

BEST PRACTICES IN STAKEHOLDER COMMUNICATIONS

INTRODUCTION

The specialized field of stakeholder communications is becoming increasingly relevant as organizations struggle for relevance and mind share among their information-overloaded audiences.

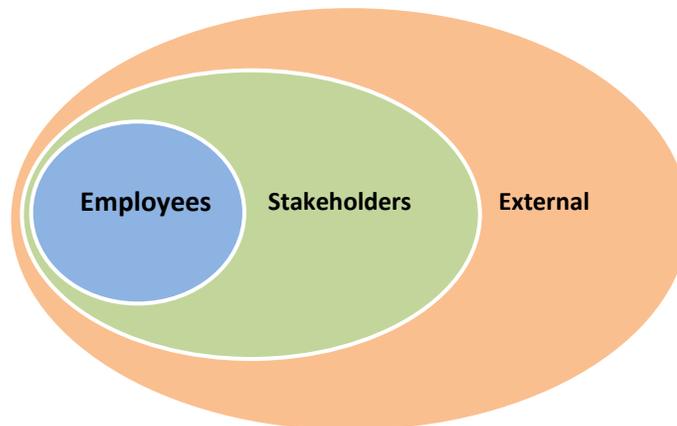
The simple truth is that not all audiences are created equal. Some audiences have a vested interest, or “stake” in your organization. Each stakeholder relationship is unique in its form and substance. This relationship sets the stage for the stakeholder communication with that group.

Designing deliberate stakeholder communication approaches that align with organizational objectives is vital. A strategic approach that is rooted in understanding the nature and importance of the stakeholder relationship is what elevates a communications program from being ordinary, to being truly transformative at a corporate level.

Thinking about stakeholder communication as a particular form of outreach with specific imperatives is pivotal not only for setting up effective relationships with these organizations, but also in considering how the stakeholders communicate with external audiences.

This systems approach to communications recognizes that audiences are not static, homogenous segments as communicators may wish them to be. On the contrary, audiences exist in a dynamic, messy environment in which individuals and organizations may in fact be in different audience groups at various times and will communicate within and among each other in an organic fashion.

Effective external communications rests on a sophisticated understanding of the inter-relationship between audience groups and how these patterns can be leveraged to advantage.



PRINCIPLES

The following principles set up the parameters for planning effective stakeholder communications.

Set yourself up for success. Effective stakeholder communications rests on high quality research and consultation input. Before charting a path for communicating with a stakeholder, take the time to understand the organization fully. Gain valuable insights by researching the organization, exploring its sector, charting its circle of influence and potential criticism. Consult with your internal clients and advisors to gain perspectives on the stakeholder's priorities, challenges and opportunities. This discipline of systematically gathering insight and evidence will pay enormous dividends in setting you up to craft targeted stakeholder communications approaches, tools and messages.

It's about relationships. Fundamentally, working with stakeholders is about building, cultivating, nurturing and fixing relationships. The rapport you have with the stakeholder is a two-way street – your organization may have its priorities and pain points, but remember that so too does the stakeholder organization. To be successful, a communicator should consider creative solutions for creating win-win opportunities with the stakeholder organization.

Focus on people, not structures. Your organization's relationships with stakeholders are ultimately based on interpersonal relationships between individuals. Consider the structure of the stakeholder organization, and the nature of the relationship that exists at various levels, such as the working teams, executives and Boards of Directors. Don't make the fatal mistake of constructing your stakeholder as a monolithic structure – like your organization; theirs also has various centres of influence, power and authority.

Be realistic. Work at maintaining an objective stance with respect to your organization's existing perception and perceived importance on behalf of the stakeholder. Too often, communicators over estimate the level of interest a stakeholder group may have in their issue or organization. Being brutally realistic about how your organization fares in the stakeholder's "attention economy" will serve you well. In particular, resist the temptation to believe that a stakeholder will want to circulate your material among their organization or membership. The harsh reality is that their posture will be rooted in asking "What's in it for me?"

