Identifying and securing communications support and resource

Why do you need communications support?

Achieving impact through your research requires wide communications and engagement. It is important to factor this activity into your planning at an early stage.

Ideally you should include the time and costs involved in communications activity in your funding application. This is particularly important where communications are likely to be integral to the success of the research. This means identifying the additional skills you may need and the people who will be able to help you. It also means providing a broad estimate of any associated costs.

Typical research communications tasks include the following.

- Creating and managing a communications strategy or plan, managing interest in your research and keeping stakeholders up to date in the research process – for example, through updates on social media.

- Running engagement events that bring stakeholders together in the early stages of the work or which help to publicise the findings more widely later on.

- Writing accessible copy tailored to the needs of different audiences that communicates the aims of your research, its findings and implications – for example, policy briefings, press releases or online articles.

- Designing, producing and commissioning creative ways of communicating your findings – for example, through the use of infographics or film.

It can be difficult to plan your communications before you know your findings. However, it is all too easy for researchers to underestimate the potential for and value of wider communication, as well as the time and skills required to do this effectively.

There are many free tools and training courses on offer to help those communicating their research, but tapping into these can be prohibitively time-consuming. It may be better to find additional support.

Where to find communications support?

Depending on the type of research you are involved in and where you work, some of the following support options may be open to you.

UK universities

Have central marketing and communications teams and/or staff based within individual faculties or schools. Most institutions will have a central media office that can support researchers in working with journalists, normally where their research is newsworthy or high profile. Many also have central creative services teams who can produce films or design imagery for faculty staff where a budget is available. A few of the most research-intensive universities employ research communications staff who will be on the lookout for engaging or high-impact research stories to communicate more widely.

NHS communications staff

Tend to be largely focused on communications around service delivery and patient care. Trusts that are members of the Shelford Group are more likely to have communications staff with some capacity to support researchers in communicating their work, particularly where the research is seen to be of particular relevance to the trust's stakeholders, and/or where it might help to enhance the trust's reputation.

Research funders

Will sometimes support the communication of research that is particularly high profile or which links into their wider communications objectives. This may include issuing joint press releases or involving researchers in stakeholder events. For example, the Health Foundation has involved some of its funded researchers in webinars on patient safety, the role of context in improvement work and achieving value in health services.

Research partners (eg health charities, groups representing patients and/or the public)

May help to communicate the research where it helps them achieve their wider goals.

Many experienced freelancers (and some communications agencies)

Specialise in science or research communications and can be contracted directly to support your research. Do check first whether your employer imposes any restrictions on the use of external providers.

Grants

Are also available for researchers who plan to engage public audiences in their work.

You may need to keep research sponsors or funders, your employer or host organisation and research partners informed about your communications plans. If you are using external support, make sure the supplier is aware of this requirement.

Finding freelance or agency support

Where in-house communications staff do not have the capacity to help individual research teams, it is common for researchers to involve experienced communications freelancers or agencies. Many of these will charge by the hour or day for their services.

If you think this is likely to be the case for your research, you should include an estimate of the costs and the predicted benefits in your application for funding.

To find the most appropriate support, you'll need to be clear about the communications work involved so that you can identify people with the right skillset. The following networks might help you find people with experience in research communications.

1. **Communications, marketing or public engagement staff in your organisation:** ask if they know of reliable freelancers or agencies with relevant skills. University communications staff may also be a member of STEMPRA, a network of more than 250 science public relations (PR), communications and media professionals. Many members use this network to seek recommendations about freelancers or agencies.

2. **The National Co-ordinating Centre for Public Engagement:** runs a Public Engagement Network for people with an interest in engaging public audiences in research. It is open to anyone with an interest in the subject. Members interact through a JISCMail list.

More general online networks are also available, such as **People Per Hour** and **Upwork**, which link up freelancers with prospective clients.

If you are employing a freelancer or agency relatively unknown to you, it is a good idea to first take up references from former clients. Many will also provide a brief proposal with an estimate of costs and a summary of their experience and skills.

If you decide to engage their services, you can then ask for a signed letter of agreement or short contract outlining what they will deliver and the costs that will be incurred (fees, expenses, VAT etc). This should detail any additional commitments you require from them – for example, the key deadlines you need them to meet and/or a clause on the appropriate use of confidential information or data.