


Managenergy Resource Tool: Effective Communications in Local & Regional Energy Agencies

This communications resource tool provides advice on developing communications plans, as well as some insights into communications good practices identified from telephone interviews conducted with local and energy agencies as part of this research on management innovations and good practice.

This resource tool is part of ManagEnergy’s ongoing work to help Local Energy Agencies and actors to learn from effective management innovations and good practice implemented across the network of 400 local and regional energy agencies in Europe.

To view other resources go to www.managenergy.net/management.html

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1. INTRODUCTION

Amid increased public awareness of the importance in finding alternative and clean energy sources, Local Energy Agencies are growing in prominence and are enjoying an increased amount of recognition and demand for their services. The climate change debate is on the tip of every politician’s tongue and energy is a well established theme for discussion in the



public arena. Having said this, LEAs often face some challenges in increasing their visibility and profile, due to lack of financial and/or staff resources or paying too little attention to marketing and communications.

The key levels and corresponding steps for creating an effective communications plan are outlined in the table below. While by no means seeking to be exhaustive, it offers one possible approach to setting about forming a communications and marketing plan.

Table 1 – Levels & Steps for your Communications Plan	
Key Level	Key Step
Strategy	Positioning communications in your overall strategy
Communications Plan	Developing your plan
Activities	Implementation
Results	Evaluation



2. STEP 1: YOUR AGENCY'S STRATEGY

As an LEA, creating a clear image of oneself and the services provided are of paramount importance. Establishing a distinct identity and undertaking a focussed communications and marketing campaign is all the more relevance for any agency coming towards the end of an initial (EC co-financed) three-year set-up period, and needs to carve out its own professional identity.



3. STEP 2: YOUR AGENCY'S COMMUNICATIONS PLAN

Your agency's external communication should be concise and clear, and should be instantly understandable to the target group to which it is aimed. Goals should be set such as to help the agency to convey the message it is trying to disseminate. It is very important that there is a clear and concerted decision made as to who the communication aims to reach, so a well defined target audience needs to be identified and the communication tailored to suit it. Developing a unique selling proposition for the service your agency is another key factor to any successful marketing campaign.

It is important to offer some point of differentiation that makes you stand out from the crowd. The next step in formulating the communication plan should involve in-depth research into what kind of activity your peers are involved in, and make an analysis of what has worked and what has been less effective. This should allow you to learn from any mistakes and avoid repeating them yourself. Finally, having conducted the research and formed a reasonably structured image of the approach you want to take with your communications and marketing, a budget should be drawn up that takes into account any costs involved in your strategy. The steps involved in creating an effective communications strategy are outlined in the table below.

TABLE 2 DEVELOPING A COMMUNICATIONS PLAN	
1.	ESTABLISH A PURPOSE
2.	STATE YOUR GOALS
3.	DETERMINE YOUR TARGET AUDIENCE
4.	DIFFERENTIATE YOURSELF
5.	RESEARCH THE MARKET
6.	DRAW UP A BUDGET

The following sections provide examples of how two energy agencies are leveraging their communications and influencing capacity in different ways in order to reach different objectives. Both can be considered examples of good practices that can (where relevant) be replicated by others. The first is Prioriterre from France and the second is the EcoFellows network set up by Tampere Energy Agency in Finland.

4. GOOD PRACTICE PROFILE:

Prioriterre - Communication to Support Fundraising and an Increasingly National Profile.



French LEA Prioriterre (<http://www.prioriterre.org>) has identified that targeting the top management in companies (CEO-level) as essential in its fund-raising efforts. Over the years,

Prioriterre has realised the importance of **working through the agency’s network and contacts, in order to benefit from personalised introductions to executive management in companies that are targeted for fund-raising to support its activities.** Trying to make ground by going through employees or middle management staff rarely (if ever) works. *“A sense of commitment or ‘engagement’ from the would-be contributors is key”*, says Magnier, Managing Director (MD) of the French Agency. Direct contact with the CEO or MD also impacts positively on the Agency’s marketing strategy by raising its profile among the relevant power brokers.

Prioriterre’s experience from its communication with prospective funders suggests that it is vital that the message being conveyed is done so with the highest degree of clarity both in terms of what the donor will receive in return for its contribution (prestige, services in kind) but also in terms of what services are on offer from the Agency. Prioriterre has also recently begun organising regular **meetings of its core donors.** These events are exclusive in nature and provide a platform for the agency to showcase its activities and show to donors how their contributions are being used by the agency.

