A short guidance how to make the Communication and Visibility Plan operational

0. Introduction

Effective and impactful communication is not rocket science. It requires adjusting the language, communication tools and techniques to the targeted audiences and the context. It also requires a communication strategy – in our case a plan. But it would be very time-consuming and labour-intensive to create different messages and content for each specific target group. That is why a smart communicator tries to generate universal messages that appeal to and engage every type of audience and require only small modifications to adjust to a given target group. There is a number of techniques – or "tricks" in the professional communication sector that make the job of delivering required information and achieving desired impact a lot easier. Here are some of them.

1. What are smart messages

In order to reach and engage an audience, our communication must reflect their abilities, needs and expectations. A message that is too complex or confusing will be rejected by most. One that is too trivial or obvious will have the same fate. Therefore, any message that we produce must contain information that is useful or valuable to our audience and that can be understood and absorbed without too much effort.

THE "KISS" PRINCIPLE: **K**eep **I**t **S**hort and **S**imple – digital consumption of information has shortened attention spans and speed of consumption. Longer and complex messages will be rejected or not absorbed.

THE THREE C's PRINCIPLE (CCC): Your writing must be Clear, Concise and Conversational – avoid long, complicated words, try to express yourself succinctly, and do not use dry, technical language or jargon only because others do or it is easier to copy and paste somebody else's text rather than write your own. If you copy and paste, you also run the risk of repeating their mistakes.

THE MAGIC 30 SECONDS PRINCIPLE: Research shows that on average a typical consumer of information or content on a mobile phone spends about 30 seconds on an item before swiping to another screen. If we do not engage the reader or viewer within the "magic" 30 seconds, we have lost him and the rest of our text or message will be lost to that person. That is why the first 30 seconds decides the success of our ability to be a smart communicator. In practice, this means only two paragraphs, or 5-6 sentences. In fact, you have less than a hundred words to engage the reader with.

In the case of visual messages, particularly videos, the reality is even more cruel, and research shows that the first 6-8 seconds of viewing a video clip is crucial to engage a viewer.

The techniques below show how to achieve all three principles and become a smart communicator. They all draw on the communication "technology" developed by news journalism but are useful to any professional communicator.

2. News values and their application outside news

News journalism has developed criteria which decide whether a message becomes "news". There are many such criteria and many classifications. Not a single one works on its own, but they always work in combination. The simplest formula to follow can be reduced to the following three criteria:

CHANGE - IMPACT - PROXIMITY

CHANGE – news is about change. If nothing changes, there is no news, and the information is static or boring. “The prices have gone up”, or “the temperature has dropped” denote change. But on its own, this is not news.

IMPACT - if the change above has no impact on us or our community; or people we identify with, it is not news because it does not signify any change in OUR lives. So, if the change has impact on our lives, it is news. When can a lower temperature or higher prices have impact on our lives?

PROXIMITY – only when it is close enough to us to make a difference. A drop in temperature 1000s of kilometres away may have impact on global warming and ultimately on the whole world population, but so long as it is not close enough to us to make us dress warmer or stay at home, we tend to ignore it. So even if impact is there, but it is not immediate or close enough to us, we will not see it as that important.

The news becomes news when all these three criteria are at play. In other words, news is a function of these three criteria. Why is it of any use to a non-journalist? Because using the techniques of news journalism helps us to attract and engage our target audience by making our messages feel and look like news. But how to apply this knowledge in practice?

3. The concept of TOPLINE and how to use it in creating smart messages

In order for our SMART message to work, it is not only necessary to ensure that CHANGE, IMPACT and PROXIMITY criteria are met. The essence of our message, or the core ingredient of it should be expressible in just one full grammatical sentence. It is known as topline in journalistic jargon.

Imagine a typical press release from the police which runs several hundred words and starts with general description of police procedures until after several sentences we read:

“At 3.15 am on Thursday, constable J.Smith was alerted by a scream in XXXXXXX Street and proceeded to check what was going on. On arriving at the source of the noise, he saw a middle-aged man lying on the floor in a pool of blood. [….]”

