

# **Developing Effective Communication Strategies for Road Management Organisations.**

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## **Abstract:**

*Consistently implementing an effective communications strategy with external stakeholders is an essential element in developing and sustaining, financial and political support for road management activities. Unfortunately, most road management organisations (RMOs) fail to recognise this importance and have no such strategy in place. The result of this omission is that they are often fighting a continual rear-guard action to support their vital work. This reactive approach is usually ineffective, wasteful and demoralising to those involved.*

*This paper highlights why this happens, what are the main characteristics necessary for a successful communications strategy, and why this is important. The paper provides a range of recommended actions and strategies, together with some practical examples that can be applied by organisations that are funding or otherwise managing a road network, whether in a developing or developed country.*

## **Introduction**

In this paper, I shall be

1. Outlining the importance of establishing an effective communication strategy, both within a road management organisation, and with external stakeholders; the common problems that result from a poor communications strategy, as well as the benefits from implementing something better.
2. Highlighting the important characteristics necessary for a successful communication strategy.
3. Identifying the target markets for any such communication strategy.
4. Make recommendations on how to structure an effective communications strategy.
5. Suggesting specific modes and information to be disseminated.

## **The Importance of Effective Two-Way Communications**

The importance of effective communications, both within an organisation, and with its external stakeholders, can not be overestimated. It is a vital ingredient to any organisation's success and is a two way process.

- **Internally**, the leadership of the organisation needs to communicate its vision, aims and objectives throughout all of the staff, in order to engender a common sense of purpose and teambuilding. But the leadership must also be receptive to the needs,

concerns and issues faced throughout the organisation's staff, in order to ensure that they can fulfil their tasks efficiently and effectively.

- **Externally**, the leadership needs to inform the wider community about what are the activities, policies, objectives, achievements and issues faced by the organisation. No institution operates in a vacuum, and as discussed below, this is an essential role in building a stronger level of support and awareness for better roads. However, the organisation must also ensure that the priorities, concerns and views of its wider, external stakeholders (especially its customers and those funding it) are effectively received, because this is the foundation upon which the organisation should be evolving the range and level of its services to its customers.

### **Why Good Communications is Particularly Important for a RMO.**

This is especially important for a road management or funding institution, for the following reasons:

1. Those paying for and using the roads have no choice as to who spends their money and little say over the quality of service that they receive. They can not take their money or custom elsewhere. There is therefore a much greater onus on those spending this money to reassure these customers that they *are* receiving good value for their money, by clearly and continually demonstrating this.
2. There is a long lead time for the results of increased and stable, predictable funding to show discernable results to users.
3. The relationship between what users pay and what they receive in return is not clear, simple or direct, compared to most other commercial transactions. Until this connection between the level and stability of funding and the quality of the roads is clear, the RMO is living on good will, trust and borrowed time.
4. Given their high costs, the provision of road infrastructure services has traditionally been provided and managed by governments. This offers a high level of temptation for political interference in the way that funds for roads are utilised, undermining the credibility of these activities. This is especially the case for the construction of new roads, which traditionally have a high political profile. The result of such interference is often that the road network is expanded even whilst the existing network is inadequately maintained. This results in much higher maintenance costs in the future, compounded by a larger future network to maintain, and hence a larger challenge for the RMO. Unless the underlying cause of this problem is communicated to the wider community, this reflects badly on the RMO and its apparent use of resources.
5. The amount of money required to construct and maintain a road network is substantial. There is therefore a large temptation for cash-strapped governments to “borrow” or otherwise help themselves to these funds, especially when there is a seasonal imbalance between the levels of revenue and expenditure.

## **The Present Communications Weakness**

It is therefore of particular concern that most road management institutions are very weak at communicating with their stakeholders. This is often because most of these institutions are run by technically minded engineers, who are not known for their lucid communication skills! Furthermore, the development and ongoing funding for communications to external stakeholders is often seen as an extravagant and unimportant sideline to the core technical functions of a road management organisation. The results of this attitude are eventually serious to the organisation.

## **Why Good Communications Matter**

If the organisation's leadership are unable to express their message effectively to external stakeholders, then it is going to be constantly involved in fighting a rearguard, reactive campaign in defence of its decisions, actions and funding levels. The agenda will be set by those outside of the road management processes, whose views are likely to be ill-informed and influenced by issues that are unrelated or unimportant to those necessary to good road management. Countering this by road management institutions is likely to be wasteful, ineffective and demoralising, a situation with which many senior road managers are likely to be familiar. Furthermore, when this results in either inadequate or unpredictable levels of funding for road maintenance, the result is a loss in the efficiency and effectiveness of those providing the road infrastructure, with costly ramifications spread throughout the entire economy.

