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<td><strong>Author(s)</strong></td>
<td>Bhaskaran Nair</td>
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Approaches To Communication Planning

By

Bhaskaran Nair
There are several useful definitions on communication planning. The definitions differ according to perspectives:

(a) an overall or catch all perspective. This definition tends to ignore the unique situations in each country. For instance, "Communication policies are sets of principles and norms established to guide the behavior of communication systems. Their orientation is fundamental and long-range, although they may have operational implications of short-range significance. They are shaped in the context of society's general approach to communication. Emanating from political ideologies, the social and economic conditions of the country and the values on which they are based, they strive to relate these to the real needs and prospective opportunities in communication." (UNESCO, 1972)

(b) the national planning perspective.

"By communication planning ... we mean the preparation of range and short-range plans (i.e. strategic and operational) for the efficient and equitable use of communication resources, and for the realization of communication policies, in the context of a particular society's goals, means and priorities, and subject to its prevailing forms of social and political organization," (Hancock, 1977)

(c) Institutional planning perspective.

"I would define communication planning at institutional levels as ... the process of allocating communication
resources to achieve organizational goals, where communication resources include not only mass media and interpersonal forms of communication, but also forms of organizational action designed to change levels of information or skill among individuals or groups within the organization's task environment. This process involves the creation of action by the application of theory (or images) to data." (Middleton, 1978)
Approaches to Communication Planning

Factors before Implementation

Basically, at any of the three levels the following factors must be considered before the communication planner can contribute to the effectiveness and successful implementation of the policies.

First, the communication planner must identify how communication works in society, in his country, or in the institution depending on what perspective he has embarked upon. He has to, for instance, see how his target audience communicate, how the social units interrelate, how important traditional (and therefore affective) relationships are, how information flows and how issues are relayed and resolved.

Second, he must identify how societal, national and institutional policies are planned and implemented. For instance, at a national level, policy planning is usually divided according to government ministries and departments. By following the accepted demarcation of policy planning, the communication planner is taking into consideration how the political leaders view policy formulation. For instance, information dissemination varies from country to country - it could be part of the dissemination of culture (ie Ministry of Culture), or part of the Information Ministry, or it may be part of the President's Prime Minister's Office.

Third, the communication planner, according to the problem area he is addressing, will apply the communication resources that he has identified with the policies being formulated. By having communication process and policy formulation in tandem, the communicator is making an effective contribution, at least theoretically, to development. There are constraints that tend to influence or hinder communication planning. Communication planners must bear the constraints, discussed later, in his mind when matching resources with policies and plans.
However, theoretically, the approaches to communication planning can be viewed as in Table 1 which is a Basic Communication-oriented Planning Matrix.
Applying the Communication Planning Matrix

The matrix is an attempt to focus on the activities involved in communications planning. The factors within the matrix are elaborated below, focusing only on communications.

Consider the vertical axis

(1) Research - Communication Resources:

The planner should develop a data base on all the communication resources available to him. His research should include identifying communication resources and its target group. He should gather a body of information on mass media, interpersonal media, verbal communication, and other channels, and the relative appropriateness and impact of communication resource on their respective target audiences.

(2) Planning - Communication Resources:

The communication planner should work out strategies and operational plans to match resource with target audiences. A less-literate, non-English speaking, low income group cannot be reached effectively by newspapers. The interpersonal methods of communication aimed at the grassroots would be more appropriate. Such issues should be considered at the operational planning stage.

(3) Decision Making - Communication Resources:

The decision makers, often political personages, would review the plans submitted based on their political acumen. They may modify the communication planner's suggestions and submissions. Over a period of time, an effective communication planner would be incorporating political perception before planning the utilization of the communication resources. In the final analysis, decisions
will be taken to apply communication resources that will ensure maximum impact and minimum adverse repercussions especially in politically sensitive areas such as language issues. Sometimes a deferred policy stand may be reviewed because an appropriate communication resource is available. Thus a political leader may find that the dangers of advocating a language policy in an open political rally, may be safely done when television is available since television allows the "sanitized" environment of a home audience.

Consider the horizontal axis in the Matrix

(1) Policies - Communication Planning:

Policies made must also be made palatable. Communication planning works towards this direction. For example, language policies may be best introduced by political leaders talking to leaders with vested interest, before following up with mass media approaches. Whatever the medium chosen, policies must be communicated well before it is well accepted. Hence the need for effective communication planning.

(2) Systems Planning and Communication Planning:

This means developing strategies - short, intermediate, long-term steps - before enunciating the policies. Strategies would be based on the research data, political feedback from leaders and other relevant aspects.

(3) Implementation and Communication Planning:

Based on the strategies decided, the policies are implemented but within the operational communication plans that have been developed. Thus the leader may be told that if the grassroot reaction has been adverse, he should go slow in the implementation of the policies and to bring in other messages to mitigate the adverse effects. He may also be asked to introduce other communication resources to placate ruffled sensitivities.
(4) Evaluation and Communication Planning:

This is often a neglected area and as result plans tend to fail. Most plans need to be redefined, modified, and restrategised. This can be done if a proper feedback mechanism exists. Communication planners must place high priority in including feedback mechanisms within their plans.

(5) Communication Resources - Communication Planning:

This is the crux of the matter if effective audience reach, maximum impact and concrete strategies are to be attained.
Realty of Communication Planning

(1) The pyramidal, hierarchical and political nature of most national planning structures should be considered. Under these circumstances, significant policy formulation takes place at upper organizational strata and it is not until it comes to implementation that lower levels are fully engaged. It is at the implementation stage when communication planners are brought into the planning structure.

(2) Perceptive politicians sometimes inject generalized, or ad-hoc, communication steps into policy formulation. The communicator has no choice but to implement the policy based on the politician's perception. Communicators, without political base, do not have interactive relationship with the political leaders.

(3) Besides, many political leaders view communication planning a luxury.