

The definitive guide to successful strategic communications

Engage stakeholders, captivate audiences
and drive positive change





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A word from our founders

In today's increasingly digitalised world, with its complex media landscape and quick flow of information, it's important to constantly adapt our idea of best practice, and to embrace new and innovative ways of engaging our stakeholders.

This is especially true when it comes to communicating your strategic vision and values. From future commercial plans, to your environmental, social and governance (ESG) ambitions. The latter is becoming especially important, as businesses seek to gain a competitive advantage by doing good for people, communities and the planet.

In the ten years since Pod was founded, we're proud to have helped many of our clients overcome these tough communication challenges – supporting them in creating award-winning campaigns that engage their stakeholders and drive positive change.

We now lead a team of passionate and talented green marketing professionals that can deal with all aspects of stakeholder comms – from planning to creative delivery. And it's with their help and insights that we have created the definitive guide to successful strategic communications.

We hope you'll find the advice in this guide helpful, and we'll continue to provide further resources to help B2B marketers plot a path to successful strategic communications.

Jen Hughes and Jodie Williams,
Pod Founders



Lets start with



While most B2B brands are good at talking about what they do and how they do it, their reason to exist is often not front and centre of their communications. And yet, sharing why you do what you do can create a powerful emotional connection between your brand and your audience – one based on shared values, rather than merely on data.

This is the principle behind the Golden Circle Theory, a leadership concept developed by Simon Sinek in 2009. Sinek suggests that persuasive messaging should target the limbic brain – the area controlling emotions and decision making – rather than the more logical neocortex.

This is because tapping into your audience's emotions can have a strong and long-lasting effect. According to the B2B Marketing Institute, **approximately 95% of a B2B brand's prospects are not ready to buy at any point in time.** However, when they are ready to buy, they prefer to rely on brands they know and trust.

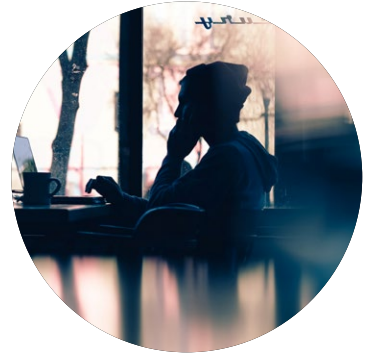
Sharing your brand's mission and vision is an excellent way of connecting with your audience through shared experiences and emotions, creating impactful communications that will resonate with your target audience well after they've been exposed to your message.

Whether you're focusing on stakeholder engagement, looking to promote environmental sustainability, or sharing the results of your latest Diversity, Equity & Inclusion (DE&I) survey, starting with 'why' will give a sense of authenticity to your communications, letting your audience know that these are more than just figures to you.

This will allow your brand to be front and centre of their minds when they are finally ready to buy. But perhaps more importantly, it will enable you to attract the right prospects – the ones that share your values, mission and vision. Over time, this can allow you to cultivate a loyal customer base, as well as helping you attract and retain like-minded talent and business partners.



The unique challenges of stakeholder engagement



Turning diversity into a strength

With the right communications approach, your stakeholders can become your brand's biggest advocates. But making sure they're on board with your project and share your business objectives may not be so straightforward.

Identifying the most common challenges of stakeholder engagement is the first step to creating a communications strategy that addresses their pain points – and achieves the results you're hoping for.

But stakeholder diversity is not limited to different or competing priorities. Cultural and linguistic barriers can also undermine effective communications, while ethical and legal issues can limit the amount and depth of information you might be able to provide.

That's why **stakeholder engagement requires a targeted approach, rather than “blanket” messaging that overlooks the specificities of each audience.** A well-executed stakeholder analysis allows you to carefully map your stakeholders' pain points, interests, and preferred communications style and channels. In this way, you can turn diversity into a strength and develop a nuanced communications strategy that gets them on board.

Are you using the right tone of voice?

A brand's tone of voice (ToV) is one of its most unique characteristics. That's why it's important to choose a ToV that really represents your organisation and to keep it consistent in all communications.