## **The Nature of the Issues Facing Senior Managers**

At the individual level, the most important issues facing senior road managers are not 'hard' technical or engineering in nature, but "soft" institutional, organisational and political issues. Consequently, although an appreciation of the technical / engineering issues is beneficial, if these senior managers are to be effective in their leadership roles, they must have excellent interpersonal, people skills. An essential element of this is an ability to communicate effectively, both internally with their staff, but also externally to outside stakeholders. They need to have an appreciation of the wider non-technical challenges that their organisation face, for it is these that will ultimately determine its success or otherwise. Unfortunately, those placed in charge of road management institutions are invariably from a predominantly technical background, with limited awareness, training or skill in these vital areas.

Road managers should of course, have the best appreciation of the reasons for their decisions and actions. It is their responsibility to communicate these reasons to those who are paying for them. Who else is better placed to do this?

## **Reassuring & Informing the Wider Community**

Basic human nature is such that people are more likely to support better funding for roads (and anything else), when they are aware of how their funds are being used and reassured that their money is being used carefully. Conversely, when people are not told how their money is being used and can not see any direct connection between how much they pay and what they receive in return, then eventually, they will become suspicious and resistant to being forced to pay. It is *their* money and they have a right to know how it is being used. This is a

fundamental pillar of good governance and applies to all areas of government, including road infrastructure.

### **The Political Involvement in Roads**

It is often left up to politicians to provide this accountability to road users and other tax payers. But as many will know, this is far from an ideal situation! By necessity, political horizons are much shorter than those required for good road management decisions. This has been one of the most important reasons why so much effort has rightly been put on moves to establish Road Boards and other institutional arrangements that keep road management functions and decision making as independent as possible from relatively short-term political issues.

This is not to dismiss the role that politics should continue to play in road management. Governments must continue to protect the wider public interest by setting appropriate strategic transport policies, overall government strategies and overseeing the whole transport sector. However, politicians are all-too-often tempted to interfere in the day-to-day decisions of what are basically the technical operational decisions of the technocrats. This is extremely common, even in developed countries, and as most road managers are aware, such decisions are often ill-informed and/or inappropriate to their own objectives and responsibilities.

This is further compounded by a common habit for the blame for subsequent failures or inability to perform to be laid at the door of the executive arm of government, such as the Roads Board, Fund or Road Authority or Agency. This is both demoralising and unfair to those involved in these activities, but unless it is effectively countered, it allows politicians to continue to pass the blame for their own bad decisions onto others, thereby providing no incentive for them to change their ways.

### **Using Transparency**

The executive arm of government however, is not entirely powerless to minimise and discourage this sort of inappropriate, outside interference. Implementing a consistent and well thought through communication strategy with external stakeholders is perhaps the most effective way to reduce this problem. It should be an integral part of a general policy of greater transparency. In fact, it is so important that the legislation establishing road management institutions should stipulate in some detail, their requirements to communicate and disseminate information to external stakeholders (see below).

Such transparency has several important benefits:

1. It reassures those paying for the provision of roads that their funds are being used wisely, and over time, should engender greater support for current expenditure levels, or even higher levels, with a greater understanding of the issues involved.
2. It provides an effective means of accountability by road managers. This not only helps to progressively improve decision making and operations, but also...
3. It helps to protect managers from continual political interference and buck-passing, as the responsibility and justification for decisions made is much clearer. To the contrary,

a clearer understanding of who should be responsible for what, should help make life easier for politicians, fund holders and road managers.

### **Characteristics Necessary for an Effective Communications Strategy**

It must be recognised that perhaps the most important role of a communications strategy is to 'sell' the need for greater road financing to the wider community. As such, the concepts for effective selling should be applied to the design of the communications strategy. Road managers need to be unashamed to promote (or sell) what they are doing.

The first characteristic for an effective communications strategy is **to define exactly what are its objectives**. What is it trying to do? Why should a road management institution bother with such efforts. The main reasons are likely to be:

- To promote the importance of road funding to key stakeholders.
- To inform and reassure those paying, that their funds are being used wisely.
- To gain support for adequate funding for roads on a long-term, sustainable basis.

The more precisely these objectives are defined, the easier it is to design the communications strategy accordingly.

