

Top Do's and Don'ts in Communicating Nature Conservation

These lists were prepared by Wendy Goldstein for the IUCN CEC website (1998 to 2006). They spell out the top do's and don'ts in communicating nature conservation, as principles of good practice. See related items by Frits Hesselink.

Top Ten Do's

1. Analyse the issue at hand thoroughly before developing a plan

Find answers to the following questions (within constraints of planning & budget):

- What is the character and extent of the issue?
- What are the causes of the issue? Try to distinguish technical from human factors.
- What are the targets of the policy?
- What are the possible solutions?

2. Identify the role of communication in an early stage

In many cases this role is regarded after plans are made reducing the potential benefits of communication greatly. Even though often communication alone can not solve the problem, it can be a supporting instrument in most situations when integrated in the strategy during initial planning.

3. Know the target groups and stakeholders

Effective communication requires knowledge of the parties involved. Find out who the target groups and stakeholders are and study their knowledge, attitude, behaviour and interests in the issue at hand. Experience shows that if you don't know the ones you want to reach, chances are high that communication will fail to have the desired effects.

4. Define communication targets

Targets should make clear which results one wants to achieve. It is essential that communication targets are SMART:

Specific,
Measurable,
Acceptable,
Realistic and
Time related.

Communication targets can range from involvement in problem solving, to attention, knowledge, awareness, motivation, behaviour and skills. In most cases, communication will be used in combination with other instruments to achieve the desired results.

5. Identify partners and intermediaries

In many cases it is costly, complex and time consuming to communicate directly with the target group, especially when a large audience has to be reached and when many different target groups are involved. Communication in co-operation with partner organisations and through intermediaries can have the following advantages:

- It can be more economical.
- Intermediaries/partners can have data bases with addresses and figures of the target group so they can be reached effectively.
- Intermediaries can have support from a large audience or can have grass root support.
- Intermediaries can have a reliable, solid image for the target group and authority based on expertise.

6. Always pre-test

Ensure that the target group understands the messages and detect unexpected interpretations of your message by pre testing it. If there is no time, personnel or budget available for a pre-test, conduct at least a 'disaster-check': confronting a small number of people who were not involved in the development of the communication plan with the draft mean and message. For instance, acquaintances, your wife, your neighbours or employees. This procedure is called a disaster check because experience shows that when people are involved in developing a communication mean and message, they sometimes are 'blind' for unexpected effects

7. Evaluate results

Evaluation is aimed at assessing the effects of your communication efforts. Furthermore, evaluation can also be aimed at judging the processes during the preparation and execution phase. By evaluating it becomes clear which methods are most effective and most efficient. Furthermore, you learn how you can organise and manage the communication process more effectively in the future. Justification of communication efforts for the leaders of your organisation and its' stakeholders is another reason to evaluate. The results of an evaluation will point out which future steps are necessary.

8. Define the medium for the message

Since each medium has its own advantages and disadvantages, one should define which medium can most effectively relay messages. For example, the Internet may reach a worldwide audience and therefore may seem to be the perfect medium to reach audience around the world, but the Internet penetration in some countries is low. People who do not have access to the Internet will not be able to receive the message. TV has a higher number of household penetration, but most TV broadcasts are local; in this case, TV may be a good medium to reach a wide range of audience within a country, but not worldwide. (Point made by Oratip Nimkannon from Bangkok, Thailand.)

9. Establish a budget

Almost everything takes money or staff or support resources.

10. Think creatively

It's a sad truth that while conservation is important, it isn't always interesting. Communicators need to add sparkle dust to bring issues alive.

(Points 9 and 10 made by Pam Beddard from Bristol, UK)

Top Don'ts

1. Don't only send, listen!

When the changing of knowledge, attitudes and behaviour is the aim of communication, the 'sending' of messages is often the main concern of the communicators. In most cases, listening to the people involved is more important than the sending of messages. One must know the perceptions, beliefs and attitudes of the target groups, the language they use and the way they can be reached. This implies that a great deal of listening is an integral part of effective communication.

2. Don't jump to means

A potential pitfall - which happens frequently - is starting to invest in means before essential questions concerning the strategy have been answered. When this happens, it is very likely that communication efforts will not be effective: there is a high risk that either the wrong people are addressed with the right message or the right people are reached with the wrong message.

3. But don't over focus on strategy either

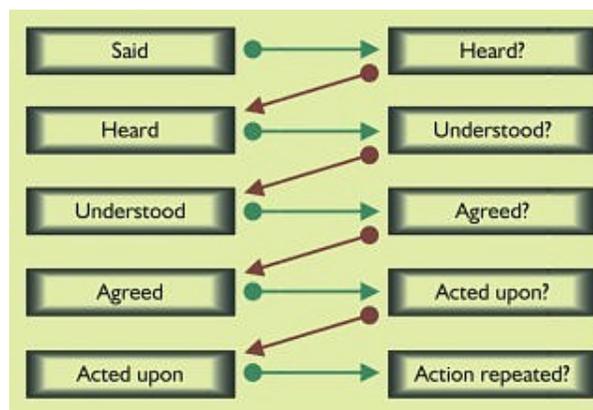
Another potential pitfall is opposite of the above: to spend much energy and time on developing a communication strategy, then quickly producing the communication means. This can result in a sound strategy implemented with means which do not appeal or lack the necessary quality to be credible for the target group.

4. Do not disregard communication barriers

Communication seems easy, but experience shows it is actually hard to communicate effectively. Often, ambitions of communication are not met. Even worse, communication can have negative side effects when used in the wrong way.

Why does communication seem so easy? Probably because humans communicate constantly. It is our second nature. But often the person or organisation that communicates does not realise how the message will be interpreted by the people for whom it is meant.

Even worse, the message often does not even reach the people concerned. There are many potential obstacles in the communication process. Taking these obstacles in consideration beforehand, increases the effectiveness of communication. The following barriers should be considered when one wants to communicate:



- Said is not necessarily heard
- Heard is not necessarily understood
- Understood is not necessarily agreed upon
- Agreed is not necessarily acted upon
- Action is not necessarily repeated

5. Do not overestimate the potential of communication

Research has shown that the way people perceive situations and problems, strongly depends on their perspective, values and previous experiences. It is also clear that it is often very difficult to change peoples perception and that it can be a long term process. It is more effective to regard other points of view as valuable instead of 'untrue'. Communicators should realise that in some situations the changing of perceptions is unrealistic or may have negative side effects. If this is the case, the perception of the people involved should be regarded as 'reality'.

6. Do not underestimate the potential of communication

It is impossible to 'not communicate'. If for instance a new industrial plant is installed without communication with people living in the area, the message they will get might be: 'we are ignored, they don't value our opinions, they just do as they like'.

A strong and potentially damaging message, possibly resulting in an angry mob tearing down the construction. Excellent plans with potential benefit for all involved have failed because of 'bad' communication. So get a clear picture in an early planning stage of the potential role of communication and make it an integral part of your activities.