Ideally, people reading or listening to your comms should get the same first impression they would if they met your team in person. There isn't a right or wrong way to go; the important thing is that your tone feels authentic and in line with your brand.

However, the challenge arises when brands need to adapt their ToV to the preferences of specific stakeholders. How can you stay true and consistent to your chosen ToV, without alienating your readers? How do you balance the need for playfulness and gravity when addressing different audiences?

Diversifying your ToV while remaining true to your brand identity can feel like a challenge, but it doesn't have to be. Imagine your brand as a person who can adapt their tone and register to suit different audiences, but remains consistent with their personality.

A fun-loving, extrovert, passionate person can display these characteristics whether they're talking to a group of Earth-conscious young people, or to their company's C-suite – they just need to adapt their register. If you can do the same in your strategic comms, you'll be able to produce effective assets that feel appropriate to a variety of stakeholders, without wiping out your brand's personality.





steps to better communication

Step 1: Planning

Embarking on a strategic comms campaign can seem like a monumental task, so it might be tempting to get cracking right away and start churning out content, visuals and digital assets. However, it's important to invest enough time and resources in understanding your audiences and coming up with the best key messages and asset types to address their concerns and get them excited about the future.

Even when you think you know your audience well, neglecting this crucial stage is not a good idea. It may lead to creating resources that lack depth, don't really resonate with them, or need to be updated in line with the company's new and exciting developments.

The first stage of planning involves identifying all potential stakeholders associated with your project. Make sure to consider both internal and external stakeholders, and categorise them based on their level of involvement in the project and how critical their decisions are to the project's completion.

The next stage is all about understanding your stakeholders' pain points, interests and expectations. What are their biggest problems and concerns, and how can you address them? What do they believe in, and how can you align their interests with your mission? By answering these questions, you can develop a communication strategy that focuses on them, rather than on you – which is critical for the next step: getting buy-in.

Step 2: Getting buy-in

You're ready to implement a project you believe in, you've mapped your stakeholders' priorities and determined the best ways to get them involved, you're all ready to go... but you first need the C-suite's buy-in. So, how can you convince them to get on board? Here are some helpful tips:

- **Think of the C-suite as another stakeholder**, understanding their priorities and clearly articulating the value proposition of your proposed solution.
- **Explain how your project aligns with business goals or addresses a challenge**, focusing on both material and emotional benefits. For example, if your goal is to unlock resources to accelerate the company's green energy transition, explain the cost-saving benefits and reputational boost the company would get from PR.
- **Try to build a compelling business case**: quantify ROI as clearly as possible, outline expected gains, cost-savings, or efficiency improvements.
- **Provide a clear roadmap** of how you plan to achieve those goals, including key milestones and timelines. This will demonstrate a clear vision and will help you articulate how the expected results tie in with the C-suite's objectives.
- **Share the results of your stakeholder analysis**. By understanding how your project addresses specific stakeholders' needs and pain points, the C-suite will be more likely to provide the resources needed for a successful roll-out.
- **Be prepared for questions and concerns**, and address them appropriately by presenting a well-thought risk mitigation plan. This will demonstrate that you've considered challenges as well as benefits, and will help reassure the C-suite that the risks are worth taking.

Step 3: Ensuring transparency

In every relationship, trust is built on transparent, clear and authentic communication – and this is exactly what you should aim for in your strategic comms.

When getting buy-in on a new project – whether that's starting on your

sustainability journey, implementing a new DE&I policy, or supporting social responsibility initiatives – make sure to clearly define your objectives and to communicate them transparently.

Ideally, use measurable KPIs so you can periodically report back on progress and showcase the tangible impact of your project.

But above all, make sure your efforts are authentic and in line with your brand's DNA.



"It's important to back up communications about sustainability and social value with tangible evidence. For example, explain how your project will positively impact the environment, society, or both – and express that with measurable proof points."

