

Dating the Decision-makers: **Moving from Communications to Engagement** *Version 1.1*

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IISD INTERNATIONAL INSTITUTE FOR
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1. INTRODUCTION.....	1
2. THEORETICAL BASIS FOR ENGAGEMENT STRATEGIES	3
1.1 LESSONS FROM THE MARKETING COMMUNITY	4
1.2 LESSONS FROM THE FUNDRAISING COMMUNITY	7
1.3 LESSONS FROM THE KNOWLEDGE MANAGEMENT COMMUNITY.....	8
1.4 LESSONS FROM THE SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY COMMUNITY	9
1.5 PULLING IT TOGETHER.....	10
2 ELEMENTS OF ENGAGEMENT STRATEGIES	10
2.1 STAGES OF ENGAGEMENT	11
2.2 ENGAGEMENT CASE STUDIES.....	13
3 ELEMENTS OF COMMUNICATIONS STRATEGIES	16
3.1 GOAL SETTING	17
3.2 AUDIENCE IDENTIFICATION	17
3.3 IDENTIFICATION OF APPROPRIATE SUITE OF TOOLS.....	19
3.4 EVALUATION AND REVISION	24
4 CONCLUSION.....	25

1. Introduction

The goal of communications for sustainable development is to change policy and practice. It is about bridging the gap between knowledge and action.

Traditionally, however, there have been only two types of "communications" strategies: public relations strategies that are focused on raising or managing a positive profile for an organization or corporation; and marketing strategies that "sell" a particular concept or product. Marketing strategies are further divided into two camps: traditional *business marketing* approaches which require an analysis of customer needs, behaviour and media habits; and *social marketing* approaches which focus on behaviour change rather than sales, but which still require analysis of target audience behaviour and media habits.

The difficulty with the traditional PR, marketing and social marketing approaches is that they tend to be focused on, and work best for, single organizations, single products, single issues and narrowly defined target audiences. But as we all know, sustainable development is built on the cooperation of multiple stakeholders, partners, and alliances, and the intersection of multiple considerations within the spheres of economy, environment and social well being.

Within the sustainable development community, we need to expand our views of communications in response to:

- The complexity of the issues
- The number of groups working both independently and collaboratively on the issues
- The increase in availability of tools to support collaboration
- The speed and penetration of today's media vehicles
- The changing concept of "audience" from passive recipients of products to stakeholders and partners in problem solving.

Sustainable development organizations are increasingly shifting their focus from developing communications strategies to instituting engagement strategies. Engagement is a process of relationship building that acknowledges the power of two-way communications. It is a process of gradually moving people from being recipients of information to being partners in the process of developing new solutions to sustainable development issues. It is a process of joint learning which blurs the distinctions between communicator and audience – effectively reducing the relevance of much traditional communications theory and language about target audiences and market segments.

Audiences and partners will vary depending on the topic addressed, but may include individuals from governments, businesses, community organizations, and the financial community. Sustainable development communicators must utilize a suite of tools and approaches to ensure that decision-makers are:

- aware of critical sustainable development issues
- knowledgeable of solutions/approaches possible
- confident in their ability to invest in/develop/modify solutions for use in their own situation.

As one of a series on “Managing International Knowledge Networks”, this paper focuses on the particular challenges of developing and implementing engagement strategies in the context of formal knowledge networks. A formal knowledge network consists of groups of expert institutions working together on a common concern, strengthening each other's research and communications capacity, sharing knowledge bases and developing solutions that are made available for use by others outside the network.¹ In addition to outlining the theoretical basis for engagement strategies, it provides practical advice on their development and implementation in network contexts.

¹ Clark, Howard. *Formal Knowledge Networks: A Study of Canadian Experiences*. Winnipeg: IISD, 1998. p. 12-13.

2. Theoretical basis for engagement strategies

Fundamental to the engagement approach is an understanding that it is easier to leverage relationships to create behavioural change than it is to leverage information. Who says things matters. Before any of us is willing to take a risk and change our behaviour, we must be confident that the advice is sound, relevant to our own situation, and that we are able to modify it to meet our needs. In a world of information overload, our primary mechanism for filtering information, assessing its trustworthiness and deciding what to act upon is through the people we know.

Change requires taking risks.
Willingness to take risks is based on trust.
Trust is based on relationships.

