How to write a communications plan

1. Think about the context

Initially, it is important to understand the environment in which you are communicating. This will help you identify the risks and benefits, and help you think of relevant key messages.

Write down the internal and external factors that may affect the outcome of your communication. For example, if you are communicating research around a new dietary intervention, you might look at media/social media discussion around healthy eating; what government is doing in this space; whether there are imminent developments that may amplify or detract from your message; what other research organisations have said recently on this topic (there may be opportunities for collaboration); and any considerations within your own organisation.

Think about who might be affected. For example, if we publish findings that could be critical of government (our funders), we would need to take this into account and liaise with them to ensure there are no negative consequences in our rush to share information.

Sometimes you may find the SWOT framework helpful to think through your communication plan:

- **S**trengths
- **W**eaknesses
- **O**pportunities
- **T**hreats

Answer these questions:

- What is the background to this research?
- What are the key developments to be aware of?
- How does this research further the debate? What is the SO WHAT?
- Is timing important? What is coming up that might make people take notice of this?

2. Establish the purpose

Every communication activity has a strategic purpose. Establishing WHY you want to communicate something will help your communications to be more targeted and, ultimately, more effective.

Thinking about purpose means you identify the primary objectives and goals for the communication. Think carefully about what you are hoping to achieve.

When thinking about the purpose of this activity, make sure it is SMART:

Specific: Be clear about what you are planning to do, why it is important, and how you will do it

Measurable: How will you quantify success? e.g. page views, audience reached, answers to a survey

Achievable: Can you reach the target given time and resource constraints?

Realistic: Prevention research unfortunately seldom makes front-page news. Be realistic about what uptake this communication will have

Time-bound: Set a deadline for achieving the purpose

Examples of types of purpose:

When thinking about the purpose of your communication, you might choose one of these overarching themes.

- To change behaviour/ persuade someone to act
- To inform
- To engage/ find opportunities for collaboration
- To build the profile of you or your organisation
- To improve your impact metrics/boost your career.

Then think carefully about how communication can help your purpose, and how you will measure success.

3. Define the audience

Always put your audience first. Researchers often make the mistake of thinking about what findings they want to disseminate. Instead, the question should be: **What does the audience need to know?**

One piece of research may need to be communicated in several different ways, depending on the audience. The messages, language, communications tools and channels all need to be adjusted to the audience.

Ask yourself:

- What are the audience's beliefs, concerns and interests?
- Why do they need to know about this?
- What do you want them to do with this information?
- What is likely to convince them to act? What information do they need?
- Where are they likely to access this information? What is the best way to connect with them?
- How should you pitch the communication to influence them (in terms of language, medium etc)?
- How can you reach them? (Does your organisation have a database? Email lists? Press release or media article?)

Examples of potential audiences for prevention research communications:

- Policy makers (e.g. to incorporate research into policy)
- Politicians or other decision makers (e.g. to persuade them to act)
- Researchers (e.g. to collaborate, inform)
- Funders (e.g. to establish the value of their investment)
- Practitioners (e.g. to inform their practice)
- The public (e.g. to build your profile, encourage healthy behaviour)
- Businesses (e.g. food retailers – to make the case for healthier policies)
- The media (e.g. to build the organisation's profile; establish a researcher as a thought leader; disseminate newsworthy findings to a vast lay audience)

Stakeholder analysis template

To think about audience, you can conduct a simple stakeholder analysis using this template.

Audience	What are their needs and concerns?	What do you want them to do?	What do they need in order to act?	Communications objectives for this group	What are their channel preferences?

4. Develop key messages

The key messages are what you want to say in order to achieve your purpose with a certain audience. They are the **main things you want your audience to remember.**

Researchers sometimes make the mistake of thinking they need to communicate *everything,* as in an academic paper. You don't. Most audiences trust you as a researcher; they do not necessarily need to know your methods and results. They are interested in what your research means for them.

The key messages can usually be found the discussion or conclusion at the end of a journal article.

