COMMUNICATIONS

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We needed to be heard. We wanted to reach out to social start-ups who might be interested in our support. We wanted to build a reputation among funders, so that they might support our partners and adopt some of our fresh practices. We also wanted to secure support from tech companies. So, unlike most other funders, communicating what we did was very important to us. So much so that our first hire was in communications. Our efforts were recognised, as our network complemented us on our communications. But we were never quite sure if our efforts were rewarded, as we didn't crack the difficult task of measuring the impact of our communications.

A motive

Things are so much easier when you know why you're doing them. So, our communications had purpose. We identified our target audiences, created key messages that we wanted them to hear and worked out the best channels of communication that they should receive them. By the end, we'd made sure that each communication we produced had a specific objective. We wrote several blogs around our failures, for example, not because we thought they'd be a good read but because we think our sector brushes failure under the carpet when it should be kept on the mantelpiece. Although we knew the purpose of our communications, we're not sure our audiences always knew. We could have more consistently had a 'call to action' in our communications to bring us onto the same page.

Building a brand

We recognised the importance of how we came across to others and that this ought to be consistent. We wanted to be authentic and so our organisational values that defined us became our 'brand values' and our communications reflected these. For example, one of our values is fresh and so we made sure our communications were innovative and alive. We spent time thinking about our 'brand voice' – the words, phrases, tone and images we used. We ended up knowing instinctively whether something we'd produced was 'on brand'.

Audience overload

Our unique position of being right in the middle of social start-ups, funders and tech companies gave us our unfair advantage as an organisation. However, from a communications perspective, it gave us a major headache. We struggled with having three target audiences. We needed to tailor our communications to be effective but we didn't have the time to do so. If we had, our communications would have been so much stronger and more influential.

Creating a story

In our early days our communications were not always coherent. Individual pieces we created didn't join up to tell a powerful story. We realised what we needed was what the experts call a 'narrative' – a story that flows through all our communications. We would have liked to tell a different story to our different audiences but we didn't have the time. So we told several stories to everyone, not what the experts would recommend. We told a story about a young foundation doing things differently. We told a story about our outstanding start-up partners. And we told a story about the potential of the tech sector to have a social impact. If you've ever tried to read three books at the same time, you'd understand that our readers weren't as hooked as we'd have liked.

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Newsworthiness

We started off by communicating too many things that were very interesting to us but not so interesting to others. So, we decided to send fewer, more interesting communications. We chose topics that we thought people would want to read, such as a funder's experience of fundraising. As we got more confident, we got more and more open, exposing ourselves to others and, by doing so, we could curate more interesting stories. And we always spent time making our communications engaging, using simple language, a playful tone and images.

Frequency & focus

Those who communicated to us regularly were in our thoughts more. A blog they'd written would prompt us to get in touch with them. We also found that we were far more likely to read a piece of communications that focused on one thing, rather than many such as newsletters. So we decided to regularly communicate to our network – at least once a month – and picked one theme. We also captured everything we did on our website and blog, reflecting that we were a dynamic organisation and providing a home for all our experiences and learning.

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Spreading the load

For small organisations like The Foundation, communications can be the thing that gets deprioritised. It was for us. At the start of the year we had to restructure from a team of five to four, and we had to say a very sad goodbye to our wonderful Communications Manager. We coped without a dedicated person by spreading the workload across the team, giving people specific responsibilities for different communications channels, planning what communications will go out and sticking to the plan.

Being bold

We spent 99% of our time making our communications and 1% sharing them. We had important things to say, and could say them in a creative and engaging way, but we didn't spend time saying them to the right people. We sent mass communications when tailored, individual messages would have had a better chance of inspiring the action we wanted. Similarly, we didn't encourage people to share our communications so we didn't amplify action. And we didn't speak at conferences or feature in industry publications. All this takes time, which we didn't make available. Mainly because, we weren't bold enough, intent on influencing others into action. We chose to influence through our actions and behaviour. And that tactic takes longer to get heard.

Fuzzy impact

We never could fully answer the question of how effective our communications were. Every year we conducted a survey to find out what our network thought of us. From this, we understood that we'd created a strong, distinctive brand – we came across how we wanted to come across. And it told us that our communications were considered to be excellent. However, we didn't put in place systems to understand whether our communications were influencing behaviour. Did they encourage funders to adopt new practices? Did they encourage people at our tech company supporters to get involved? We can't be sure. Our untested assumption was that our communications played a part, but very much alogside other things we did to mobilise people.

WERE OUR EXPERIENCES OF COMMUNICATIONS HELPFUL? THERE'S PLENTY MORE FROM WHERE THAT CAME FROM.

INCLUDING INSIGHTS ON...

BUILDING A VENTURE

LEADERSHIP

PROGRAMMES FOR YOUNG PEOPLE

SUPPORTING NON-PROFITS

THE WORLD OF FUNDERS

FUNDRAISING

WORKING WITH COMPANIES