Relationships build the trust necessary to bridge the gap between knowledge and action for sustainable development. Relationships, not information, are at the centre of all communications.

Knowledge networks focus on relationship building with decision-makers within government, business and civil society around the world. These relationships are built, maintained and managed toward achieving concrete sustainable development goals. Since trusting relationships take time to build and maintain, it is in the interest of each knowledge network member to work in partnership with other institutions around the world who already have established relationships with decision-makers. In addition, in many parts of the world, there is great fluidity between staff within influencing institutions and decision-making positions. Therefore, building the capacity of key influencing institutions is critical to achieving an organization's strategic objectives both directly and indirectly.

Each well-managed relationship not only helps to achieve the network's goals directly, but also provides access to both additional relationships and a broader funding base. Care must be taken to ensure time spent on managing relationships at various levels is

balanced. Networks can afford neither to alienate a new potential relationship nor to ignore the needs and interests of its close partners and decision-makers.

The importance of relationships to opportunities for influence is not new. However, throughout the 1990s, the focus on relationships in communications was often overshadowed by the increased emphasis on information exchange. However, as the Internet matures, research is emerging on the role of information within the broader context of community formation and learning.² Much of this research is based on lessons derived from the fields of marketing, fundraising, knowledge management, and communications.

1.1 Lessons from the marketing community

The field of marketing has been shaken by the introduction of the Internet. In 1999, Rick Levine, Christopher Locke, Doc Searls and David Weinberger launched the Cluetrain Manifesto declaring:

A powerful global conversation has begun. Through the Internet, people are discovering and inventing new ways to share relevant knowledge with blinding speed. As a direct result, markets are getting smarter—and getting smarter faster than most companies. These markets are conversations. Their members communicate in language that is natural, open, honest, direct, funny and often shocking...[N]etworked markets have no respect for companies unable or unwilling to speak as they do...[But] most companies ignore their ability to deliver genuine knowledge, opting instead to crank out sterile happytalk that insults the intelligence of markets literally too smart to buy it.³

² Brown, John Seely and Paul Duguid. *The Social Life of Information*. Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 2000.

³ Levine, Rick, Christopher Locke, Doc Searls and David Weinberger. *Cluetrain Manifesto*. <http://www.cluetrain.org/> (16 August 2001)

The 95 theses of the Cluetrain Manifesto rattled the world of corporate marketing. Unfortunately, its implications have largely been missed in the world of nonprofits intent on “professionalizing” their marketing approaches by adopting the techniques which leading edge corporations are now abandoning. Many continue to invest in contentless brochures and annual reports instead of empowering all staff to communicate effectively. On the positive side, many civil society organizations around the world have never made the leap to marketingese... they continue to communicate through one on one conversations with potential collaborators and allies.

In addition to changes in tone and style, the late 1990s also saw changes to when and how marketing campaigns were conducted. Traditional marketing techniques relied on interrupting what people are doing at any given moment to convince them that they should be doing something else. However, it was becoming obvious that such a strategy was doomed to fail in the long run since the opportunity cost to people is just too high. In a knowledge economy, there is a glut of information freely available elsewhere. The scarcest commodities are time and attention. Interruption marketing wastes information seekers' time; in the meantime, information producers are never sure that they have their target audience's attention.

According to Seth Godin, the alternative is Permission Marketing, which offers people an opportunity to volunteer to be marketed to.⁴ It allows marketers to calmly and succinctly tell their story, without fear of being interrupted by competitors or Interruption Marketers. Permission Marketing encourages consumers to participate in a long-term, interactive marketing campaign in which they are rewarded in some way for paying attention to increasingly relevant messages. Permission Marketing is just like dating. Through this process, the producer and consumer gradually establish a relationship and learn more about each other. Many of the rules of dating apply, and so do many of the benefits.

⁴ Godin, Seth. *Permission Marketing: Turning Strangers into Friends, and Friends into Customers*. Simon & Schuster, 1999.