Weekly **updates of the agency’s blog** (www.prioriterre.org/blog/index.php) is also central to the Agency’s marketing campaign and serves as a valuable tool in

spreading Prioriterre's message and keeping interested parties in the loop.

As director of the agency, Charles Magnier does significant external communications, including **speaking at conferences as well as talking on radio shows**. This has helped to shift the Agency's profile from being regional in focus to having more of a national reach. This shown to Prioriterre that fund-raising becomes easier to undertake when an agency has a national profile and is active country-wide and not just confined to one region.

Prioriterre has advised other energy agencies on their marketing and communications, and emphasises the importance of local energy agencies not just talking about their agency but also about themselves and their mission. In other words, make the marketing campaign personal, exciting and attention grabbing. Potential clients and other prospective donors want to be associated with an agency that gives them an **image benefit**.

Finally, Magnier emphasises the importance of **not deviating from the LEA's core raison d'être** which is, simply put, to save the planet from climate change, when engaging in communications and marketing. He argues for the importance of keeping one's soul and always remembering why the Agency exists.

5. GOOD PRACTICE PROFILE:

Raising Your Profile Through Networking: The EcoFellows Story

In 2002, Finnish LEA Tampere created a  Network by the name of EcoFellows Ltd. The network was set up to promote the goal of sustainable development among the town's companies, public organizations, scientific and educational organizations, NGOs and citizens.

EcoFellows Ltd. was set up at same time as the company in 2002. Through EcoFellows, Tampere Energy Agency organises different events, seminars and training for various groups. There is no formal membership structure but there are sub-groups for households, people maintaining residential buildings, futures and science groups, NGOs and private enterprises. Each member network has its own programme of events for the year.

EcoFellows provides Tampere Energy Agency with a good understanding of the needs of a wide group of local energy actors, including citizens and house owners, and provides a far more effective way of measuring sentiment than trying to understand their needs by, for instance, sending out a questionnaire. *"It allows for great access to stakeholders with key opinions just a phone call away"*, notes the

Managing Director (MD) of the Tampere Energy Agency Ms. Suvi Holm. Exposure to a wider variety of ideas and thinking makes Holm feel that she is standing on solid ground and that she is fully equipped with all the necessary information to take an informed decision. On the down side, Holm point to the fact that the agency is a small organisation and does not have a lot of money for marketing.

The success of the EcoFellows network is an example of how **agencies can initiate their own networks to spread the word of their mission and sensitise people to the issues they seek to address thus serving as an effective communications tool.** The creation of EcoFellows has made the agency much more visible in the eyes of local political leaders and has lent it more credibility and helped generate more support in the form of public money for developing the service, allowing for most of the consultancy for SMEs to be provided free of charge.



6. STEP 3: IMPLEMENTING YOUR COMMUNICATIONS PLAN

Having gone through the steps set out in section 3 the next obvious stage is for you to begin the implementation process of your communications plan. You will most likely have already formulated a comprehensive plan but the entire plan may not necessarily need to be implemented all at once but rather a

“testing the water’ process could precede any full launch of the marketing plan that has been formulated.

Get Outside Help – or Do it Yourself??

At this stage in the process you may like to consider whether the campaign can most cost effectively be carried out by outsourcing it to an external consultant, or if would make more sense to use an internal staff member or communications officer.

Many energy agencies are small organisations, and sometimes the communications work that comes with a new large EC co-financed project (e.g. Projects funded by programmes such as the *Intelligent Energy – Europe Programme*) can create challenges, not only in terms of resource but also in terms of having the expertise to do the communications work properly.

“In our experience, this decision on whether or not to get outside professional help with the communications work is a key one”, comments Peter Loeffler, Communications Officer at the Executive Agency for Competitiveness and Innovation (EACI) of the European Commission. *“From our experience, we see quite a number of projects that we co-finance through the Intelligent Energy - Europe Programme running into challenges without professional communications help. Here it is important that an energy agency is honest with itself and considers whether it has the skills and knowledge to develop*

and implement a viable communications strategy. Pitfalls can be manifold - for example, even including the agency's own enthusiasm and conviction and it's being too close to the subject and trying to second-guess what is important from the target audience's perspective, or failing to find an interesting angle/message for the target audience".