The police press release may go on describing the scene and the circumstances until perhaps towards the end we learn that the man died and in all probability was killed with a hammer by his wife. Journalists will ignore what is predictable and procedural but will concentrate on what constitutes the news. They will start their story with the topline rather than repeat the structure of the press release. In other words, they will transform the press release into a piece a news which will likely start like this:

“The police have arrested a woman in the Fifth District after a body of a middle-aged man was found lying in a pool of blood in Gorky Street in the early morning hours of Thursday.”

The same principle can and should be applied in non-journalistic communication, even if there is no REAL news. We need to identify the most dynamic, interesting and relevant information in the message we want to communicate to make it sound and feel like a news story. If there is nothing happening, we still need to describe it using active verbs and showing change or that change is about to happen, or that it has happened recently.

Another technique to make our messages “newsy” is to use quotes from important or high-profile people, even if what they say may not be that new or ground-breaking. But because **people are always at the centre of news**, putting somebody’s opinion or statement at the top makes it feel as if something has happened because they are talking about it. Making concrete people the agents of your messages makes them a lot more newsy, so avoid writing in an impersonal way or using passive voice.

A given communication or message for the public should talk about a single issue or describe one "news" story. If it tries to cover two or more events, activities or processes, the consumer or target group will usually focus on one only and ignore the others, or simply get confused because they expect one story out of one message.

Building a message or a "news" item on numbers – for example on the number of participants at a training – is a bad habit and a bad strategy, unless these numbers are significant and make a news story. Otherwise, the audience will reject a story based on numbers because they expect change and impact – in other words, tension and drama. Predictable or repetitive statistics do not deliver these elements.

4. The Project website and smart messages

The website is both the repository of documents/record of the project and a publishing and dissemination platform. Therefore, it has both static and dynamic information. For example, the Project's one-pager (Project Information Summary) is a static document, while the Project's "news" based on toplines and smart message principles are dynamic elements. The website must be updated with dynamic elements regularly – at least once a week, otherwise readers will stop visiting it, if they do not find anything new on a repeat visit.

The reason why the weekly update is the optimum frequency, is because Western civilisation has conditioned people to measure their work-related existence in weekly intervals. If a project updates its website less frequently – for example once a month or fortnight, it will be seen as lazy or not dynamic, even it sometimes there will be 10 updates in one week and no updates for a month or two. This is because updating "on merit" that is when something genuinely happens will not be registered as such – visitors will not register peaks and troughs of activity over a longer period and balance it out (as this requires monitoring and evaluation tools and is a specialist job), but will simply expect something new on each visit.

5. Newsletter

The same frequency principle applies to Newsletters, which remain the main instrument of the Project despite decreasing usage of e-mail by the younger generation in favour of social media and messaging apps. E-mail is a recorded and filed means of communicating which is crucial in institutional exchange of information. The Newsletter must contain news and must be published weekly on the same day of the week at approximately the same time of day. Many communication specialists recommend Thursday afternoons, preferably by 3 or 4pm.

The Newsletter should not be a list or a summary in bullet points format, but should offer a narrative style, preferably using story-telling techniques, and be based on the topline in the first or second sentence. It should not be more than a single page long, which means a maximum of 300-350 words, preferably 200-250 but not less. A very short Newsletter will be seen as fickle and suggest that nothing goes on in the project.

Compiling a distribution list (or lists) for the Newsletter is a priority job and should be grouped by language, as the newsletter should be published in three languages of the Project – Kyrgyz, Russian and English. Experience in Kyrgyzstan shows that the most effective Newsletters are originally written in Russian and then translated into Kyrgyz and English. The distribution list should be divided into the three language groups – in the cases where the addressee is bilingual or represents other bodies speaking one of the other three languages, such addressee will be put in two or three distribution lists.

Each newsletter should be written “from scratch” – in other words, the technique of “copy and paste” – that is of copying excerpts from project reports or other documents – will destroy its purpose as jargon and technical language will repel the reader.

For weeks when not much is happening in the project, the Newsletter may preview (look ahead to) future events and activities, or sum up and analyse the ones that took place the preceding week. If there is nothing worthy of “news” in the preceding or forthcoming week, the Newsletter may refer to some opinion or commentary made by people involved or interacting with the Project.