According to Godin, there are five steps to dating your customer

1. Offer the prospect an incentive to volunteer
2. Using the attention offered by the prospect, offer a curriculum over time, teaching the consumer about your product or service
3. Reinforce the incentive to guarantee that the prospect maintains the permission
4. Offer additional incentives to get even more permission from the consumer
5. Over time, leverage the permission to change consumer behavior towards profits

Sustainable development knowledge networks could apply these principles as they strive to change decision-makers' actions. Incentives in this context would usually consist of the information itself, packaged in increasingly customized formats tailored to meet the needs of the individual. In exchange for providing more customized information, the network would request additional information about the decision maker, moving from a simple e-mail address to include the person's name, position, country, experience, and specific interests. Each time a product is requested, the knowledge network can learn more about what exactly that individual wants and needs. This allows for further innovation and development of products that meet the needs of known users who want to learn more.

For example, rather than trying to convince a government minister to change toward green taxes across the board with a single publication, permission marketing suggests that more can be accomplished by creating a series of smaller, more tailored products that can be delivered to policy-makers upon request. As the relationship is established and the network more clearly understands the decision-makers' predicaments, it should be able to help them achieve what they really want - environmental integrity, economic development and increased well-being. The curriculum then involves defining those things and showing policy-makers what types of policies and practices will actually be implementable given their constraints. It may also involve, in the case of the green taxes example, providing the appropriate government ministry with the communication strategies for changing public opinion to favour such taxes.

1.2 Lessons from the fundraising community

While permissions marketing may sound calculating, such approaches are not foreign to the world of civil society. Over the past decade, the concept of ‘moves management’ has gained ascendancy in fundraising and philanthropic circles. Personal attention in cultivating and soliciting prospects is critical in the major gifts program.⁵ Like permission marketing, the moves management process entails taking a series of steps (moves) with identified prospects. The idea is to move them from attention, to interest, to desire, and back to attention. Essentially, you develop a strategy for each prospect. Then you track the progress of the relationship by planning contacts, implementing moves, and evaluating the success of each move. It's a constantly changing strategy that you refine as you move along.

One of the greatest challenges of implementing moves management has been tracking relationships between organizations and individuals over an extended period of time. However, the increased power of database technologies and customized user interfaces has made it easier for organizations to track interactions with potential and current donor prospects. The Institute for Charitable Giving has even released its own version of Moves Management software based on Symantec's ACT! 4.+ contact management software.

However, collective relationship management is a resource-intensive task. While organizational efforts have made some progress toward systematizing knowledge about relationships, networks have largely not managed information about external relationships in a coordinated manner. The roots of the problem go beyond incompatible database systems and platforms. The lack of network contacts management is more closely linked to the real costs of staff time required to maintain formal systems. Databases are easily built, but staff within sustainable development organizations do not perceive significant benefits from systematically tracking their collective contacts and

⁵ Kelly, Kathleen S. "Effective Fund-Raising Management Summary" *UL-Lafayette site*. <http://www.ucs.louisiana.edu/~ksk1890/summary.html>

leads. Most staff are too busy implementing projects and fulfilling the expectations of current relationships to pursue many new opportunities or to mine data for potentially interesting new areas of work. Thus, while corporations have moved from developing internal systems management software to connecting these with those of their suppliers and customers, civil society organizations have barely begun to develop internal systems. CSOs do not have the internal systems in place to grow or to spin off ideas in order to take advantage of all opportunities that are available.

1.3 Lessons from the knowledge management community

Knowledge management practices are quickly moving from the private sector to the international development community. While experiments began with large donor organizations such as the World Bank and the Canadian International Development Agency, there is a growing appreciation of the need for collaborative knowledge management networks.⁶

Most organizations are discovering that you cannot manage knowledge; it is too slippery, it changes too quickly. Rather than trying to database everything people know, it can often be more effective to foster communities of practice where people can find others who know what they need to know when they need it. This shifts the focus from classifying data to facilitating learning between people.

Communities of practice are also able to move beyond explicit knowledge to sharing implicit and tacit knowledge as well. Implicit knowledge deals with the contextual surroundings of an organization or community that shapes the collective expectations and values. Tacit knowledge refers to ways of doing things practiced by individuals and communities. Most tacit knowledge cannot be fully articulated, if at all. Someone can explain it to you, but it takes trial and error to be able to do it yourself.

⁶ Bellanet. *Knowledge Management and International Development*.

