

Developing A Communications Plan for Your NCEAS Working Group

Communicating the results of your work effectively is more than just a matter of tweets and press releases. It involves a clear plan that defines your goals, audiences, and messages and considers what opportunities and barriers might lie in the way. Your aim should be catching the right people's attention and being clear about why they are critical to your goals – who really needs to know about your new research or tool and why; who is important to helping you achieve your goals and what could they do; and how can you best engage them?

These guidelines are intended to help your working group communicate its results and outputs strategically, thereby increasing your chances of achieving the impacts you want. While you may have limited time to spend on communications, developing even a simple plan could help you get the most bang for your buck. Accompanying this guide is a worksheet designed to help you design your plan.

Here are some considerations to keep in mind from start:

- Start thinking about your communications early – don't wait until the papers are published.
- Never lose sight of the “so what” – why would or should people care about your research? This should be evident in all of your communications products or materials.
- Collect photos and other images among your team that would be useful for communications materials and which you have the rights to use. Please also keep track of information on how to credit the photos.
- Be mindful of and honest about your capacity. Videos always seem like great ideas, but it can take a lot of work and money to create great videos, for example.

Resources for You

Besides these guidelines, NCEAS provides additional communications resources for working groups at this link:

Of particular note are the following resources:

- This communications strategy template is designed to help you develop an overall strategy for your working group: <https://www.nceas.ucsb.edu/files/Working-Group-Communications-Strategy-Template.docx>
- This product communications strategy template is designed to help you develop a basic strategy for a specific product, such as a publication: <https://www.nceas.ucsb.edu/files/Product-Communications-Strategy-Template.docx>

The Basics of A Communications Plan

Goals

Developing clear goals is an important first step to any communications plan. Do you want to inform or improve policy or decisions? Do you want to change or deepen the conversation? Do

you want to empower people to adopt certain practices? Be honest and specific about what you are trying to achieve – and keep in mind, providing more information or knowledge is rarely sufficient to achieve change.

Ask yourselves the following questions:

- What is the overall goal we want to achieve?
- What tangible outcomes do we hope to achieve through our communications?
- What measures of success do we most care about?

Audiences

Identify the top 1-2 audiences you need to engage to meet your goals:

- Who makes the decisions related to your working group's issue?
- Who needs to know about your findings in order to bring about your overall goal?
- Whose knowledge, attitude, or behavior must be changed in order to meet your goal?

Messages

For the most part, your messages will be tailored to both your audience(s) and the channel(s) you use to reach them. That said, you should agree on a set of statements and themes that convey the key information you want to communicate about your research. Consider creating a set of talking points to serve as the basis for your communications.

Here are some overall guiding principles for your messages:

- Be clear and do not use scientific jargon
- Be consistent
- Be mindful of the tone you convey
- Be relevant
- Be specific about the “so what” of your research, especially in terms of what your target audience cares about or values
- If your research is related to something controversial, be mindful that people process information through their own belief filters and, as such, may understand your message differently than you intend. Even if you are trying to be as objective as possible in your messaging, individuals may interpret it according to their own beliefs. Try to anticipate or research what beliefs or opinions may be associated with your issue and frame your messages accordingly.
- A helpful exercise for designing your main message(s) in a clear and concise way is to consider this: if a news outlet were to cover your study, what would be your ideal headline for their article?

Tactics and channels

Develop your communications tactics once you have determined your goals and primary audience(s), as those will determine *how* you communicate. The following is a list of tactics you

might consider, depending on your capacity, budget and resources, and even your reputation with your key audiences. Included with each of them are some considerations to help you determine which tactics are right for you. It might be fruitful to pursue more than one tactic.

Press releases

- Good for: Studies that would be of interest to a broad audience, have a timely hook, and/or have “newsworthy” implications. If you aren’t sure, ask your communications contacts at your home institution or at NCEAS.
- Recommended approach: The primary author’s institution should spearhead the press release’s creation, and supporting institutions can repurpose it. Work with your press team to determine whether to disseminate it broadly or to target specialty outlets. While the lead institution should have primary responsibility for dissemination and posting to news services like EurekAlert, all involved institutions can help with media outreach, especially if there are personal contacts with reporters among your team.
- Working with the NCEAS communications team: If the lead author is directly affiliated with NCEAS or UCSB, we can spearhead the press release writing and dissemination, as well as pitching it to specific reporters. If the lead author is from a different institution, please keep us in the loop about your press release plans and we will consider repurposing the main press release for our respective websites and/or promote it via social media. If you are having trouble getting help from the lead institution, contact us and we may be able to step in. Please also see the section below called Pitching to Journalists.
- Other considerations: Regardless of who lead the press release effort, please be sure the final press release properly acknowledges NCEAS support.

