

Section

1

Setting communications objectives: a template

How to create a set of communications objectives you can measure

Communications objectives set the direction for all your research communications. They provide the means to achieve focus and impact. Therefore it is important to spend time at the outset making sure that you have the right objectives in place.

The following are principles for setting communications objectives.

* They should derive from your wider research project objectives, but are not the same thing. The key questions to ask when setting your objectives are:
  + Who do we need to engage or involve, to influence policy and/or practice?
  + What areas are the research findings likely to highlight?
  + Who will be interested in them?
  + How can our communications help us engage these audiences to make an impact?
* They should focus not just on outputs (eg how many stakeholder events you hold) but also on outcomes (eg any actions people took as a result of those events).
* They should focus your activity, so there shouldn’t be too many of them. Aim for five or less.
* The more specific and measurable you make them, the more focused and efficient your communications can be.

Be realistic about what communications can achieve. Below are some examples of what communications can help with in a research context.

* Establishing and growing networks and relationships with research users.
* Building commitment to and understanding of your research aims and encouraging others to be involved.
* Informing and influencing the development of policy, practice or service provision through insights and findings.
* Providing evidence for policy debates, contributing to understanding and refuting myths and misconceptions.
* Raising awareness, shifting attitudes and inspiring behaviour change.

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| **Which of your research objectives need communications input to succeed?** |
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Taking each one of these research objectives in turn, use the following prompt questions to help draft your communications objectives. You can record your communications objectives in the [communications strategy template](http://www.health.org.uk/sites/health/files/Developing-communications-strategy-template-dl.docx).

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| **Question to ask** | **Prompts for consideration** |
| Broadly, what will your communications need to do to deliver this objective? | * Secure commitment or promote participation? * Raise awareness? * Prompt action? * Impart knowledge? |
| Who do you think you will need to engage to achieve this objective? | * Who do you need to engage or involve, to get the messages out from the research findings? * What are the outcomes of the research likely to highlight? * Who might benefit from the research or be interested in the findings?   Even at this early stage, before you have identified or prioritised audiences, try to be as specific as possible. Avoid very broad categories like ‘the public’ or ‘health care professionals’. |
| What will you want that audience to do? | * Become aware: prompt knowledge, build understanding, gain recognition for. * Take action: join, visit, sign up to, attend, disseminate, accept, support. * Engage: create information exchange, change practice, influence behaviour or beliefs. |
| How will you know you have succeeded? | What indicators or data can show we have achieved the [above](http://www.health.org.uk/sites/health/files/Demonstrating%20impact%20through%20communications%20activity.pdf)? |
| What is the timeframe for your objectives? | When will we do this by? |

Example objectives:

1. We will build our online presence for the research by setting up a website or web page for the study by month/year.
2. We will raise awareness in audience A of our findings on the risk of XYZ, including the measures to mitigate this risk as evidenced by our research, between month/year (eg planned journal publication date) and month/year.

Remember: Developing objectives is an iterative process. At this stage you will be able to establish your objectives in broad terms.

As you work through the detail of your communications strategy it may be possible to be more specific about your audiences and the targets you wish to meet.

Expect your objectives to change as your research develops. Early on, the focus of your communications might be on building awareness of your research aims, but after you have announced your findings you might be more focused on building influence.