<http://www.bellanet.org/km/> (16 August 2001)

Finally, knowledge management experts have rediscovered the power of stories and objects.⁷ It turns out that interesting stories and things attract interesting people and conversations. We used to think that innovative people made innovative products, but the latest research at MIT indicates that innovative products actually attract innovative people.⁸

1.4 Lessons from the social psychology community

How do people hear about innovative ideas and products in the first place, though? According to “The Tipping Point,” ideas and products and messages and behaviors spread just like viruses do.⁹ Similar to medical epidemics, a handful of special people play an important role in starting idea epidemics. They translate the message of innovators into something we can understand. They alter it in such a way that extraneous details are dropped and others are exaggerated so that the message itself comes to acquire deeper meaning.

- Mavens – These individuals are idea specialists. They are human databanks who are obsessive about details and sharing them with others.
- Connectors – Connectors are people specialists. They know a LOT of people from every possible sub-culture and niche there is. They have an extraordinary knack for making friends and acquaintances out of everyone from a farmer in a village in Ethiopia to vice presidents of international banks. They act as social glue by spreading ideas around.

⁷ The most widely-known book on storytelling as a knowledge management practice is Stephen Denning’s *The Springboard : How Storytelling Ignites Action in Knowledge-Era Organizations*. Butterworth Heinemann: Woburn, MA, 2000. See <http://www.stevedenning.com/> for additional information and discussion.

⁸ Schrage, Michael. *Serious Play: How the World’s Best Companies Simulate to Innovate*. Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 2000.

⁹ Gladwell, Malcolm. *The Tipping Point: How Little Things Can Make a Big Difference*. Boston: Little Brown & Company , 2000.

- Salespeople – These individuals have the skills to persuade us when we are unconvinced of what we are hearing. They are masters of the art of emotional expression and draw people into their own conversational rhythms on a completely sub-conscious level.

1.5 Pulling it together

In reviewing the experiences of various communications communities, we find that the following principles can serve as the basis for a successful engagement strategy. Such a strategy:

- Has a clear focus and goals
- Acknowledges that people are the most important resource for sustainable development
- Uses tangible projects as a way of focusing conversations and attracting interesting people to learn from each other
- Bases participation on the individual's/organization's ability to fulfill specific roles in transforming innovation into general practice
- Provides graduated steps for participation of stakeholders

The next section of the paper will explore how to put these principles into practice within the context of sustainable development knowledge networks.

2 Elements of engagement strategies

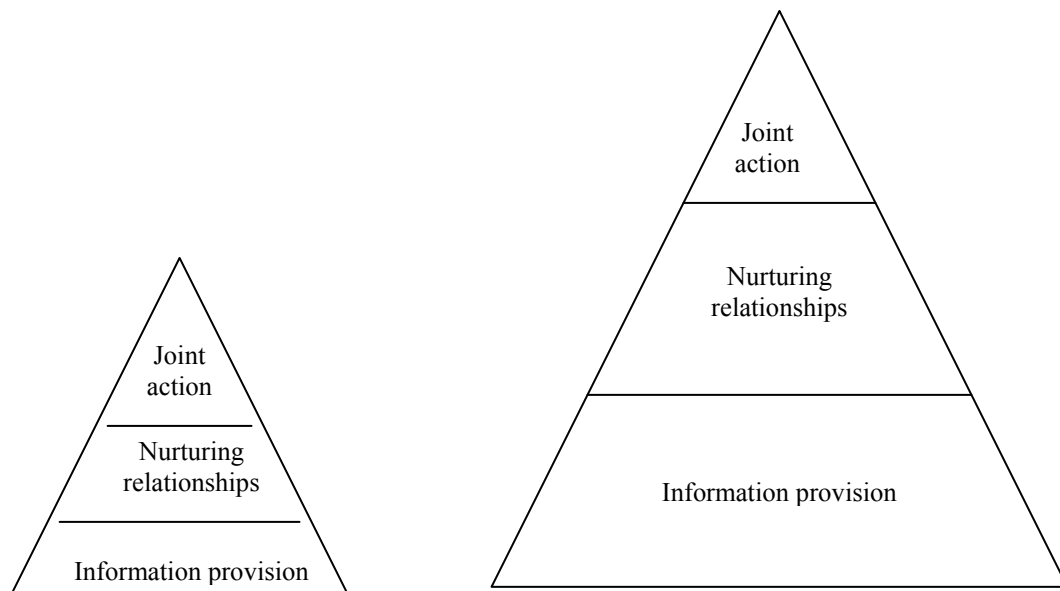
An engagement strategy can be thought of as a systemic approach to building action-oriented relationships over time. It provides a conceptual framework to help ensure that individual projects and communication strategies within a knowledge network build upon one another to foster collaborative learning and change.

