

BEST PRACTICES IN COMMUNICATIONS PROJECT MANAGEMENT

INTRODUCTION

Project management is the discipline of planning, organizing and managing resources to bring about the successful completion of specific project goals and objectives. It is typically focused on managing and optimizing the variables of time, quality and budget.

Fundamentally, strong project management is based on solid communications skills. It is the project manager's responsibility to effectively communicate project goals, objectives, roles and responsibilities to his or her project team and ensure that all key players understand the process and desired outcomes of the project.

Strategic communications projects such as strategies or media relations campaigns tend to be deceptively complex. They can involve upwards of a hundred input resources such as articles, publications, benchmark organizations to be assessed, dozens of key informant interviews, consultative workshops, as well as internal review and approval processes. Strong project management is vital to keep a communications project on budget, on time, and on target.

PRINCIPLES

Strong communications project management is based on the following core principles:

Communicate often. A simple project management framework is invaluable in guiding the communications product development process. In particular, it is extremely effective in contributing to positive internal client relationships. Often, internal clients of the communications function feel that a communications project takes place in a black hole – ironically, often the communicator communicates rarely, if ever, about the project, its progress and its promise. Communicate often to all internal parties who may contribute to the overall success of your project.

Don't underestimate internal critics. Project management alleviates that common symptom of internal disconnect related to communications and helps cultivate strong buy-in to the communications planning process and ultimately the end product, be a strategy or an annual report. That engagement is not only important in terms of internal client satisfaction, it is critical to the future success of the project's implementation, which will likely require significant commitment by internal parties such as the CEO, front-line staff or key functional groups.

Stick to the plan. The sequencing of steps in the project plan is important, and should be respected. The plan follows a logical flow of activities, from the original scoping of the project, to conducting research and analysis, to engaging in consultations, validating direction and drafting and revising the final products.

Resource appropriately. When developing your project management plan ensure that the appropriate resources (financial and human) are allocated to each task. Drawing on the strengths of your team will ensure that your project is delivered on time, on budget and on target.



BEST PRACTICES

#1: Define scope, objectives and deliverables.

Before embarking on any project, you must first understand the objectives, the boundaries of the work to be completed and the definition of the end product.

The easiest way to ensure that you develop a strong communications project management structure is to invest the time up-front by gathering all the key stakeholders in a kick-off meeting to define the fundamentals.

A strong kick-off takes very little time or effort, and yet can generate very powerful benefits to the strategic planning process and to the quality of the end product. This meeting will help drive organizational alignment behind the communications project by ensuring that all relevant internal parties are clear on the project's focus, goals, timelines and intended outcomes, while also fostering internal engagement.

#2: Plan diligently.

The project plan is the essential guide for managing the various moving parts associated with a communications strategy. It can be built with the raw inputs obtained as part of the kick-off consultation.

Be meticulous about defining each activity – delegating the appropriate resource to leverage strengths and experience. Collaborate with all members of your team to set milestones, and to ensure that everyone understands the requirements of each phase. The plan can help identify issues, such as gaps in resourcing, or scheduling challenges. Get agreement and sign-off from all key stakeholders.

#3: Over-communicating is a myth.

Highly-defined project plans are useless unless they've been effectively communicated to the team. Communicate often with your team and ensure that every member of your team understands his/her roles and responsibilities. Create an environment that lends itself to cross-communication – your team should feel comfortable raising issues/concerns with you. Furthermore, communicate all successes with your team to provide support and encouragement and maintain momentum.

#4: Track and report progress.

Develop a rigorous process of tracking and reporting the project's actual progress against the planned progress. Bi-weekly or weekly project updates – depending on the scope and length of the project – can be very useful to help facilitate the effective management and integration of the Project Plan.

Project updates should be used for strategic communications projects that span more than a month. This simple tool will provide internal partners and clients with a quick snapshot of achievements, next steps and issues requiring attention.

This is extremely valuable in facilitating ongoing communication about the project's progress and creating a formal reporting mechanism to document any issues or gaps.



#5: Assess impact and risk.

Too often, once a project is delivered and implemented, it is forgotten, in favour of the new issues and challenges at hand. Strong project management and sound strategic planning principles dictate, however, that a project or product should be evaluated and assessed after its implementation.

Working through a simple assessment tool can be a very powerful source of ideas and insight that add value to the organization. It is particularly effective when it is used as a focal point for a de-brief meeting among a project team.

Integrating the assessment as part of the project management framework helps ensure that this final step gets the attention and time commitment it deserves.

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.