Jodie Williams, Pod's Co-founder

Another point to remember is to address your stakeholders in a language they will understand. Nothing undermines trust like vague, confusing or alienating jargon. Put yourself in your audience's shoes, and try to consider what knowledge they already have, and what is brand new to them and might require further clarification or background information.



"Communicating complex ideas, especially in technical fields, can be challenging. That's why it's essential to convey messages clearly, but without losing important details or nuances.

Once again, the key is to keep your audience front and centre of your communications, so drop the jargon and make sure to communicate in a way they will understand."

Jen Hughes, Pod's Co-founder

Finally, don't be afraid to share challenges or missed objectives. Remember that you are taking your stakeholders with you on a journey, sharing the highs and lows of your project. Communicating why a project didn't generate the expected results and what you're going to do about it can go a long way in fostering a sense of transparency and authenticity – and thus build trust.



Step 4: Engagement tactics

Once you've mapped your stakeholders and gained buy-in from the C-suite, it's time to deliver your strategic comms plan. Using the key messages you've identified in step one, prepare and deliver a range of tailored assets in a format that appeals to your stakeholders. Some might prefer detailed reports, while others might be more interested in quick periodic updates.

"Generally speaking, stakeholder comms need to be concise to appeal to busy stakeholder groups. Focus on assets that are easy to digest, and provide quick and easy ways to get in touch and give feedback."

Jen Hughes, Pod's Co-founder

“Remember that strategic communication is not just about immediate results: it’s about building and nurturing long-term relationships. To do that, engage stakeholders from the very early stages of a project, and keep the communication open throughout the project’s lifecycle.”

Jodie Williams, Pod’s Co-founder



A great way to engage stakeholders and make them feel part of the project is through workshops, round table discussions and focus groups. Whether in-person or virtually, these get-togethers provide a much needed outlet for stakeholders to voice their opinions and concerns, ensuring feedback is gathered and acted upon.

Crucially, you also need to provide regular and consistent updates explaining how feedback was implemented. This can include progress reports, newsletters, and social media updates showcasing project-related achievements and challenges overcome along the way. You can even create a dedicated stakeholder portal, such as a tailored microsite or an informal Facebook group, where you regularly upload progress notifications and encourage stakeholders to comment and share.

Finally, don't forget to celebrate success and acknowledge your stakeholders' role in helping reach important milestones. Recognition can strengthen the sense of working towards a common goal, and can contribute to stakeholders looking forward to the next phase of the project.



Step 5: Creative promotion

A project where stakeholders contributed in an active and meaningful way is a stronger and more successful one. And this is a message worth spreading. So, how can you do that in a creative and engaging way?

Social media is the first outlet brands tend to use for creative promotion. With features such as polls, carousels and a variety of video formats, your brand's social media channels are perfect to create a storytelling campaign that highlights your project's milestones and the impact of stakeholder engagement.

Other ideas involve leveraging your digital marketing and web development capabilities – or outsourcing them to the Pod's incredible dev team – to create immersive experiences based on gamification or virtual reality (VR).

This can help you give your audience an idea of the project's results, in a way that makes the process more memorable and enjoyable.

Gamification can offer a more dynamic way of providing feedback, encouraging your stakeholders to give you the answers you need by completing challenges and taking part in quizzes and games.



If you're not keen on VR and gamified assets, another way to maximise engagement is by designing visually appealing infographics, posters and explainer videos. These are great ways to create a compelling visual narrative, keeping audiences engaged while providing the information they need in a concise way.

And what if your audience prefers text-based assets? In this case, creative storytelling is the way to go. Craft relatable characters for your story by building on stakeholder personas, and have them walk through the various stages of your project, overcoming obstacles and celebrating successes along the way.

Finally, remember that a creative and unique way of promoting your project is not just good for stakeholder engagement – it can also help attract media attention and make a bigger PR splash.



Communicating effectively on environmental goals



With consumer, stakeholder and regulatory pressure building up, most brands are now keen to showcase their progress in reducing their carbon footprint. Green marketing campaigns are more popular than ever, and when done correctly, they can raise an organisation's profile as well as provide a positive example for other brands to follow – leading to a virtuous domino effect.