**Identifying the target audience** is the second crucial characteristic (and can be included in the objectives above). For road management institutions, there are likely to be three core groups in the broader society:

- **Key decision makers and opinion formers.** These are the people who make decisions as to how much funding is to be provided for roads, and how the relevant institutions are to be structured and run. They should include all Ministers of government, MPs (or Congressmen / Senators), the media (radio, TV and press), business leaders and other key opinion formers (such as the police and religious / community leaders).
- **Those who pay for the roads.** It is their money that allows the road management functions to be carried out. They need to be reassured that their funds are being used well. This is especially important for roads, given that they normally have no choice about paying for these services, nor can they take their funds elsewhere to a competing supplier.
- **Road users.** These may (should) be the same as those who pay for the roads (above), but may not be. Road users are usually politically powerful and their support for better road funding is crucial in the broader political environment. Road users should include motorists, public transport operators and users, taxi organisations and haulage / freight companies.

These target groups have different needs and interests pertaining to roads. **The communications strategy should therefore be tailored to their issues and interests.** This is an important (and too often missed) aspect of effective communications: people buy a product, service or idea for *their* reasons, not the reasons of the seller. A restaurant would not

be successful in promoting its meat dishes to a vegetarian customer! Likewise, it will not be effective to promote aspects of road management that are irrelevant to the target groups. Thus, communications directed towards freight companies should focus on issues, policies, decision and activities that are important to them. These are likely to be different than for motorists, public transport users and operators, or decision makers. The more specific the material can be to a particular target group, the more effective it is likely to be.

This requires road managers to have a good understanding of the needs, priorities and concerns of their target groups. This however, should be an important role for them anyway, so that they can ensure that the services that they provide are as appropriate as possible. Hence the need for good two-way communications, as highlighted above.

**Sell the benefits not the features.** Road users do not care what is the roughness of a road. They care that their journey is comfortable, speedy and safe. In communicating the activities and decisions of road management institutions, the strategy should focus on how these improve the level of service experienced by the target groups (i.e. what are the outcomes, rather than the inputs). It is up to road managers to translate these benefits into the criteria that measure these benefits. It is however, very common (but inappropriate) for the performance of a RMO to be defined (if it is at all), in terms of inputs (such as the quantity of work carried out), rather than in the level of service experienced by road users.

Likewise, **use appropriate terminology and language.** There is a temptation for technical people to express themselves in technical terms, using acronyms and specialised terms. This is an instant turn-off to most people, making such efforts a waste of everyone's time! The message that you are trying to get across needs to be expressed in a way that your target audience can easily understand. This can be a challenge in the area of road management, where complex relationships exist, but it is still necessary. It is not the message that is transmitted that is important, but the message that is received! As effective communicators, we need to ensure that these are the same.

Similarly, the **communications should be transmitted in the locally used language**, rather than in English (unless this is the commonly used language of course). Road management institutions need to **'relate' to the target groups**, to demonstrate that they are on the same side as their customers, there to help their customers achieve *their* objectives and protect *their* interests. Using a foreign language, technically complex terminology or a foreign face is more likely to be seen as 'talking down' to local stakeholders, automatically engendering some level of (often subconscious) resistance. It is better to use local people, speaking in the local language, using non-technical, easily understood terms.

Finally, any effective communications strategy requires the organisation to **keep doing it**. There is little or no benefit from transmitting your message on an ad-hoc or one-off basis. With repetition comes retention. Repeatedly transmitting the same message to the target audience is a technique that all successful companies follow, and road management institutions are no different, because the nature of their target audiences are basically the same. The implication of this is that road institutions need to have in place, a permanent facility to continually get the message out there.

## **Recommended Organisational Approach**

It should be obvious by now that the skills required to manage an effective communications strategy for a road management organisation are somewhat different to those traditionally considered important in such institutions. These involve marketing, selling and communication skills, areas in which technically trained road managers are traditionally often weak.

Developing and implementing an appropriate communications strategy for a road management organisation need not be a large, costly task, but it is a full-time, long-term activity. It is recommended that the organisation therefore has a small Public Relations (PR) unit dedicated to this role, or alternatively, procures this expertise from a suitable local supplier on a long term basis. The unit (or service) should be headed up by a PR expert who has a good knowledge of the local community and contacts in the local media. This individual should report directly to the Chief Executive and assist the organisation's senior managers with all aspects of their communications with external stakeholders, including other government institutions. He (or she) should be supported by at least two other full-time individuals, responsible for developing appropriate PR material, computer based skills (e.g. DTP and web design) and other administrative needs of the unit. This unit would also be responsible for procuring the services of market surveyors in order to measure specific issues in the wider target groups (or market), such as the level of awareness of specific road issues or to collect a better understanding of their needs and priorities. The first task of this unit should be to devise an appropriate costed, communications strategy for the RMO, including objective measures by which its effectiveness and success can be measured over time.

## **Communications Strategy**

There are a number of strategies that should be considered by the Road Management Organisation (RMO), in order to ensure that it has an effective communications strategy with its external stakeholders. The actual approach used will depend on the specific circumstances of each stakeholder and societal structure, and this should be considered by the PR expert in devising the communications strategy.

