Telling The Right Story To The Right People At The Right Time

Module Four: Honing Your Outreach Strategy

LTER Network Communications Office
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In the previous modules of this course, we have discussed how to:

- understand your audience (module one),

- develop your central message (module two),

- and craft that message into something that will truly engage your audience (module three).

In this last module, let's talk about the final piece of the puzzle: coming up with a strategy to put your science communication into action. Without a strategy, it would be all too easy to spin your wheels in an unfocused way. On the other hand, the right strategy can give you the power to effectively reach your communication goals. Coming up with your initial strategy isn't a difficult task, but your strategy does have to take several factors into account: clarity, measurability, longevity, and sustainability. Let's talk about why each of these is important.

Clarity

The most essential part of any communication strategy is precisely defining what you aim to achieve. For most people, it is helpful to think of things in a two-tiered way. The first tier is a larger big-picture goal that you aim to achieve.

Here are some examples of such goals:

- To improve general awareness of the consequences of climate change in my region,

- To increase the usage of data collected in my LTER site by the scientific community,

- To improve science literacy among K-12 students.

Obviously, each of these big-picture goals (and ones like them) would be very difficult to completely achieve by any one scientist or LTER site. That's where the second-tier of goals come in: more tightly focused goals that can actually be accomplished by you or your team that further progress towards your big-picture goals. Here are some examples of such goals that further the big-picture goals given above:
- To have 30 people consistently attend our monthly seminar series for the community,
- To increase downloads of our datasets by 50%.
- To have 10 local high-school science teachers use the LTER-derived lesson plans that we have developed.

Measurability

It is almost certain that any initial communications plan that you devise will need to be tweaked (at the least) once you are under way. But what kind of tweaking is needed? Is your plan working at all? That's where measurability comes in. Specifically, it is critical to have metrics that you can directly measure that are connected to your second-tier goals. If you select the right metrics for your goals, you'll have a consistent gauge of how well your plan is working and what elements of your plan need to be altered. Here are some examples of metrics associated with the above second-tier goals (not an exhaustive list):
- The number of people attending individual seminars; the number of repeat attendees to the series; the number of people signing up for our seminar series email list; feedback based on surveys of seminar attendees,
- The number of data downloads; the variation in downloads among the various data sets that we have to offer,
- The number of teachers using our lesson plans; the number of teachers successfully contacted by an email awareness campaign; feedback on the lesson plans by teachers and students.

Longevity

Achieving almost any engagement goal that you may have will require one thing: a significant number of people paying attention to your message. People are generally very slow to notice new messages, let alone to take note of the content of those messages. This is true for all of us, not just for those you are attempting to reach - just think of how easy it is to miss things coming in to your email inboxes. No matter how your method of contacting people - word of mouth, posters, emails, paid ads, etc. - any particular communication will only be noticed by a small fraction of your audience. As a consequence, repeated contact over time is essential to get your target audience to notice you. The need for this repeated contact means that practically any successful engagement effort needs to be planned as a long-term affair. The meaning of long-term is going to be highly context specific, but in most circumstances, many weeks is the minimum campaign length. Anything less and your message will be unlikely to cut through the clutter.

Sustainability

Most of us can spare the time for a communications activity that occurs once. It might seem to be a much more difficult task to find the time to execute on the kind of multi-week (or much longer) communications plan that is actually likely to be effective. Given how busy all of our lives are, this may well seem like a bridge too far - who can spare a significant amount of time week after week for this kind of thing?

Thankfully, executing on a long-term strategy is far from impossible. The key is to make effective use of whatever time that you can spare to execute your strategy on an ongoing weekly or monthly basis. There is no wrong answer to the question of how much time you should spend (other than zero, which presents an obvious hurdle). Can other people be brought in to share the workload?

One key consequence of the time that you and your team can spare is that it drives decisions on the kinds of activities that you can do in pursuit of your goals. Here is an example of all of this. Let's say that you are interested in engaging adults in your local community with the highlights of the latest findings from your LTER site. Let's further say that you have 30 minutes a week that you can sustainably spend on this effort. This time constraint means that any ongoing activity that is time consuming is out (for example: video production or a series of public talks).

On the other hand, a blog focused on your local community might well fit within the time you have. Generally speaking, a blog should post at least once a week to build a following. This may seem like a daunting task, but it doesn't have to be. Given the time that you have, your approach should be to write very short posts where the focus is already-existing videos or images that can quickly be embedded in your posts. Another way to reduce the time involved in this effort would be to bring other people into the blog. If you can find just one other collaborator, your workload will be cut in half (and will incidentally make the blog more interesting by bringing in multiple perspectives).

Wrap-up

If you are just getting started on your communication efforts, this may seem like an overwhelming number of things to account for. Don't give up though! You can always start very simply with each of these elements and add complexity (if needed) over time.