

DEVELOPING INNOVATIVE CAMPAIGNS TO ENHANCE PUBLIC AWARENESS OF GOVERNMENT INITIATIVES



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Revision date: February, 2009
Pages: 4

HOW GOVERNMENT COMMUNICATION IS USED

Government communications help to market government products, services, policies and programs. It is usually aimed at a wider population and intended to influence the public's attitudes and behaviours.

Government communications are most often used for the following purposes:

- To inform the public of significant events or policy or program changes.
- To inform the public about their rights, responsibilities or other benefits.
- To influence community attitudes.
- To influence behavior and seek a response.
- To sell a product or service.

Having worked on many different government campaigns from educating the public about greenhouse gas emission to issues management for the health department, there are some lessons attached to this specialist area.

SOME LESSONS LEARNT

Lesson one is that it works. There is growing evidence that government campaigns do change behaviours. Take for example, the massive trends in smoking cessation or seat belt use. However, there are some caveats:

- Public education tends to work slowly.
- Not all behaviors are equally responsive to public education efforts – teenage drinking versus cancer screening.
- Attractive offers are easier to promote – taking up citizenship versus taking up costly private health insurance.

Like any marketing program, government programs should be based on the principle of exchange theory, that is, mutual benefit with all parties having some gain in the transaction.

Lesson two is strategic multi-faceted programs work best – because they reach everyone at some point somewhere. They can include:

- Media publicity
- Public Service Announcements
- Advertising
- Direct mail
- Brochures
- Displays
- Free telephone information lines
- Websites
- Directive communicating
- Retail point of sale
- Community information points
- Speeches
- Newsletters
- Word of mouth
- Spokespeople

There are a myriad of tactics that can be used, depending on your particular campaign needs.

Lesson three is that the general public is not a valid definition for government campaigns. This is for a number of reasons. Different types of people have different communication needs. We need to segment the diverse general population into more homogenous audiences and then tailor "educational" efforts to meet each audience's unique needs. It is also important not to forget influencers and opinion leaders as well as those people or organisations that can act as information conduits.

Lesson four is that motivation and behaviour change are not easy to achieve. Education occurs when clear (simple) messages are repeated often. Motivation occurs when perceived benefits clearly outweigh perceived costs. Behaviour change is more likely to occur with education, motivation and the ability or skills of the audience to undertake the desired change.

UNIQUENESS OF GOVERNMENT COMMUNICATIONS

Government communications is a unique public relations area.

You need to have a good understanding of the government policy environment and any issues surrounding it, for instance, what the Opposition thinks or lobby groups who have alternative viewpoints. There needs to be sensitivity to spending government funds, with glitzy and high cost productions being avoided. There is an obligation to use public money cost effectively. You need to ensure that everyone has equal access to receiving government communications.

THE SPECIAL CHALLENGES OF PUBLIC SECTOR COMMUNICATIONS

Compared to consumer goods or business communications, government communications tend to either have extreme levels of high or low involvement; they also offer less tangible, less immediate and less personal benefits and often deal with more sensitive issues that have an element of public controversy.

Available resources for government communications need to be spread across a wide range of program areas. Current demographic trends indicate a widening gap between young and old, creating larger disparities between their interests, attitudes, behaviors and needs. With the ageing of the population and baby boomers now retiring, government communications are needed for many public health areas.

UTILISING MARKET RESEARCH

Developmental research is a critical component of the development of any government information campaign. It allows for the needs of the target groups to be assessed and can assist in the identification of appropriate strategies to effectively communicate with the target audience.

Developmental research is often exploratory in nature, with the prime objective being to establish current knowledge, attitudes and behaviors of the group or groups to be targeted by the intervention.

There are four main research needs in developing government campaigns. They are:

1. Campaign needs analysis and strategy development

- Qualitative assessment of existing perceptions.
- Quantitative study of the extent to which views and attitudes are held.
- Establishment of the initial phase of the benchmark survey to be used to track changes in attitudes and beliefs over time.