However, increased instances of greenwashing and greenhushing are undermining consumer and stakeholder trust in sustainability campaigns. So, it's critical to create a communication strategy based on realistic, measurable and science-based targets – without forgetting the human element.

Regulation

In 2021, the Competition and Markets Authority (CMA) published the **Green Claims Code**, which requires organisations to hold data to prove environmental claims about their products and business practices. The Code is enforced under the Consumer Protection from Unfair Trading Regulations (CPUT Regs), with penalties ranging from fines to taking products off the market.

Find out more about the Green Claims Code **here**.

The new **Digital Markets, Competition and Consumers Bill** is set to replace the CPUT Rrgs and grant the CMA power to to impose direct civil penalties on greenwashing companies. The fines can be of up to 10% of global turnover for big companies, and up to £300,000 for individuals.

The Advertising Standards Authority

is also responsible for investigating exaggerated eco-claims, and has already ordered several household brands to remove misleading adverts.

Finally, it's important that companies address **carbon disclosure obligations**. In the UK, quoted companies and large businesses must disclose their annual energy use and GHG emissions. Dozens of companies have already been fined by the Environment Agency for under-reporting their emissions, or for failing to submit their reports.

Best practice

The golden rule when it comes to green marketing is to make sure you can substantiate your claims:

- **Set clear, measurable and realistic objectives**
- **Provide science-backed data to showcase how you are progressing towards your goals**
- **Make sure you disclose data about your current carbon footprint. It doesn't need to be perfect: take your audience on a journey and tell them how you're planning to do better.**
- **Express commitment to sustainability targets in a measurable way. For example, don't say "we follow net zero best practice" but "we're committed to cut our Co2 emissions by 50% by 2025."**

Pod tip

Data is essential to give credibility to your message and avoid accusations of greenwashing. But it's also important to inject some humanity into your campaigns. Use engaging storytelling to tell your audience how you're planning to help the environment, and don't shy away from talking about the challenges you're overcoming along the way, and about the work still to be done. Your audience will appreciate the authenticity of your efforts and will value progress over perfection.

Communicating effectively on social value



Social value is the positive impact your organisation creates for communities and the environment – from reduced carbon emissions to increased employment and social inclusion. It is a vast category, but defining, measuring and communicating your social value is definitely worth it. Not only does that give you a clearer idea of the social good your organisation is responsible for – it is also great to attract and retain talent, build stakeholder trust, and can even help you win public bids and tenders.

Regulation

In the UK, the Public Services (Social Value) Act of 2012 requires the public sector to ensure the services it commissions also contribute to the social, economic and environmental wellbeing of the local community where the services will be delivered.

Since then, the public sector has led the way in delivering social value, but the private sector is steadily following suit – particularly in the construction, healthcare and facilities management industries.

Best practice

“Social value” can refer to a wide variety of practices and initiatives, so the first thing to do to communicate it effectively is to use clear definitions and measurable data. To this purpose, the Social Value TOM System™ was developed as a social value measurement standard to be used across the UK. TOM stands for:

- **Themes:** social value areas that organisations should look at
- **Outcomes:** positive changes an organisation hopes to see
- **Measures:** quantifiable actions that deliver outcomes

Fully transparent and recognised by both local and central government, the Social Value TOM System™ has all data validated by a third party, which safeguards organisations against accusations of greenwashing and social washing.

Using the Social Value TOM System™ – or other recognised frameworks – to measure your organisation's impact on the community is the best way to communicate your organisation's social value in a clear and transparent way, helping build trust.

The Social Value TOM System was created by Social Value Portal, which Pod is delighted to be working in partnership with, raising the profile and impact of adopting this valuable national framework.

Pod tip

Measurable data is crucial, but don't forget the importance of tapping into your audience's emotions to grab their attention and make them care about your organisation. Remember to start with why you are seeking to increase your social value, and give readers an overview of the company values that support your social value initiatives.