- Publication of regular reports about the road network, its status, actual work underway, work planned, network statistics, financial status and key policies. Although this sort of information should be contained within the RMO's Annual Report, summary leaflets should be produced for those who do not require detailed information. Extensive use of maps, charts, diagrams and colour should be used (rather than tables of numbers), whilst technical and specialised terms minimised and clearly explained if used.
- Production of short articles on specific issues, suitable for publication in leaflet form, or for submission to the media, once again employing the use of diagrams, photos and charts where appropriate.
- Regular production of maps of the road network, showing aspects that are likely to be of interest and use to road users, such as: general condition of the network, areas where work is underway and planned, and average journey times between key points on the network.

- Interviews of senior managers with the media, especially the national television, radio, newspapers and magazines.
- Provision of a Web site, containing all of the above information, together with an opportunity for members of the public to contact the RMO (both centrally and on a local/regional basis).
- The provision of mailing addresses, a fax and telephone ‘hotline’ and email address for members of the public to contact the RMO. All enquiries should be acknowledged and statistics about these calls collected and analysed to identify for example, the main issues raised.
- The provision of regular ‘briefing’ sessions and materials to key decision makers, including MPs, the media and other opinion formers.
- The publication and presentation of detailed technical papers about specific issues, to permit a broad level of discussion by interested parties, such as at Engineering Institutions.
- The sponsorship of specific community activities that are congruent with the objectives of the RMO, such as road safety initiatives.
- The use of advertising and public notices to inform road users and the wider public about the activities of the RMO.

### **Institutional Support**

No institution operates within an institutional vacuum, but must have clear, ongoing interactions with other public and private sector organisations. This is especially true for road management organisations, who must have long-term perspectives with both the public and private sectors. All aspects of its operational effectiveness will be strongly influenced by the institutional framework within which it must work. This includes its communications with external stakeholders.

Better communications requires consistent effort and funding. It also requires a willingness by senior managers to present their case and be subject to some degree of external exposure. The temptation to avoid these potential risks needs to be resisted and appropriate institutional arrangements should be put in place to ensure that this does not happen. Such measures include:

- A requirement for the road management organisation (RMO) to produce an Annual Report within a certain time from the end of each Financial Year, which must adhere to the usual requirements of a commercial style Annual Report. This should be made publicly available.
- A requirement to have a Performance Agreement each year, that defines in detail, the Target Values for a range of appropriate Key Performance Indicators (KPIs). This should also be made publicly available.

- A publicly available independent technical and financial auditors' report on the performance of the RMO.
- An obligation by the senior managers (e.g. Chief Executive, Directors and Board Members) to hold regular, well-publicised public meetings, so that the public can ask questions and obtain more knowledge about the operations and decisions of the RMO.
- A general policy of transparency in all the activities and decisions made by the RMO, unless specific reasons are given for particular cases as to why this should not be the case (such as commercial confidentiality). This should include clear and transparent operating procedures, standards and policies.

Ultimately, responsibility to ensure that the road management organisation does have and does implement an effective communications strategy, lies with the relevant Minister of State, through the use of legislative clauses, Ministerial Orders and other measures (such as effective auditing). Where this does not occur (which is, alas, all too common), it is up to the general public to demand that the government *does* fulfil its oversight responsibilities properly.

### **Internal Communications**

The focus of this paper has been on the communications strategies that a RMO should have with its external stakeholders. However, the senior management of the organisation should also complement this external strategy with an effective internal strategy to communicate its policies, strategies, priorities and visions throughout its internal staff within the organisation. This is essential to building a cohesive, integrated organisation, with a sense of teamwork, belonging and loyalty to the organisation's goals.

### **Examples**

Unfortunately, providing examples of successful communication strategies by an RMO has not been possible, because the author has yet to see any in place! Some of the elements identified above are evident, especially in developed countries such as the UK, New Zealand and Australia, such as the provision of web sites and written documents (such as Annual Reports and pamphlets). Alas, plenty of examples exist of poor communication strategies by RMOs, from which the above conclusions and recommendations have been developed, and most of the problems highlighted above were present in more than a single country.

### **References**

Most of this material is based on practical experience and observations gained with road management organisations in more than dozen countries in Africa, Asia, the Caribbean, Europe and Australasia.

Readers who are interested in improving their communications and leadership skills should contact Toastmasters International ([www.toastmasters.org](http://www.toastmasters.org)), a voluntary public speaking organisation with branches in over 50 countries.

There are numerous publications available which cover sales and selling techniques. There is however, no substitute for practical experience in this!

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