Communications and Messaging

What we mean by Communications and Messaging:

Communications and messaging refers to the way in which information is presented, interpreted, and understood. While communications broadly means the act of conveying information, messaging refers specifically to the customization of information for particular audiences. Communications and messaging is one of the key factors in "getting the right information to the right people at the right time" that is critical to knowledge management (KM) and learning.

Why it matters:

Communications and messaging support KM and learning efforts in a number of ways. First and foremost, the outreach process helps to engage the right people with the best, most relevant information to facilitate their full participation. Oftentimes, this lays out the vision and goals so that all stakeholders can come to the work with similar expectations. Communications and messaging elevates the sharing of ideas and information in a way that maximizes stakeholder contributions and furthers project goals.

How it works:

Communications and messaging plans and products are only as good as the programmatic vision on which they are based. For this reason, the first step in developing a communications strategy involves having larger project strategic goals and objectives already in place – communications efforts are more effective when they are tied to clear strategic direction. Using this vision as a reference point, a communications strategy may include (but should not be limited to) the following components:

- Communications Objectives
- Key Messages
- Audiences
- Channels
- Products and Activities
- Implementation Plan
- Monitoring and Evaluation
- Roles, Responsibilities, and Budget

What it looks like:

Following USAID's Office of Microenterprise and Private Enterprise Promotion's (MPEP) Evidence Summit on "From Microfinance to Inclusive Market Development," the Office wanted to align its communication to reflect a renewed emphasis on the inclusive market development approach. This transition affected the long-standing Breakfast and After Hours Seminar Series, which had become familiar to many regular participants and the Office needed to update its messaging to reflect its renewed approach. The new "MPEP Seminar Series: Exploring the Frontiers of Inclusive Market Development" was successfully launched in March 2013, and was rolled out through a communications strategy that reflected the Office's new strategic objectives and took the audience needs and expectations into account. Through careful planning and the articulation of new messages, the Series transitioned seamlessly and not only maintained, but grew its core participants.

Once the communications strategy is clear and agreed upon by key stakeholders, implementation begins with careful attention to feedback and closely monitoring how messages are being received by the target audiences. Communications and messaging should evolve as the work evolves. However, too many changes to the core message will confuse participants and they will disengage. Try to stay on message while making necessary adjustments.

Too often, the value of strong communications and messaging are underestimated or considered as an afterthought, however they should be seen as central to a KM and learning approach since the basis of this work implies knowledge capture/curation/translation and sharing.

Learn More:

Communications Planning Session Tips

Creative thinking is imperative to developing a communications strategy. Use sticky notes, markers, flip chart paper, and other tools to help the team brainstorm individually and collaboratively. It also helps to have a communications team, or even one person who can serve as a communications specialist, facilitate the process. During the communications strategy brainstorming session, a generalist with communications expertise can draw the proper information from people while still seeing the big picture and connecting the dots.

Message Development Tips

When articulating key messages, remember to stick to deep, simple messages. Make your message accessible and able to inspire, educate, and reinforce. A good way to achieve this is through storytelling, whereby real world situations and motivations can be examined and then translated into appropriate messaging. Key messages should be developed with the audience in mind. Effective methods for testing messages and engaging target audiences include activities such as focus groups, questionnaires, and online discussions. However, crafting key messages and identifying audiences will likely be an iterative process as new stakeholders become involved over time, feedback is integrated, and priorities shift.

Tips for Operationalizing the Plan

While a brainstorming session can help to create team buy-in and generate many key messages and audiences, the next phase is to turn this into actionable steps. Identify products and channels that best meet your communications objectives. Communications products are the embodiment of the key messages developed during the strategy process, such as newsletters, email campaigns, promotional collateral, or web content development. A communications strategy should pinpoint the most effective and accessible channels, both online and offline, such as media, webinars, partner networks, social media, or events. Last but not least, monitoring and evaluation indicators can guide the development of and set benchmarks for a communications and messaging implementation plan, allowing the team to define success and to know when to recalibrate.