

The Asian Forum of Parliamentarians on Population and Development (AFPPD)

Communicating for Policy Impact

Prepared by APCO Worldwide
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Background

The changing landscape of communications

Communication is an essential enabler for all AFPPD members as they work to promote their legislative work in support of the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda.

The challenges of today’s interdependent and interconnected world – where issues are hyper-connected through an incredibly engaged audience, mobilized by social media – dictate responses and issue management that is multi-platform, data-driven and sensitive to the needs of our constituents and policy makers.

When considering what ‘leadership through communications’ means, we must begin to examine whether our previous modes of communicating are suitable to new generation demands and pressures from the public. AFPPD members will increasingly be expected to be the voices of reason during times of crisis, translators of dense and complex data, and mobilizers of public action around key initiatives to drive real policy change.

The key to success may lie in reframing our thinking away from taught skills, towards understanding the inherent traits that make good leaders and communicators.

Government digital transformation provide a new lens for communicators

“No individual, enterprise or government can afford to be unaware of the implications that the growing use of digital media and information content and services will have on industry and society. We must begin planning for how our increased connection to digital media will continue to change the very fabric of our society.”

*-Sarita Nayyar, Managing Director
World Economic Forum (USA)*

Indeed, governments around our region have already begun rolling out their blueprints for digital transformation. As they do so, a sharp focus on citizen satisfaction with digital services, volume of transformative digital projects, and use of data analytics in communications will become larger measures of success for public service.

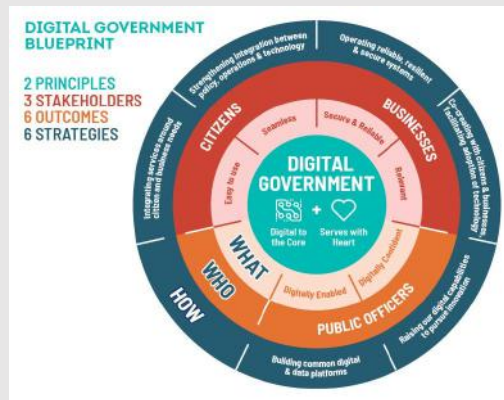
An effective communications strategy which brings together face-to-face and digital allows people to engage in direct dialogue with politicians, civic officials, and even entire government agencies. It also gives them a chance to engage back, raise awareness, calm fears, and mobilize.

Figure 1. Digital Government, Smart Nation: Pursuing Singapore’s Tech Imperative.

Below is an illustrative example of how government digital transformation objectives are changing expectations for communicators.

Many nations are exploring their own digital transformation roadmaps and requiring not only technology platforms but a shift to omnichannel communications. This means public officers who are ‘digitally enabled’ and ‘digitally confident’ demonstrating value by being able to mobilize their constituents around transformative projects.

In Singapore, digital government KPIs are already in place and include measures for stakeholder satisfaction with digital services and public officers with basic digital literacy.



STAKEHOLDER SATISFACTION	Citizen Satisfaction with Digital Services (in survey)	75-80% to rate very satisfied
	Business Satisfaction with Digital Services (in survey)	75-80% to rate very satisfied
END-TO-END DIGITAL OPTIONS	Services that offer e-government systems (inbound and outbound)	100%
	Services that are certified with Government-verified data	100%
	Services that offer digital options for wet ink signatures	100%*
END-TO-END DIGITAL TRANSACTIONS	Percentage of transactions completed digitally from end-to-end	30-35%*
	Percentage of payments (inbound and outbound) completed via e-payments	100%*
DIGITAL CAPABILITIES	Number of public officers trained in data analytics and data science	25,000
	Number of public officers with basic digital literacy	40 Public Officers
TRANSFORMATIVE DIGITAL PROJECTS	Number of transformative digital projects	30-50 over a period of 5 years
AI DATA AND DATA ANALYTICS	Percentage of Ministry Services that use AI for service delivery or policy making	40 Officers families to have at least one AI project

