with – general, business, trade, scientific – and tailoring the way you explain your company, science, products and plans appropriately.

Press releases should be written with the journalist's needs in mind. At its most basic this is often summarised as the Five W's (and one H): Who? What? Why? When? Where? and How? Beyond releases, media interviews and briefings should be used to add colour and provide background information.

Social media

Social media is a useful marketing tool to complement the more traditional channels. As always in our sector, the channel can be fraught with compliance issues so some care is required. The first thing to do with social is to identify which channels are most useful for your business.

Secondly, you need to have a decent content plan – which is a well thought through plan of regular things to post or to say. This is not necessarily just your corporate news. It's good to have a personality, get involved in conversations and support other people's posts.

Thirdly, once you've built up a good audience on a channel, it can be a great way of driving people to particular pieces of content on your website – if you have a new whitepaper or news article, you can publish the link on your network and see how effective the different channels are at driving traffic. Also remember that different social media channels have their own etiquette – be careful and consider how people might respond as per any conversation. If you're thinking of spending on social media, treat it like any other marketing or communications investment asking, what are my objectives, what's my return on investment etc? The key thing is to know your audience. Social media is just that – social. Who are you talking to?

Websites

A company's website is the first place people will look for information and should be the hub of its online presence. A website provides a showcase for the company and its capabilities to a range of audiences, including potential investors, partners and employees.

First impressions count, so while a website needs to be both informative and engaging, it also needs to be easy to navigate, well designed and have professional quality content. If possible, ask an independent contact/advisor to check the content to ensure it is easily understood from an outside the company perspective.

As mobile becomes an increasing part of web viewing, the website should be responsive for mobile friendly viewing.

A website does not need to be complex, but should develop as the company develops, with the content reflecting the business needs of the company at that time.

Policy engagement

Governments represent both threats and opportunities to organisations. By its policy announcements and initiatives, a Government can severely limit the scope of an organisation's ability as they may lack all the information when making decisions. Through targeted engagement programmes, and informed political monitoring, it is possible to impact the policy making process in a timely manner to provide your organisation with more opportunities than threats. In the life sciences industry it is important that companies engage early with regulatory bodies and payers to establish an acceptable plan for clinical development and ultimately product approval and reimbursement.

Employee engagement

From members of the senior management team, to scientists presenting at academic symposia, to the medical affairs teams working with key regulatory bodies, all employees represent the organisation. It is therefore important to ensure that all professionals understand the company's goals and key messages. Attracting and retaining a motivated workforce is critical to achieving milestones across business functions. Employees appreciate being involved and trusted with information, however they also need appropriate training and guidance to ensure that they understand the communication policies. Suggestions for employee engagement include regular "town hall" meetings, circulating press releases, working "lunch & learn" sessions, FAQ / key message documents and communication / social media policies (understanding the dos and don'ts). Other options include webcasting (e.g. financial results) and intranets. Typically, communications functions work closely with HR on employee engagement.

Speaker platforms and speeches

Speaker platforms and speeches at industry events are an opportunity to raise your visibility directly with your target audiences such as partners, investors or the media. These can take the format of company presentations, participation on panels, or a key note speech. The message and content should be appropriately pitched to the target audience and format (slides are not always the most appropriate).

Participation on panels can be a useful tool for positioning yourself as an expert in a subject matter linked to your field and can maximise the impact of attending events when combined with face-to-face meetings with key targets. It's important to ensure that the right spokespeople are attending the key scientific, partnering and investor events, depending on the stage of the company. There are lots of conferences out there and attending can be expensive, so be targeted in your selection.

Communicating with the general public

For many organisations in the public and private life sciences sector, the "general public" is a very often an important stakeholder. Public engagement can help inspire the next generation of scientists, generate support for a planning application or explain the benefits of scientific research to society. Indeed, "public engagement" is often a requirement of government funding; many universities and research institutes have employees dedicated to delivering communications and activities that both inspire and educate the wider public. Strategic planning of public engagement activities is key; to ensure it is aligned with the overall goals of the organisation.

Patient and family communications

One important group of stakeholders will be the potential product users: patients, families and caregivers. Patients and families often have a different set of questions to other stakeholders and it is worth developing specific communications materials, such as patient focused websites, Q&A sets and email alert forms. Ensure communications are clear and avoid using too much technical information or jargon

while being sensitive. Develop relationships with patient advocacy organisations, who will help disseminate information by hosting community focussed webinars and collating feedback directly from the community. Always ensure information provided to the community is public to avoid breaking any regulatory obligations. Develop internal Q&A responses to ensure you are prepared for difficult questions on topics such as compassionate use.

Outsource or in-house expertise?

In-house communications roles, when done correctly, encourage a strong element of collaboration with other key business functions (medical, regulatory, business development) which is beneficial as companies continue to grow and deliver on their strategic objectives. They can also do a lot of the heavy lifting for CEOs and CFOs. That said, not all small- / mid-cap companies can justify having full-time in-house communications expertise. By out-sourcing communications, agencies are continuously cultivating relationships with the media and other key stakeholder groups on your behalf. Agencies have industry-wide insight and can act as a helpful intermediary with the media in particular. Depending on the budget you have, there needs to be synergy with in-house expertise, agencies and other external advisory relationships.

Issues and Crisis

A crisis is not an emergency and, if handled well, a crisis can boost your reputation and brand. If handled badly it may destroy it.

Preparation is key. Have a crisis and reputation plan in place, maintain it and make sure individual roles are understood and scenarios are tested. It is important to have the right team, including a trained core team and your specialist advisors, as well as the right monitoring and evaluation tools in place to gauge impact of actions. Additionally, it is important to keep relationships with journalists, politicians, policymakers, regulators and other influencers warm, as they will then be more inclined to listen to you in a crisis. In case of a crisis, use your plan to make sure issues are triaged properly, responses are adequate, and, if needed senior and or specialist resources are unlocked quickly. But, do not cleave blindly to the plan. If the facts on the ground change the strategy may need to adapt, as inflexibility can rapidly make a crisis worse.

Useful sources and links

BIA CAC member PR agencies

- Citigate Dewe Rogerson (<http://www.citigatedewerogerson.com/>)
- Consilium Strategic Communications (<http://www.consilium-comms.com/>)
- FTI Consulting (<http://www.fticonsulting.com/>)
- Hume Brophy (<http://humbrophy.com/>)
- Instinctif Partners (<http://instinctif.com/>)

Chartered Institute of Public Relations (<https://www.cipr.co.uk/>)

Science Media Centre (<http://www.sciencemediacentre.org/>)

An independent press office helping to ensure that the public have access to the best scientific evidence and expertise through the news media when science hits the headlines.

Stempra (<http://stempra.org.uk/>)

Stempra is an informal network set up to bring together people working in science communication.

Understanding Animal Research

(<http://www.understandinganimalresearch.org.uk/>)

Aim to provide all you want to know about animal research, whether you are a concerned member of the public or have a special interest.

We are at the forefront of UK bioscience,
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