Blog posts or commentaries

- Good for: Studies that have a specialized audience, have an interesting or provocative angle that authors want to highlight, or aren’t newsworthy enough for a press release but still provide important or useful information to your target audiences
- Recommended approach: If you or your working group has a blog, that is a perfect place to share your findings. You could also approach blogs relevant to your target audience(s) about writing a guest post. The NCEAS communications officer may also be able to help you place a blog on an established outlet, such as NatGeo or Huffington Post. Contact us if you would like this assistance.
- Working with the NCEAS communications team: We can provide support by sharing your blog post on social media. We can also help you place your post on an external, established outlet, as mentioned above.

Newsletter announcements

- Good for: Studies or tools that have a specific (user) audience whose attention you really want to get or whose work could be impacted by your research/tool
- Recommended approach: Determine which organizations or associations have a newsletter or listserv that would reach your target audience and contact their

communications lead to inquire about placing a short announcement or article about your study/tool in it. Often the organization will want a pre-written announcement. While they may have specific guidelines for you, the piece should be short – i.e., 2-4 concise paragraphs explaining the “what,” “so what,” and “how can I learn more.”

- Working with the NCEAS communications team: We can provide assistance with crafting the announcement and/or identifying good outlets to contact, depending on our capacity at the time.

Social media

- Good for: Promoting any new study or tool to your social and professional networks. This is a low-hanging-fruit way to get the word out, especially to your followers and people with similar interests.
- Recommended approach: Twitter and Facebook are the most popular platforms for the research community.
- Working with the NCEAS communications team: We can help you promote your study or tool via Twitter and/or Facebook. Our handles are @nceas for Twitter and @NCEASUCSB for Facebook. Consider tagging us in your posts.
- Other considerations: Consider hosting a Facebook Live event to talk about your research on live video. The NCEAS communications team may be able to host it on its account – contact us if you’re interested.

Magazine/feature article

- Good for: Studies or tools with an interesting story embedded within the larger context of the issue you are studying; studies that say something interesting about the big picture or offer a new, provocative way to think about things
- Recommended approach: You could pitch an article yourself to a relevant academic magazine, such as The Conversation or Solutions Journal, or you could work with the NCEAS communications officer to pitch an idea directly to a journalist.
- Working with the NCEAS communications team: We can help you craft your pitch or provide feedback on it, and we can help you identify the right journalist and/or outlet and send the pitch. We advise that you have one of us send the pitch, rather than do it yourself, unless it is to an academic magazine. We can also help promote the resulting story via social media. Please see the section below called Pitching to Journalists.

Multimedia product (e.g., video, podcast, StoryMap, infographic, or data visualization)

- Good for: Studies or tools that lend themselves to interesting visuals that can convey a clear and compelling message or that have a strong story behind them. These methods can be good for reaching new or non-technical audiences, and are highly shareable on social media.
- Recommended approach: Be clear about the main message you want to convey in whichever form of media you pursue. Your main message and your target audience will help you determine which type of product is most appropriate to create. We also emphasize the importance of hiring or working with professionals – e.g., graphic

designers, writers, or videographers – to help ensure the end product is of high quality. Another tip is to start early and expect it will take longer than you think it will. These projects can be worthwhile, but are time and labor-intensive.

- Working with the NCEAS communications team: We may be able to help you create your multimedia product, depending on our capacity and resources at the time. Contact us to discuss your ideas.
- Other considerations:
 - If your working group has a postdoctoral researcher, consider engaging them in creating a research-oriented multimedia project, such as a StoryMap or Shiny app data visualization.
 - You may be able to get away with creating a simple and short (around one minute) video interview using your smart phone, which could be used as “sound bites” to accompany a press release or other communications product. If you are interested in this idea and want guidance, please contact us.

Stakeholder meeting or workshop

- Good for: Engaging a specific group of stakeholders who have decision-making influence; getting your research into the hands and conversations of decision makers.
- Recommended approach: This tactic will involve careful planning. There are many resources out there to help you through the process of organizing and facilitating stakeholder meetings. It would be impossible to outline all the considerations here. All we can say is start early, be specific about what you want to get out of your meeting/workshop, and focus on inviting the right people who will help you achieve your goals. You might also consider creating a well-designed communications product that conveys your main messages to give to your event participants.
- Working with the NCEAS communications team: At this time we are not able to offer much assistance with such an approach, other than providing some initial guidance on how to go about planning the event.

Email your peers

- Don't be shy about sharing your new paper or tool with your professional network – word of mouth is often one of the best forms of promotion. Your message doesn't need to be complicated. A concise and to-the-point email is all you really need. And remember to mention that your work is the result of support from NCEAS!

Pitching to Journalists

We advise that you work with the NCEAS communications officer and/or the Public Information Officer from your home institution to pitch a story to a journalist. To craft a winning pitch, we will need to know the following:

- What is your study's main message (in non-technical terms)?
- Why is the study or product important?
- What is the “so what” of your study – i.e., what would make people care?
- What else about your study or product should we try to highlight in the pitch?

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