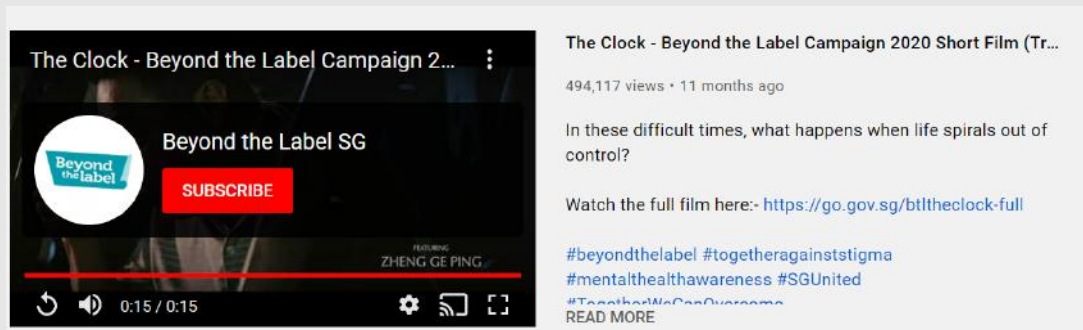
Below is a quick summary of how effective digital communications can drive stronger public engagement:

- **Provide citizens real time guidance in difficult times:** During challenging times, the public is looking to their civil servants not just for direction, but also to set the tone in how to cope. It’s especially important for the public sector to get the message out in a clear, calm, professional manner.
- **Create a foundation for long-term citizen engagement.**
 - **Build trust.** Through consistent messaging and understanding of key issues in the community.
 - **Humanize your personal brand.** People often forget that there are actual people behind agencies and issues. Showing a bit of humor and compassion can show that we are all in this together.
 - **Gain deeper understanding of your constituents by testing messages.** In digital communications, you can receive immediate feedback and see responses to types of content and approaches. Effective communicators will often pilot a few different

approaches over 3 months and begin to really learn about the communities they serve and how they consume information.

Figure 2. The National Council of Social Service, governed by the Ministry of Social and Family Development of Singapore mental health campaign.

Beyond the Label is an online movement to address stigma faced by persons with mental health conditions. Its objective is to encourage those suffering from mental health conditions to seek professional help, address stigmas, and educate and equip the public to better interact and support those in recovery. The campaign gained a large following on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, facilitating new conversations between the government and the public.



Communications checklist

Every successful communications campaign engaging the public, and even high-target outreach to policy decision makers, starts with a clear strategy. Below is a simple communications checklist which can serve as a best practice guideline for any communicator.

It is advisable to take some time—even with outreach that is already underway—to confirm that these checkpoints have been defined.

COMMUNICATIONS CHECKLIST

**CLEAR OBJECTIVE
TARGETED AUDIENCE**

**KEY MESSAGE
COMPELLING EVIDENCE
STRONG NARRATIVE**

INTEGRATED OUTREACH

**ACTIONABLE
EVALUATION**

- Who do we need to convince?
- What do we want them to do?
 - What do they need to know?
 - Why should they care?
 - How will this resonate with them?
 - How/where can we reach them?
 - Who else will they listen to?
 - How are they responding? (How do we know?)
 - What can be improved?



Starting with the audience

The most effective communicators are always aware of their audience. Whether you are reaching to your peers in government, constituents and the general population, partners and advocates, or the media, we must keep in mind their interests, motivations, sophistication on the issue, and behavioral pattern in consumption of information. Your messages, content type and platforms should be segmented to match these audience characteristics.

Some helpful questions to guide audience analysis:

- What makes an argument compelling to them?
- What makes an argument trustworthy to them?
- Why might they share content?
- What type of content, on which platform, would catch their eye online?