Over the past 5 years, IISD has been experimenting with developing engagement strategies in the context of formal knowledge networks. All projects and the network itself have communication strategies. However, the most important thing is to structure

those communications strategies in such a way that they add up to a broader engagement strategy.

2.1 Stages of Engagement

The stages of engagement can be thought of as levels in a pyramid, with the highest levels of engagement at the top of the pyramid. This reflects the reality that at any given point in time a broad base of support is required to support a smaller number of intense relationships. Seen from the perspective of the network, the stages move from providing general information to decision-makers to nurturing a relationship with them to undertaking joint actions. Over time, the size of the relationship pyramid of a successful network will grow - reflecting its ability to manage relationships effectively toward achievement of network goals.



1a. Engagement pyramid - Time 1

1b. Engagement pyramid - Time 2

2.1.1 Information provision

This is the broadest type of relationship. The knowledge of the network is packaged for sharing with decision-makers. Communication strategies are planned and implemented to ensure that increasing numbers of decision-makers are aware of, and have access to, the experiences and lessons of network members. As the first level of relationship building, organizations request very little information in exchange for the provision of their knowledge base on sustainable development. However, from records of information

centre inquiries, workshop attendees, publication purchases and Web site statistics, the network can determine that interested individuals include a wide base of people from civil society, government, business and academia around the world.

2.1.2 Nurturing relationships

To grow and flourish, relationships require conversations. At some point in the provision/reception of general information products and services, either the decision-maker or the network may decide to advance the relationship. At workshops, this step is easily observed in conversations over coffee or following panel presentations. Short introductions are made and business cards exchanged. In a virtual environment, there are several ways to encourage this step to happen:

- Establishment of a discussion group that opens the possibility for public conversations
- Establishment of reciprocal Web links or sharing of relevant information
- Establishment of clear mechanisms to contact the network privately

Following the introduction, both the network and the decision-maker have time to decide whether to pursue the relationship. Too frequently, follow-up does not occur and the conversations end. To be successful, networks must ensure that follow up occurs quickly and professionally. Since knowledge networks are distributed organizations, this requires that all members make provisions for following up on in-person and e-mail questions and feedback. It is not the job of the secretariat alone. Cultivation of important new contacts may require the coordinated joint actions of many members.

Nurturing relationships is a time-intensive task. It requires not just responding to conversations, but starting them as well. It requires ensuring that the network is represented at important events in order to solidify existing relationships and explore possible avenues for joint action.

2.1.3 Joint action

Once trust has been established and visions of sustainable development clarified, decision-makers may wish to work more closely with a knowledge network in resolving

their current challenges. Joint action between knowledge networks and decision-makers usually takes the form of a funded project or consulting arrangement. Knowledge networks usually do not have adequate core resources to engage in substantive joint actions without direct support from specific decision-makers. Unlike traditional development approaches, knowledge networks are usually seeking not just funding, but substantive contributions of knowledge and relationship from the decision-makers as well. This is based on the understanding that decision-makers are more likely to implement policy recommendations if they have been active participants in the research as well.

2.2 Engagement Case Studies

The case studies that follow illustrate the relationships between various external communication products and services as part of a broader network engagement strategy.

2.2.1 Case Study I: Trade Knowledge Network

The goal of the Trade Knowledge Network is to foster long-term capacity to address the complex issues of trade and sustainable development in developing country governments, research institutions and other non-governmental organizations. It seeks to help build capacity at the national level in partner countries for stronger voices on issues of trade and sustainable development. It also seeks to help identify those areas where improved environmental protection may offer economic benefits from increased exports as well as benefits in terms of environment and development—the win-win scenarios. Finally, and perhaps most important, it seeks to bring the actual developing country experience of the trade and sustainable development linkages to a Northern audience that too often perceives those linkages through the filters of untested assumptions.

The base of its engagement strategy is the creation and provision of research reports on issues related to trade and sustainable development in developing countries. Two series of reports were created, country specific reports and cross-cutting international issues papers on themes such as TRIPS and the greening of government procurement. This research is provided freely to government trade experts, academics, and civil society organizations through the TKN Web site <<http://iisd.ca/tkn/>> and as print publications.

