

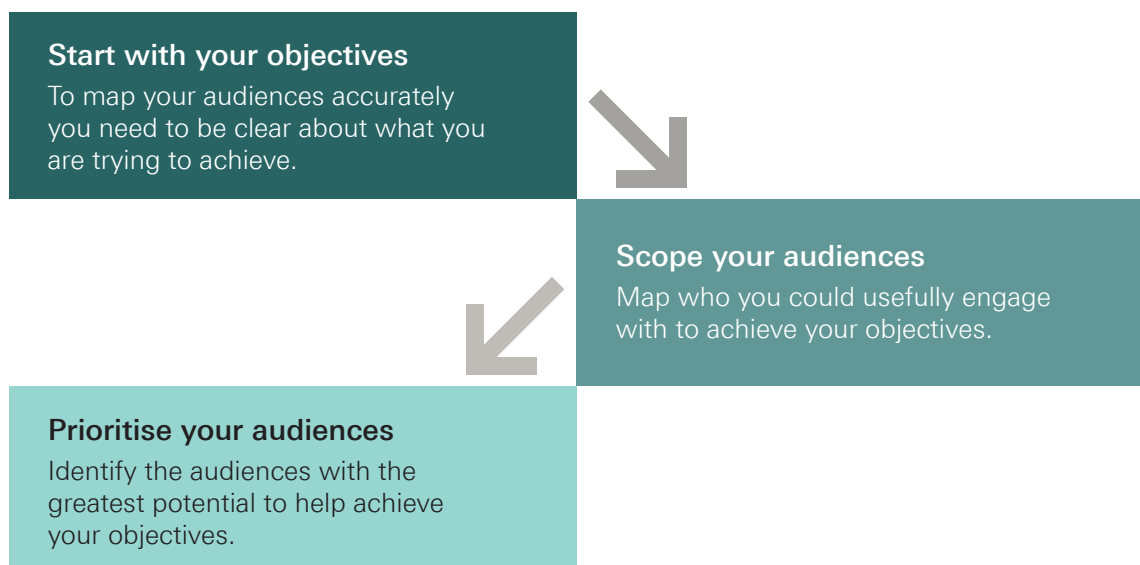
Identifying and prioritising audiences

Introduction

Knowing which audiences to focus on as a priority will make your communications approach more efficient and effective. Developing a clear view of who you are trying to communicate with and why, and tailoring your approach to their particular needs, interests and challenges, is a process. Investing time at the outset of your study to work through this process and reviewing those choices at key points during the study is central to a strategic communications approach.

Researchers can scope and prioritise audiences using a three-step tool. The process helps you identify the most relevant groups and individuals for your research communications: those that have both potentially high levels of interest in your research findings and the ability to use them in a way that informs debate, policy or practice.

The three steps to scope and prioritise your audience



1. Start with your objectives

Identifying your priority audience(s) starts with your **communications objectives**. However, these objectives may change throughout the course of a research study.

For example, at the beginning of your study you may wish to engage with audiences that can help shape your research and approach. Midway, there may be insights emerging that will impact on practice or policy audiences and you may wish to engage with them around the implications of those insights before your study has concluded. Once research is complete and findings are available, your audience focus may expand to include policymakers, practitioners or members of the public.

The task in this first step is to clarify the communications objectives against which you will scope and prioritise your audiences.

2. Map your audiences

The focused question for this part of the process is: who could we engage with to achieve our communications objective(s) and why?

The task is to set out all the groups that could potentially help to achieve your objectives (or act as a barrier to you achieving them). If possible, this brainstorming is best done as a group so that you are able to bring different ideas and perspectives to it.

A mapping tool

The following tables have been split into types of audiences and populated with some generic examples. It may be helpful to use this type of format to prompt lateral thinking and to record results. Please see **Tips for use** before starting the exercise.