Key messages are:

- Succinct, memorable statements (usually 3; no more than 5 or 6)
- Prominent in whatever communication product you use
- Used consistently used by everyone involved in operationalising the communication plan

Tips for writing key messages:

- Keep them SIMPLE and SHORT (no more than 40 words each)
- Convey ONE IDEA only per key message
- Use active voice and plain English (even for advanced audiences, such as other researchers)
- Do not state the obvious
- Include what is surprising or memorable about your research
- Make them relevant for the audience – think about the implications of the research for them (even if this is not included in your report or journal article). If someone asked you, ‘This is really great research, but what should I *do*?’ – what would you say?
- Background material and evidence are still important and need to be included – but the key messages always come first. Remember, many people will only retain the first few lines/seconds of a communications product.

5. Decide communications tools and channels

Tools are the products.

There can be several different tools, each conveying the key messages in a different way, depending on the target audience.

Channels are the means which the tools are conveyed to the audience.

There may be several different channels for each tool.

Conveying the same messages using different tools and channels will enhance the impact of the communication.

Examples of tools:

- News story (for an example, see Prevention Centre News)
- Blog/opinion piece (either on your organisation's website, such as the Prevention Centre blog; in an industry blog such as Croakey, MJA's Insite+, The Mandarin; or the general media (the Conversation, Guardian, SMH/The Age, The Australian)
- Tweet/social media post
- Media release
- Fact sheet/evidence brief (see the Prevention Centre's Findings briefs)
- Video
- Podcast
- Webinar
- Poster or brochure
- Face-to-face meeting/ dialogue (speaking and listening is one of the most powerful ways of communicating)

Examples of channels:

- Website / intranet
- Email
- Electronic newsletter (EDM)
- Media
- Social media
- Face-to-face

Think about WHEN to release your communications tool – to align with the audience and purpose.

Case study – different tools/channels for different audiences

Background: A research group conducted a pilot study that used a novel mobile phone app to collect data on a hard to reach adolescent cohort in Western Sydney.

Audience and purpose: They wanted other researchers to know about the success of their method. They also wanted to feed back the data as a thank you to the adolescent participants and the youth advisory group.

Tools and channels:

We provided two levels of information for researchers: an in-depth report containing the full methods and data, published on the Prevention Centre website, and a summary news story pointing to the report, disseminated through our newsletter to more than 3,000 stakeholders with an interest in prevention.

For the young people, we produced an easy-to-read snapshot using visual imagery, published it on the website, and disseminated it via by email to members of the youth advisory group to share with their networks.

6. Be prepared

Spokespeople: Decide who is the 'face' of the communication? Who would take the call if a journalist rang? Usually this would be the lead researcher. Make sure they know the key messages and the aim of the communication – and that they are accessible and available to comment.

Partners: Who might be affected by your communication (study participants, collaborators, funders, partner institutions, university media unit, etc)? Make sure you alert them and obtain permissions if necessary. Consider co-branding requirements.

Collateral: Have necessary images, headshots, logos, bios, etc, to hand. It is sometimes a good idea to create a 'brand' - a visual key using a hero image to be used across all collateral and assets. Make sure the website is up to date and journal articles or reports are accessible.

7. Evaluate

To evaluate the success of your communications plan, ask:

- Whether the target audience received the communication
- How and when they received it
- Whether they understood it / whether it was useful to them
- How can you improve next time?

Evaluation template

Question	Examples of how to measure
Did the audience receive the communication?	Email open rate EDM metrics (reach and click through, geographic distribution) Attendees at an event Google analytics (unique visitors) Social media shares/likes
How and when did they receive it?	Google analytics (webpage unique visits vs timing of communication) Website traffic Media monitoring and distribution rates Social media
Did they understand/use it?	Reponses to call to action (e.g. number of event registrations, resource downloads) Survey Feedback Ask ‘friendlies’ for personal insights Comments on blogs/social media Media uptake/ requests for interviews and comments Changes to practice
How to improve? What did not work, and why?	Click rates on EDM or webpage Resource downloads Qualitative comments and feedback from audience

8. Further reading

NHMRC: Dissemination and communication

WHO strategic Framework for effective communications

Cochrane Public Health: Resources for Review Authors; Knowledge translation