Relationships with decision-makers are nurtured at various levels through the TKN: the Trade Knowledge Network (TKN), and the looser national level networks. The TKN is the network of research partners from each country, who will help review each others' work, and will periodically meet to assess common problems and chart progress. The national-level networks are groups of interested NGOs, academics, businesses and government officials first drawn together at policy workshops (or ideally, earlier during the research process), that recognize the importance of the issues, and to which the research partners can channel information on trade and sustainable development. The goal is to help breathe independent life into these national level networks, which can then become enduring forces for change.

The engagement strategy was most strongly featured in the policy workshops element of the project. More than providing the research freely to the audience, the network members tried to engage the audience by bringing it together and presenting the results of the research, followed by discussions and consideration of the way forward. Every partner had at least one such workshop in phase one.

While the TKN has not yet achieved a top level of engagement in terms of joint actions through the network with particular decision-makers, individual member organizations are working closely with national governments on trade policy reform. For example, the Trade and Industrial Policy Secretariat (TIPS) in South Africa hosted a workshop in July 1999 in collaboration with the Department of Trade and Industry as preparation for South African negotiations at the World Trade Organisation (WTO) on the General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS). In Pakistan, the Sustainable Development Policy Network (SDPI) has followed up its initial workshop with further meetings with officials from the ministries of environment, commerce and agriculture, especially on TRIPS-related issues. Training courses for officials have also been initiated. SDPI plans to use its good relations with the Minister of Environment to establish an inter-agency working group. This group would have monthly meetings to brief people on forthcoming issues.

The success of the network as a whole can be assessed through its ability to consciously manage relationships and meet the needs of an expanding community of developing country trade policy-makers. Over time, as the reputation of the network increases, decision-makers will move from reading TKN research results to participating in workshops to developing joint actions that change international trade policy and practice.

2.2.2 Case Study II: Climate Change Knowledge Network

The goal of the Climate Change Knowledge Network is to create knowledge and enhance the capacity of developing and developed countries to shape an effective, equitable and sustainable climate change regime. The network seeks to build capacity so that negotiators can take actions to link development with efforts to mitigate climate change, with sustainable development as the overall goal. In early 2000, the members of the Climate Change Knowledge Network decided to undertake an initiative to prepare African and Latin American climate change negotiators to represent their countries' interests more effectively. It was felt that many small delegations had little formal experience with either climate change issues or with strategies for managing their time and alliances during protracted negotiation sessions.

In July 2000, a five-day Dakar workshop for African negotiators was organized by IISD and ENDA; the three-day Miami workshop for Latin American and Caribbean negotiators was organized by CSDA. Following the two workshops, CSDA, with participation from IISD, ENDA and IVM, published "On Behalf of My Delegation, . . .", a survival guide for developing country climate change negotiators. Over 650 copies of the book and 250 CD-ROM versions were distributed at COP-6. The survival guide is available on-line at the CCKN web site <<http://www.cckn.net/delegation.htm>>. The book was also translated into Spanish and French for subsequent negotiations.

By providing practical training for developing country negotiators in multiple formats, the CCKN has quickly established relationships with climate change policy-makers from around the world. Not only will this engagement strategy have short-term impacts on negotiations, but it has also opened the possibility for continued dialogue and joint action

in the coming years. Some of these negotiators will likely become supporters of and participants in other network activities regarding decentralized renewable energy and vulnerability and adaptation.

3 Elements of communications strategies

Engagement strategies rest upon a solid foundation of expertise in research and traditional communications. For communications activities to be effective, they must walk a careful line between what a group has to say and what and how the audience wants, needs, and expects to hear the message. Unfortunately, civil society organisations often focus more on the former than the latter. While they have extensive expertise in research on sustainable development topics, they have less experience with a wide variety of communications media and techniques. Publishing and communications are seen as relatively straightforward activities that any researcher should be able to successfully undertake once the research is complete. As a result, many civil society organisations develop research products and services that are written and produced in a way that they communicate most clearly only with other civil society organisations. They produce what they would like to read or see. They may frequently be less familiar with the needs of business, government, and community audiences – even though they claim to seek to influence these groups. This reduces the effectiveness of their overall work.