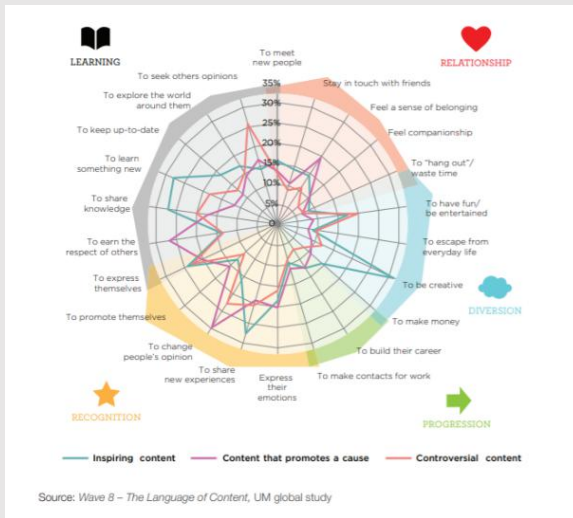


Figure 3. What makes content go 'viral'?

A global study by research firm Pulsar explored why certain online content promoting social issues or awareness was widely shared while others were not. Findings suggest that people are drawn to digital media offerings that fulfil five fundamental needs underpinning all social behavior:

- **Social interaction** (e.g., chatting, messaging, building relationships through like-mindedness)
- **Recognition** (e.g., expressing oneself, earning respect, supporting a cause)
- **Entertainment/diversion** (e.g., having fun, relaxing, being creative, indulging in a passion/interest)
- **Information/learning** (e.g., testing a theory, getting practical advice)
- **Work/progression** (e.g., elevating oneself as a thought leader, validation)

Figure 4. Audience issue 'flashpoints' vary by age

Depending on your target audiences' age, their interest area and likelihood of sharing information across their networks will vary. For example, Gen X'ers tend to be the most vocal group on issues related to corporate transparency and ethical labor practices.

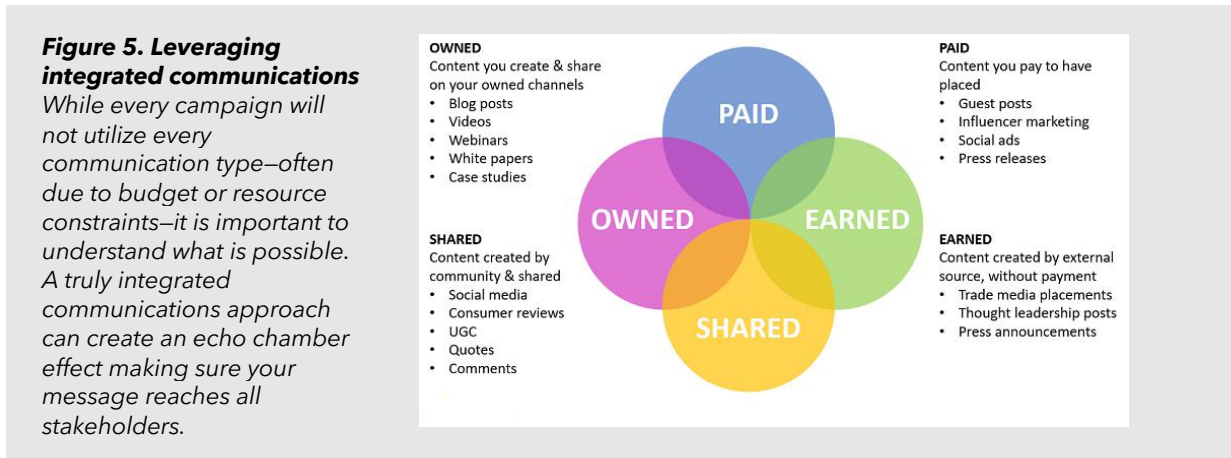
Figure 11: Corporate Social Responsibility Efforts that Are Important for MEI Companies to Support, by Use Level and Generation (%)

