

Case Study

Communicating your projects to politicians: some tips

Politicians are one of your project target groups and you should follow the same principles of strategic communications as for all your other key stakeholders.

As in any strategic communications planning you need to identify your communication aims, your key messages and your tactics.

You should analyse this target group in the same as with all others – think about their influence and interest in your project and their familiarity and favourability with the themes that it covers. Use the same analysis tools that we covered in the PR strategy and planning sessions.

The analysis is the same but this target group is highly specialised in many ways including the following

- Politicians are affected by the concerns of their constituents (and their votes!). Most politicians have published speeches, articles, positions in public – do some rudimentary desk research and find out what interests them.
- They are interested in issues that affect people at a **local level** – news and stories that affect their electorate have impact on them.
- They are interested in the very local - therefore you should scan the local **media** for items that may be of interest.
- They are also interested in the **very large** – they probably sit on certain parliamentary or legislative committees (energy, health, employment, industry etc.). Find out which committee they are on and adapt your communications.
- Apart from independents, politicians are part of a **wider political party** that sets out policies on issues. Find out their positions.
- Their attention span is **time bound** and is affected by the passage of legislation, elections or other big new items that make it onto the agenda.
- There are a whole host of **other organisations, think-tanks and interest groups** trying to exert influence on them at the same time – there is chance of building coalitions of like minded organisations.

Tactics – things to consider when planning communications

What tactics are going to be most effective to reach your objectives? As with all communications activities you should consider the following:

Positioning your project

You want your politician to understand your project and view it positively.

How do you go about positioning a project to extract maximum value?

- **Raise profile** – project events, research, recognition by linking it to common new stories on local issues that matter to the electorate
- **Organise round table discussion forums** with local chambers of commerce or other interest groups, think-tanks.
- **Enhance position** – organise media activities or proposals that demonstrate that public money is being wisely spent under this administration
- **Define usefulness** – do your research to determine if the politician is willing to compromise, easy to work with. You can use fairly basic on-line desk research to find out their positions (and their party), speeches, articles on the themes of your project.

Advocacy and influencing

This involves leading the decision-maker to the conclusion him or herself, in other words, presenting the facts and allowing the decision-maker to reach his/her own decision. It is important to:

- Tie in your project outputs, achievements, findings with decision-makers' own interests
- Explain the effect and impact of legislation in powerful and emotive terms, but have rational arguments as well
- Use third-party testimony (i.e. their electorate) to reinforce your message objectively
- Build coalitions with other organisations, groups who are trying to influence them

Timing

Many campaigns fail not because of weak tactics or strategy, but due to a failure to recognise the impact of timing on a public policy campaign. To avoid such problems:

- Note the legislative process – key elements can be time sensitive (e.g. formal consultation periods)
- Prepare time to spend on critical decision-making points
- Pre-plan around timing issues (hold campaign meetings just before key events)