2. Communication and strategy testing
 - Qualitative testing of alternative communication strategies.
 - Qualitative assessment of creative concepts and communication tools by pre-testing amongst representative target groups.
3. During campaign activity
 - Awareness testing to assess campaign reach and impact.
 - Tracking studies (based on benchmark survey), particularly where television is used.
 - Random sampling to ensure communication has reached target.
4. Post campaign assessment
 - Qualitative survey of views held immediately following campaign conclusion.
 - Report and assessment of successes and failures of campaign in reaching stated objectives.
 - Qualitative assessment of the long term effects of the campaign – 6 or 12 months later.

While it is good practice that all information activities are evaluated, smaller activities may not require benchmark and tracking research.

PREPARING A STRATEGIC PLAN

A plan provides a roadmap with milestones to guide you along the way. A public sector communications model features the following elements:

1. Public communications programs are designed to respond to the needs, wants and perceptions of the audience.
2. The objective of programs is to promote understanding attitude or behavior change amongst audience members.
3. Research is used to segment and profile target audiences and to identify appropriate distribution and promotional channels.
4. Formative research is used to develop and test creative concepts.
5. Strategies are developed and implemented specifically to meet the perceived needs of the target audiences.

Developing innovative campaigns to enhance government initiatives

6. Ideally, products are delivered through distribution channels identified in the audience research.
7. Programs are promoted through media and organisational channels identified in audience research.
8. There is meaningful tracking of program implementation through process evaluation.
9. Audience response is documented through impact or outcome evaluation.
10. Evaluation data is used to modify and improve the program.

The following ten steps need to be undertaken to produce a strategic plan. They are defining, developing or implementing the following:

1. The overall goal.
2. The background to the problem or opportunity.
3. Target market/audience.
4. Research.
5. Communications objectives.
6. Strategies and key messages.
7. Activities to be implemented. This phase includes the launch of the campaign, the development and distribution of campaign publications, the placement of advertisements in the media and the implementation of public relations activities.
8. Timetable.
9. Budget.
10. Evaluation.

EVALUATION

Evaluation is critical and should be built into the plan of action and timetable. It should be an ongoing process e.g. review meetings formal evaluation at the end of the campaign.

Internal evaluation can include:

- Accurate campaign objectives.
- Appropriate budget allocation.
- Cost-effectiveness.
- Quality standards.

External evaluation can include:

- Change of awareness and understanding of target audiences.
- Media content analysis.
- Stakeholder feedback.
- Success of individual events/activities .

KEYS TO SUCCESS

In successful Government campaigns of magnitude, the following features stand out as key imperatives

when communicating to multiple community audiences:

- **Keep it simple:** The ability of the community to absorb detailed reasoning is limited, given the surrounding "noise" in their lives. Although complex discussions can be presented to information service providers and commentators, communications in the wider sense must be simple. Testing of materials before distribution is therefore critical.
- **Branding is essential:** Where appropriate, brand and immediately identify the communications as a Government benefit people enjoy. Communications must reflect the message and branding.
- **Continual reinforcement of messages:** Complex messages need to be regularly reinforced to the target audiences through multiple vehicles to cut through the "noise".
- **Communicate via trusted sources:** While the mass media influence the opinions of consumers; it is also important that the messages are provided to them by the community sources, which they most trust. This could be family, friends or work colleagues. The audiences will be more accepting of information about an issue at the point where decisions about it are uppermost in their minds, eg. for medicines at the doctor's surgery and at the pharmacy. Although advertising would help raise the issues within the community, face to face reinforcement would be needed at "point of sale" (pharmacies and surgeries) when decisions are being made about the use of medicines.
- **Comprehensive coverage, at grassroots:** While advertising will raise awareness levels, it is the questions asked and discussed at a grassroots level that change behaviour. Education must concentrate on awareness building in people's neighbourhoods, conducted through credible community members.
- **Create "self enlightened interests":** To ensure success for all parties this requires an understanding of both government and social objectives and an ability to make these objectives complementary.

About The Reputation Group

The Reputation Group is a boutique public relations agency based in Melbourne, Australia. We are a strategic communications and public relations consultancy with particular expertise in brand and reputation building, marketing communications and corporate responsibility and sustainability. We are passionate professionals, offering the one-to-one service of a boutique agency with deep experience gained working with major corporations, industry associations, government, and not-for-profits. We strive to provide clients with the highest level of service backed by total accountability and value for money.

If you would like us to help translate your communication challenges into opportunities to enhance your organisation's reputation, our contact details are below.

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