Elements	% Agreeing Those Corporate Social Responsibility Efforts are Important for MEI Companies to Actively Support					
	Frequent Users			Sporadic Users		
	Millennials	Generation X	Baby Boomers	Millennials	Generation X	Baby Boomers
Environmental sustainability	76	83	83	54	60	70
Ethical labour practices	75	83	80	51	58	65
Philanthropy	65	72	72	44	48	47
Social impact accountability	74	80	81	49	53	54
Corporate transparency	75	84	82	55	62	69

Taking an integrated approach

Public servants are entering a "noisy" landscape where information is consumed on multiple mediums, often in parallel. In addition to this, digital and social media has empowered individuals to become information outlets themselves, as well as given them more control over what they see/hear and where. Attention is divided, interests are hyper localized, and touchpoints are sporadic.

To reach your audience and to have meaningful engagements, it is crucial that your campaign take an integrated approach. You will meet the audience where they are across multiple channels, with a consistent message and personal brand, creating an “echo chamber” of communication. This will include the combined use of owned, paid, shared, and earned media, from face-to-face events to online advertisements.



Spokesperson tips

You are the storyteller, and one of the greatest gifts you can give your constituents and peers is your ability to compress knowledge and enormous amounts of information into crisp, compelling, and actionable positions.

The key to unlocking the profound impact of good storytelling is to know that there are different types of stories, and how you match your strategic purpose or mission to a specific story telling technique.

This will pave the way for you to communicate effectively and meet expectations; develop, prepare, and deliver a key message to your intended target audience. As a representative of your organization and an expert in your field, your role is to provide insightful personal analysis - key to those gathered - forming their own judgments.

Below are some foundational tips, sometimes referred to as the “Be Attitudes” to keep in mind whether you are interacting with media, constituents or ministries.

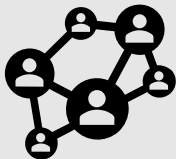
Figure 6. Segmenting your messages

While not every message is intended for every audience, it is a good idea to keep several tips in mind when engaging specific cohorts. Below are some fundamental communications tips for engaging with different stakeholders.



Public/Constituents

- **“What’s in it for me?”** Always be able to answer this question from the public’s point of view.
- **Be a curator of knowledge.** One of the greatest gifts you can give your constituents is compressing an enormous amount of information and filtering it into easily understandable thoughts.
- **Don’t overload.** The human memory is finite.



Media/Journalists

- **“News = Information + Emotion”** The news will often be a snippet rather than a balanced representation of your interview.
- **Always land (your key message).** It is not the journalist’s job to set you up for the right question. It is your job to understand what message you came to land and do so regardless of which direction the interview goes by steering the interview.
- **Be comfortable with silence.** Once you have landed your messages—stop speaking. The longer your answer, the greater the chance views will be truncated, excerpted, or misquoted.
- **Nothing is off record.** In this age of social media, anyone is a journalist. Watch what you are saying at coffee meetings, conferences, etc.



Officials/Academics

- **Don’t bury the lead.** Open with your most important message at the beginning, don’t save it for the end. Get to the point first, then substantiate with examples and facts.
- **Do not be drawn into philosophical or speculative discussions.** Focus on what you can answer and admit where arguments are limited or require further research.
- **Understand motivation.** Be aware of your audiences’ position, ongoing projects, own measures of success before engaging. Try to locate at least two points of alignment between your agenda and theirs ahead of time and have your proof points lined up.