Delivery	Peers and partners	Beneficiaries
Who must you engage with in order to ensure the communication of your research?	Who may wish to partner or help?	Who will benefit from your study?
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Patient groups.• Clinical leads in X.• Nursing staff in Y.• Research partners.• Funders.• University public affairs offices.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Charities.• Think tanks.• Research departments in other institutions.• Funders.• Royal colleges/ professional associations.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Patient groups.• Staff groups.• Clinical staff.• Executive boards.• Policymakers (local, regional, national).• Groups of the general public.

Detractors	Influencers	Power brokers
Who could act as a barrier to the successful communication of your study or be a significant detractor?	Who influences the agenda and thinking around this issue? Who do your other audiences respect and trust as a source of information?	Who has the decision-making power associated with your study's findings? Who can make the final decision around policy and practice changes?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Competitors for resource. • Patient groups. • Pressure groups • Charities. • Media – traditional # and social. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • NHS England/Wales/Scotland/Northern Ireland. • Royal colleges or similar. • Care Quality Commission/NHS Improvement. • Media, blogs (strictly 'channels' but can be important in own right). • Think tanks. • MPs/parliamentarians. • Well-known individuals. • Medical/patient charities. • Funders. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • NHS England/Wales/Scotland/Northern Ireland. • MPs. • Government departments. • Parliamentary groups (select committees, all-party parliamentary groups).

Tips for use

- Do not attempt to judge or prioritise any audiences. Simply record all ideas.
- Lateral thinking is good at this stage. The task is to record as many potentially relevant audiences as possible.
- Only use the category prompts in the tables if they feel helpful. You can adapt the categories if others feel more relevant to your study, or not segment them at all. Do whatever feels most helpful to you and your team when gathering ideas.
- It does not matter if the same audience appears in more than one category. In fact, this could be an early indication of their importance to your communications.
- Where possible, be specific (ie, try not to record 'the Department of Health', but the specific departments, regions, posts or even individuals that you could connect with). Never record categories like 'the public', 'patients', 'health care staff' or other large generic groups – this does not help to focus your communications. However, in the first instance, you may need to record broad audience categories that feel important and undertake further research to refine and focus them.

Output

At the end of this mapping process you will have a list of potential types of audiences you could engage with to achieve your communications objectives.

Next steps

- A useful exercise in early prioritisation is to look at your long list and ask the questions: *Why do we want to engage with this audience? How will they help us achieve our objective(s)?*
- If necessary, do more research to refine the audiences you have identified. If there are individuals you feel are absolutely key to engage with in order to effectively communicate your findings, then list them as an audience. The tighter the focus, the more efficient your communications can be.

3. Prioritise your audiences

After you have identified all of the audiences you could engage with, the next task is to prioritise the most vital ones. The fewer target audiences you have, the more focused your communications can be. The aim is to identify at least four, but no more than six, priority audiences.