The writing of each newsletter should not take more than an hour or so, as the one-pager already contains background (static) information which only requires a dynamic “head” or top part.

6. Writing the “News Story” and re-versioning

The initial input to a Newsletter should be a 50-80 word “news story” which is constructed on the basis of the properly formulated TOPLINE (a single “newsy” sentence) and constitutes an input both for updating the website and for expanding into the Newsletter. This short news story is also the input for constructing social media messaging which may be textual – derived from the news story – or “translated” into images, videos or posts and tweets.

This initial short piece of text becomes an input into all other versions used in the Project communication – the Newsletter, website news, social media posts, and other products. This means that there is no need to produce separately items from scratch for each medium and platform, but instead the “news story” is the initial product from which all various formats and outputs are derived and re-versioned according to needs.

7. Press releases

Special care and attention must be paid to constructing press releases which require separate treatment. A press release is the interface with both the media and official institutions and agencies and requires a lot of careful editing before dissemination/publication. Needless to say, all press releases must be approved by the EU before publication, so need to be prepared well in advance of a given event or activity. It is a common mistake to issue a single press release for a given event or activity, while in many cases, one needs to issue up to 4 versions of the press release to achieve desired impact. They can all be created at the same time for approval but published at different dates and times. Here is how:

a. A “curtain raiser” (advance) press release: depending on the day of the week, a story making media outlets and other actors aware of the forthcoming event. Some of them will enter the event in their news planning diaries (if they have one, and Kyrgyz media and institutions are well known not to run them properly or not at all) while some will not, but such a press release creates a trace in the institutional memory, so when the next version comes, they will be more likely to understand it better or absorb its content. Such a press release is usually published 4-5 days before the event.
b. A “preview” press release published and disseminated the day before the event but written in grammatical formulations as if it is already happening (to make it easier for media outlets to use them without too much re-writing). Given that media outlets usually dedicate inexperienced staff to “process” press releases, a “newsy” press release is more likely to be picked up and turned into a news item by the media outlet than a dry and boring one.

c. The press release on the morning of the event, to target morning shifts in newsrooms, if they either missed or ignored the preview press release. In most cases, this release only requires the change of tense to show that the event is actually taking place.
d. Post-event press release: if there is no real news to include from the event (such as an important statement, or an achievement of sorts), the only change required will be to say that it has taken place or has been completed. This is meant to target those media outlets which are either slow or for focus on things that have happened.

Creating and publishing all versions requires minimal extra effort as it involves very few modifications in each of them and the publication is a matter of pressing a button because of the distribution lists system, while it ensures maximum impact.

There are many resources online showing how to construct and write press-releases, what layout or design to use and what elements a professional press release must contain, so this information is not included here.

8. Follow-up phone calls

Despite a lot of communication going online and digital, nothing has changed when it comes to the personal touch in pushing information which is still very effectively delivered by personal phone calls. Editors and officials should not be pestered all the time with calls following up press release publication, but there is nothing wrong with phoning them up after the preview press release to encourage them to pick up on our story and send a reporter to our event if this is in the interest of the Project. The same goes for follow up phone calls to officials to invite them to or alert them about events or activities relevant to their institutions. It has the added effect of developing informal relationships and contacts for the future.

9. The contact book

Developing a list of contacts not only with contact details such as phone number or e-mail address, but with profiles and a record of past engagements is an essential prerequisite to effective work as a communication specialist. This book needs to be constantly updated and expanded throughout the lifetime of the Project, and judiciously shared with the consortium members.

10. Social media

A consortium-wide decision needs to be made about the choice of platforms on which the Project will operate. A current standard approach is to use Facebook, Instagram and Twitter with an increasing number of projects recognising the value of Telegram and similar platforms including Russian language ones which are popular in Kyrgyzstan. There is no reason why the Project should not run quite a number of pages, groups and accounts on social media given the strategy of producing one initial and basic news story (up to 80 words long) which is then re-versioned appropriately for each platform.

11. Using multimedia in communication

The practice of mechanical addition of photographs to textual messages is obsolete and no longer works in digital space. Instead, multimedia need to be either integrated into the story, or the textual message should be converted into multimedia. Visuals and audio should NOT repeat the text, but either tell the story and replace elements of the text or complement it.