Good practice for all audiences: Practice "Be Attitudes" as effective spokespeople

Be Attitudes	Key objectives	Check
Be prepared	Prepare in advance two or three key ideas you wish to get across. Anticipate key issues that will come up during the interview and be prepared to use those issues to launch your objectives. Think of questions you would ask.	
Be positive	Turn negative questions or statements into positive responses. End every answer on a positive, upbeat note.	
Be honest	Always tell the truth. If you don't and try to bluff, it will show. Your credibility is crucial.	
Be brief	Crystallize your ideas into a few short phrases that summarize what you're trying to communicate.	
Be yourself	Keep your voice at an even pace. Act naturally.	
Be energetic	Be animated. Use hand gestures, facial expressions and body language to add vitality to your words. (Just don't overdo it.)	
Be focused	Put your full attention on the interviewer. Look directly at the person asking the questions. Don't be concerned with distractions.	
Be comfortable, confident and take charge	Relax. You know more about the story topic than the interviewer. If not, you wouldn't be interviewed.	

Navigating challenging issues as the primary spokesperson

- Think through the two or three key points you want to make. Make sure you make these first in case you run out of time.
- Remember that the human memory is finite. This is even more the case in virtual interactions. Don't bury your point or action item under data or too much landscape analysis.
- Finish answering each question completely in the order in which they were asked. When you are asked to address extremely complex issues, you must steer the direction of the discussion, including the cadence of questions.
- Simplicity - Make short, simple, and specific statements.
- Talk to people, not at them. Jargon, acronyms and data overload can be interpreted as inauthentic or out of touch. Use simple, understandable English and focus on the human and community impact every time you communicate.

- Paint a picture with your words. Short anecdotes and relatable examples are always most engaging.

Figure 7. The power of simplicity and painting a picture with words

When Deputy Prime Minister and Finance Minister Tharman Shanmugaratnam appeared on BBC Hardtalk, the journalist grilled him on whether or not he believed in the idea of a social safety net in Singapore. Understanding the sensitivity, Mr. Tharman tried to take the diplomatic route, but the reporter persisted saying "I believe in the simplicity of yes or no answers. Does Singapore believe in the notion of a safety net for those who fall between the cracks of a successful economy?"

His response: "I believe in the notion of a trampoline."



By this metaphor Mr. Tharman meant that rather than a safety net, which merely catches you when you fall, he believed in creating a system that empowers you to spring back up. "It boils down to what policies you're talking about. If you provide for someone who is willing to take up a job and work at it, and make life not so easy if you stay out of work...it transforms culture." The journalist stunned and the audience broke into laughter and applause.

- Speak only as a representative for your organization and not from a personal viewpoint.
- Don't speak for someone who isn't present.
- Don't assume that any statistics are going to be correct. If you are uncertain answer accordingly,
 - "That may or may not be true. I'd like to see a copy of that report."
- Know when to respond. When to hold fire.
 - Especially for virtual interactions, first ask yourself—Is there strong misinformation being shared which needs to be corrected for the safety of the public? Could the information being shared have potential long-term impact to reputation? Am I the right person to answer this question?

Conclusion

Effective public engagement is the cornerstone of better policies and services that take into account the needs of citizens in different circumstances. As public engagement grows online, communicators will need a strategy that integrates both online and offline strategies and best practice to increase mutual trust and shared ownership of policy outcomes.

We live in a virtual world where public issues are multi-dimensional and cut across traditional agency, demographic, or sectoral boundaries. We must be nimble and ever-evolving in our approaches to ensure that we are accelerating progress towards our collective goals.

For additional reading

- Canel, María José. Luoma-aho, Vilma. The Handbook of Public Sector Communication. Wiley Blackwell, 2020.
- Social Media Use by Governments: A Policy Primer to Discuss Trends, Identify Policy Opportunities and Guide Decision Makers. OECD Working Papers on Public Governance No. 26. https://read.oecd-ilibrary.org/governance/social-media-use-by-governments_5jxrcmghmk0s-en#page1
- The Use of Social Media in Risk and Crisis Communications. OECD Working Papers on Public Governance No. 24. https://read.oecd-ilibrary.org/governance/the-use-of-social-media-in-risk-and-crisis-communication_5k3v01fskp9s-en#page1

* More detail and case studies can be found in the full report of the online lecture “Communicating for Policy Impact” conducted on July 26, 2021 for the AFPPD.