A prioritisation tool

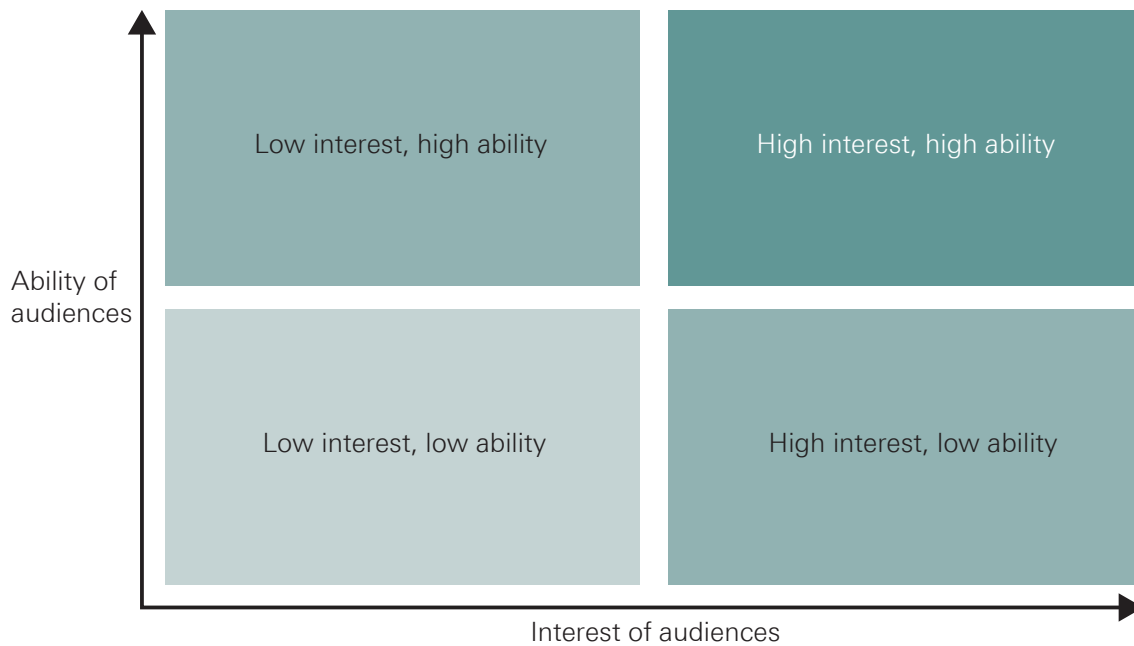
The interest–ability matrix in this section can help you prioritise your mapped audiences.

You may wish to do an initial instinctive trawl of the audiences identified in the mapping exercise. Lateral thinking is good but do you have any that you know, even at this stage, will not be a key audience for your research communications? If so, weed them out now.

Write the remaining potential audiences on sticky notes, one per note. Taking one at a time, place the audience on the matrix below in response to the following questions:

- What level of interest does this audience have, or potentially have, in the research that we are undertaking/our knowledge/our research insights?
- What level of ability does this audience have in helping us achieve our communications objectives?

Interest–ability matrix: interpreting the results



- All audiences that sit in the **top right** quadrant have high levels of interest in your research and they are in a good position to help you achieve your objectives (they make or influence the directly relevant policy, practice or behaviours). Strategically, these are going to be the most relevant audiences to target your communications at.
- All audiences that sit in the **bottom right** quadrant have a shared interest in your area of research but have little direct influence on, or ability to achieve, your objectives. In communications terms it might be appropriate to keep these audiences aware or broadly informed about your work (eg updates via Twitter or e-newsletters) but not concentrate resources on them.
- All audiences that sit in the **top left** quadrant have low levels of interest in what you are trying to achieve but potentially high influence on, or ability to achieve, your objectives. Key influential detractors could sit here too – they are not interested in seeing you achieve your objectives but may have a high ability to disrupt/prevent you from achieving them. Bear in mind that audiences in this quadrant may be important but will be harder to reach and require more communications resources to engage than those in the top right quadrant.
- All audiences that sit in the **bottom left** quadrant have low levels of interest in your objectives and low levels of ability to achieve or influence your objectives. In most instances, you can take these out of your communications plans.

Identifying your priorities

- The most easily engaged audiences will be those in the top right quadrant.
- In some circumstances, you may wish to target those in the top left (low (current) interest/high ability). But, be aware that it is likely to require more time and resources to engage these audiences.
- It is rare to prioritise any audiences in the bottom two quadrants, although you may decide to keep those in the bottom right-hand quadrant (high interest/low ability) informed of your study.
- Helpful questions to ask when doing this final prioritisation may include:
 - Who holds the key decision-making power around these findings?
 - Who will champion these findings above all others?
 - Who stands to benefit most from these insights?

Output

At the end of this prioritisation process you will have a list of four to six priority audiences for your study's communications.

Next steps

- Record those audiences in the [communications strategy template](#) and use this focus to guide decisions on channels, messages, etc.