This is a key issue, as effective communications is a key success factor for such projects. The inset box below provides some tips for effective communications on such projects

Intelligent Energy
Europe

**Effective Communication on EC Co-funded Projects –
Some Tips from the Intelligent Energy Europe Programme**

1. **Plan well:** Plan your communications work carefully – the purpose, target groups, messages, channels and tools, monitoring and evaluation – and allocate enough resources to it.
2. **Get competent help:** Let communication professionals do the job, if you are not sure you have the skills and expertise. Such professionals have the know-how and skills which you need to be successful.
3. **Focus:** Be focussed! What is your key message? Who is your key target group? Less is in most cases more.
4. **Clarity:** Be clear and simple! One message at a time. Avoid jargon.

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Europe

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5. **What's in it for me?** Make your message(s) relevant to your target audience(s) and speak in terms of benefits. Your audience is interested in the service or product you offer, not how you develop it. Tell them what's in it for them and why they should care.
6. **Start early!** Start right from the beginning of the project. A project kick-off is exciting and likely to attract media interest.

7. STEP 4: EVALUATING YOUR COMMUNICATIONS PROGRESS

Carrying out regular checks on your communications plan is advisable in terms of monitoring progress made and highlighting any ad hoc complications that may have arisen. Regular checks make it easier to identify and remedy problems, compared to, say, reviewing your communications progress only once a year. It is during these regular checks that you should take stock of how effective your plan is, drawing on the indicators set out during its formulation in order to ascertain whether or not targets are being met.

Table 3 below gives an example of a proposed method for undertaking the task

of monitoring and evaluating the communications process.

Table 3 - Evaluation and Monitoring		
Comm's. Plan	Objectives	Target Audience
Monthly Status Report	To keep staff & supervisors up to speed on the plan's progress & key upcoming events	Steering & executive committee
Weekly Schedule Metrics	Report & update of scheduled tasks. Problem solving for ad hoc issues that arise	Project management team & steering committee
Project Team Calendar	Inform project participants of key dates	All project participants

How can you assess your communication activities? Some of the possible options include:













- Surveys of users/target groups (online, and/or offline)
- Telephone interviews
- Perception studies
- External evaluations
- Self-reporting options (e.g. user feedback options in your newsletters, website etc.).
- Focus groups

A key consideration is whether you carryout communication activities in "task mode" or whether your communications activities are carried out with clear results in mind. This comes back in part to the **purpose of your communication activity**. Are you clear as to what is the message you are trying to convey? Are you trying to promote an existing service? Or communicating the key differentiators of your energy agency? Or seeking to increase awareness regarding an energy efficiency issue?

8. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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 CHECKLIST FOR EVALUATING YOUR COMMUNICATIONS	
1.	<p>Do you have a clear strategy for your agency's development over the short, medium and long-term? Is the role of marketing and communications specified in this strategy?</p> <p> Refer back to step 1 in this profile for further elaboration on the position your communications plan should have in your agency's overall strategy.</p>
2.	<p>Have you identified the objectives and audiences of your external communication programme? Is the strategy appropriate to these objectives and audiences?</p> <p> Table 1 in step 2 outlines this and the other considerations for forming a communications plan.</p>
3.	<p>Does your communications strategy include measurable goals?</p> <p> Indicators should be established at the formulation phase for ease of measurement at the plan's various stages.</p>
4.	<p>Have you derived a strategy that will differentiate you from others in your field? 2</p> <p> See paragraph 2 in Step 2 for more details on this.</p>
5.	<p>Have you researched what has worked and what has not worked in the past for other players in the field?</p> <p> See the example of Prioriterre for some good practices in communications and marketing.</p>
6.	<p>Have you a clearly identified roadmap of what you want to achieve with your communications plan and the tools you are going to use to implement it?</p> <p> Planning is crucial for a successful communications strategy, tables 3 and 4 provide a generic example of the planning phase.</p>
9.	<p>Do your communications convey a message that is instantly understood?</p> <p> Step 3 refers to a 'testing the water' stage which could be used to gauge clarity of message among target audiences.</p>
10.	<p>Is the message communicated sufficiently concise and does it highlight the advantages the agency can bring to the client?</p> <p> Feedback from the early stages of Step 3 (the implementation stage) could be used measure how effective your message is (for instance through an online survey).</p>
11.	<p>Have you established methods of obtaining data and arriving at conclusions?</p> <p> Step 4 looks at the evaluation of your plan once it is up and running.</p>
12.	<p>Are there regular checks in place to ensure that the established goals of the communication plan and strategy are being met and targets are being reached?</p> <p> See step 4 for the importance of early and frequent testing of the effectiveness of your plan.</p>
13.	<p>Is there a system to review the existing communication strategy?</p> <p> Regular checks of the plan will allow for prompt adaptation as needed.</p>