Communicating effectively on business plans



Change can sometimes be hard to accept. And when your business plans require a substantial transformation of processes and ways of working, it's important to have a solid communication strategy to get your audience on board.

An engaging communication plan to address both internal and external stakeholders can make the difference between a successful transformation agenda, and confusion or discontent with the business' strategic roadmap.

Regulation

New business plans can imply new company policies and procedures, and communicating them to employees and relevant stakeholders will be essential to avoid costly mistakes.

Failing to do so could have serious legal and financial consequences. For example, failing to disclose new health and safety guidelines, or to address changes in governance and disclosure policies, could lead to the company being sued for non-compliance.

As a result, it's important to determine who's going to be affected by new policy changes, and to communicate them in a way that leaves no space for misinterpretation. It is also crucial to ensure that employees and relevant stakeholders have easy access to documentation regarding new policies, and that they have the opportunity to undergo appropriate training when needed.



Best practice

Successful corporate comms go beyond the bare minimum of addressing policy and procedure changes. Clear communication on the company's roadmap for growth and success, as well as on how the organisation will deal with a crisis, creates the basis for a culture of transparency.

It's important to have a corporate communications plan that details your target audiences, the types of events you might want to communicate on, the tone of voice, distribution strategies, and measures to assess the effectiveness of communication. Having a clear idea of who your audience is and what they care about, as well as having a set of key messages in place, will help develop effective communications when time is scarce, such as during emergencies or crisis situations.

It's also a good idea to determine clear channels of communication. For example, a weekly newsletter can be ideal to communicate key happenings to your internal stakeholders, while quarterly in-person meetings can be the right venue to communicate past performance and future growth strategies.

Pod tip

When business plans are changing, it can be difficult for stakeholders and employees to provide honest feedback. So, it's a good idea to maximise their chances to do so. Try to foster a culture of openness, and provide opportunities such as roundtables, discussion groups, forums. Then, clearly communicate how you're going to take action on the collected feedback.



Communicating effectively on DE&I principles



There are several reasons why DE&I initiatives have become increasingly important for organisations worldwide. Market demands and globalisation mean that having a diverse workforce can help companies better understand and satisfy their consumers. At the same time, a focus on diversity and inclusion is a proven way to attract and retain talent, as well as boost staff wellbeing and morale.

Moreover, regulatory frameworks are now encouraging companies to promote diversity and inclusion in the workplace, and to report on DE&I targets as part of their ESG agendas.

With so much more focus on DE&I than in the past, it's not surprising that many brands wish to promote what they're doing to achieve a more diverse workplace, as well as showcase their efforts to launch more inclusive products, services, and work practices. There is no single way to communicate your DE&I efforts in the right way, but there is something all organisations should strive to do: communicate with empathy.

Regulation

The 2010 Equality Act legally protects people from discrimination on the basis of age, disability, gender reassignment, marriage and civil partnership, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion or belief, sex, and sexual orientation. It forms the legal basis to act against discriminatory behaviours against these nine protected categories, and sets out what can be categorised as direct or indirect discrimination, harassment, or victimisation.

Marketing-wise, the Advertising Standard Authority has published some helpful guidelines to help organisations comply with Broadcast Code (BCAP Code) and Non-broadcast Code (CAP Code) regulations. The guidance aims at avoiding:

- **Explicitly harmful stereotypes (even when the intention is to challenge those stereotypes)**
- **Mocking or insensitive depictions**
- **The representation of stereotypical roles and characteristics**
- **Objectification and sexualisation**

The guidelines have a specific focus on racial and ethnic discrimination, but provide a helpful framework to prevent discrimination against other protected categories, too.

Best practice

The Unstereotyped Alliance, founded by UN Women, has published a useful framework that can help marketers put the CAP Code and BCAP Code principles into practice. The 3Ps framework offers guidelines on how to portray characters in a way that challenges traditional stereotypes, leading to a more inclusive representation of society at large.