Stakeholders talk to each other. Keep in mind that the stakeholder environment is fluid and in constant motion. Stakeholders deal with each other and with external audiences on a daily basis. This underscores the importance of authenticity, trust and transparency. Your organization, however powerful, does not control the spontaneous interactions between stakeholders which occur up, down and across those organizations day-to-day.



BEST PRACTICES

#1: Clarify the organizational importance of each stakeholder.

Approach stakeholder communications activities from the fundamental premise that communications is a support function. We don't communicate for the sake of communicating, but rather to advance our organization's objectives. Before embarking on communications planning, take stock of your company's perspective on the importance of each stakeholder. At a corporate level, what makes them important? What, specifically, is your organization looking to achieve with this stakeholder? Gaining that insight and validating the strategic alignment internally will be instrumental to your communications success.

#2: Apply "outside-in" thinking.

Before crafting stakeholder communications strategies or activities, it is useful to consider the concept of "outside-in" thinking. Put aside your own organization's pressures and priorities and focus exclusively on understanding the stakeholder. Identify the stakeholder group's main challenges, pain points, opportunities and imperatives. What makes them tick? What keeps their executives up at night? What do they want from you? This external perspective will pay dividends in helping you craft communications approaches that are truly relevant and resonant for stakeholders.

#3: Think about communication dynamics.

Consider that audience groups have dynamic relationships between each other and with external audiences over which you have no control. Think creatively about whether there is opportunity for your organization in this chaos – are there opportunities for leverage? Partnership? Synergy? At minimum, take the time to ensure that your organization is not exposed to undue risk in communicating different messages to different stakeholder groups. In the immediacy of today's information age, that antiquated practice could prove deadly to your organization's credibility and reputation.

#4: Develop a stakeholder map.

A stakeholder map can be a powerful tool to help plan effective stakeholder communications. A stakeholder map is a visual sketch of how various stakeholders interact with your organization, among each other and with external audience segments. Consider developing a stakeholder map as an internal alignment and strategic planning exercise among your colleagues – you can gain tremendous insights about the stakeholders and will have an opportunity to identify any internal disconnects or conflicts with respect to the perceived importance or relationship with or among stakeholder groups.

#5: One size does not fit all.

Keep in mind that stakeholder groups are all different and therefore require a customized approach to communication and engagement. Consider their characteristics such as size, geography, culture, funding, political context, structure and leadership so that you are engineering communications activities in a way that is deliberately intended to work with that particular organization.

#6: Focus on engagement.

Successful stakeholder communication is about meaningful engagement and dialogue. The traditional uni-directional "spray and pray" techniques of sending material passively to stakeholder groups are not only ineffective, they are potentially dangerous to the integrity and credibility of your brand. Seek out opportunities to engage, co-create and collaborate where possible.



#7: Consider circles of influence.

It can be useful to think in terms of circles of influence among and between stakeholder groups. Who is influencing the stakeholder group you're working with? Why? What motivates them? Charting circles of influence can help yield avenues for potential strategic direction, or in identifying potential areas of risk exposure.

#8: Measure relationships.

Ultimately, the measure of success of stakeholder communications is measured in the quality of relationships¹. Work with your internal experts to help define the nature of the relationship you are seeking with each stakeholder. Identify indicators of success for the stakeholder relationship – this may entail attributes such as support, buy-in to a joint project, third party endorsement or financing. Remember to consider absence as an indicator of success – the absence of negative feedback or public criticism may be the ultimate objective.

For more information on how these best practices can be leveraged to meet your organization's communications objectives, please contact Ingenium Communications at info@ingeniumcommunications.com or 613.729.1721.

Ingenium Communications produces a suite of products, including a collection of best practices, a white paper series and useful tools that help enhance your organization's communications activities. To access this suite of products visit www.ingeniumcommunications.com.

¹ For an excellent resource on measuring relationships, consult KD Paine's "[Measuring the Value of Public Relationships](#)"