The three Ps are:

- **Presence:** this refers to the central characters in ads and marketing communications. Erasing some groups from communications can be deeply disempowering for members of those groups, so marketers are encouraged to feature a range of people that represent the cultural and ethnic mix in the market.
- **Perspective:** this refers to the people “behind the camera” and how their views influence the representation of the main characters.
- **Personality:** this refers to the depth of the characters, who should be represented as more than “tokens” and should be depicted as three-dimensional and in control of their lives.

This framework can be helpful when considering how to represent people in ads and other marketing collaterals, but also when drafting DE&I statements and reports.

In fact, it is always important to go beyond tokenism and the representation of people as mere figures. It's crucial to communicate why these reports exist in the first place, what the company wants to achieve by increasing transparency on DE&I, and why the inclusion of people from different backgrounds matters to the organisation.

Pod tip

Unconscious bias can steer even the most well-meaning initiative in the wrong direction, which is why it's important to **do your research**, but also benefit from **an external point of view**. Partnering with a charity, working with a diverse focus group, and consulting with internal or external experts are excellent ways to help dispel unconscious bias and craft a truly inclusive message.

Best practice put into practice:

Xoserve's transparency-first approach to stakeholder comms

As the central service data provider for the UK's gas market, Xoserve understands that to successfully decarbonise the gas industry, stakeholder collaboration is a must.

Every year, Xoserve releases its Business Plan, which provides a detailed overview to stakeholders of how funds are allocated among a variety of projects. However, after the release of the 2023 Business Plan (BP23), Xoserve felt that a more consultative approach was needed.

Several stakeholders had expressed the view that BP23 was presented as a rather final version, and that they had had limited opportunities to contribute to it.

As a result, Xoserve worked with The Marketing Pod to create a stakeholder engagement plan that maximised opportunities for feedback. Ahead of BP24, Xoserve drafted a preliminary document to get stakeholders on the same page when it came to the values and principles that were to inform the new Business Plan.



The new Principles and Approach (P&A) document outlined the pillars of the new Business Plan:

- **Our plan will be built on engagement**
- **Our plan will be accessible**
- **Our plan will articulate value for money**
- **Our plan will consider uncertainty**

A first draft of the P&A document was shared with stakeholders, who agreed on its core principles but expressed the desire for transparency to be added as a key theme. So, Xoserve added transparency as a “golden thread” that was to inform not only the new P&A document, but every step of the creation and implementation process of BP24.

The first draft of BP24 was completed in September 2023. To provide a dedicated portal for stakeholder feedback, The Marketing Pod helped Xoserve create a microsite to host this preliminary version. The microsite contained questions and feedback prompts to encourage stakeholders to express their views and concerns, as well as questionnaires on specific sections that some stakeholders might find more relevant.

To encourage peer-to-peer conversations and allow different stakeholder groups to communicate effectively, Xoserve then organised a series of virtual roundtables. These resulted in productive conversations that provided Xoserve with a host of new information to draft the second and final version of BP24.

This consultative approach has proved successful. Engaging stakeholders early on has allowed Xoserve to complete BP24 quickly and with minimal amends, while the golden thread of transparency has enhanced stakeholder trust and re-ignited enthusiasm about Xoserve's projects for the new financial year.



Choosing a partner

Strategic comms is crucial to organisational success, but the need to map different stakeholders' priorities and develop a targeted communication plan for each can feel overwhelming to your internal comms teams.

Partnering with a marketing agency with a proven track record in strategic comms can have several benefits. It allows you to manage your resources more effectively, get access to a host of diverse skill sets, and create campaigns built on measurable and data-driven KPIs – all without overstretching your team.



strategy



content



PR



digital



creative

With five centres of excellence under one roof (strategy, content, PR, digital and creative), The Marketing Pod is ideally positioned to maximise the value of your strategic comms. As a full-service agency with in-house expertise, we've been on both sides of stakeholder engagement, and are familiar with the challenges and opportunities it provides.

Get in touch with our team today and book a discovery call to see how we can help:

hello@marketingpod.com