In order to be effective, knowledge networks must seek to build the communications capacity of member organisations to ensure that they are developing and delivering research products in the most effective manner possible. They must learn to repackage and redeliver the same information differently for different audiences.¹⁰ The network cannot develop and deliver a communications strategy unless member organizations have

¹⁰ While not developed in a knowledge network setting, Porter Novelli's "Communication Strategy Statement for the National Youth Anti-Drug Media Campaign" (<http://www.nida.nih.gov/rfp/5063/exhibitc.htm>) is a good example of how to outline a communications strategy.

some familiarity with communication practices. Participation in network activities can build on the capacity of member organisations to better manage their individual communications activities as well.

3.1 Goal setting

Communications is a tool, not a goal in itself. The goal of any communications activity should be to change the actions of a particular group. Communications products and services are merely the tools to provide information, advice, and experience to people faced with decisions in order to influence them toward a desired outcome.

Communications is not a value-neutral exercise.

Clear goals must include specific reference to which target audience one would like to undertake what actions within what timeframe. Greater specificity enhances a group's ability to develop products and services to meet their goals. All further decisions about audiences, communication tools and methodologies grew from that goal.

3.2 Audience identification

The action one wishes to change and the target audience for a particular product or service may be different. This is due to the varied ways in which decision-makers seek information. It may often be more efficient to target information brokers with established personal relationships with decision-makers than to target decision-makers themselves.

Policy-makers, practitioners and the international development community each approach information gathering in different ways. For example, policy-makers frequently maintain contact with the academic community. Non-governmental organisations wishing to influence government policies may, at times, be more effective if they create communication products and services targeted at the academic community. Academics may then draw upon these resources in their policy-briefings for government ministers. By comparison, consulting firms often have greater legitimacy with the business community than non-profit organisations. Influencing senior business leaders may often be most efficiently done by providing materials to consulting firms which they may draw upon in developing training programs and consulting reports for corporations.

Understanding one's audiences includes developing an understanding of what constraints they face at any particular time. The messages developed for that audience must address how they may overcome their constraints. For example, in North America at the present time, it may not be useful to recommend raising fuel taxes to the government; it is constrained in its ability to act on the issue by public sentiment. If a group chooses to make such recommendations, they must accompany those recommendations with communications strategies and materials that the government could use to help shift public sentiment. Investing in learning more about one's audience and addressing their perceived constraints directly may increase the likelihood that recommendations are acted upon.

The selection of audience will determine the most appropriate tone and format for the communication product or service. If the desired target audience includes senior decision-makers, it must take into account their actual information gathering habits. Executive summaries and short articles in leading newspapers and magazines have a greater chance of being read than comprehensive reports. More detailed information and case studies, however, must be made available for their junior staff to review as the need arises. Young professionals in government and business play an important role in interpreting and aggregating information for decision-making. They may be more likely to seek information online through Web sites and email discussion group archives. While the style of writing must be appropriate for excerpting into policy-briefs, the design and conceptual navigation must suit the needs and understanding of the young professionals.

Ultimately, CSOs and knowledge networks must engage in "intelligence" activities to learn as much as possible about their target audiences and about other organizations vying for the target's attention and action. One's information rarely arrives in a silent vacuum. In fact, all new information arrives adds to the clutter in decision-makers' minds and on their desks. It is increasingly difficult to design and deliver communications products that stand out from the background noise surrounding any particular audience.

3.3 Identification of appropriate suite of tools

Civil society organisations tend to use a fairly small set of communication tools to deliver their messages to target audiences. This is usually due to a lack of familiarity with alternative media. Most researchers have been trained by academic institutions in the preparation of working papers and presentations. They have usually not been asked to prepare short articles, press briefs, Web modules, or audio-visual materials. If the organisation does not have communication staff trained in the preparation of these media, researchers resort to the techniques with which they are most familiar. Ultimately, a well-conceived communications strategy for a particular message may include many of the following tools. It is essential that the strategy be established in the project planning phase, with budget lines and responsibility for each product clearly articulated.

3.3.1 Personal contact

Personal contact should not be overlooked as an important communications medium. While its one-to-one nature makes it a slow way of communicating, it allows for higher levels of tailoring of messages than other techniques. In addition, higher levels of context can be established through personal contact. This significantly increases the levels of trust and the probability for action on recommendations.

3.3.2 Print publication

Print publications are the most common communications media used by civil society organisations. They include a wide variety of formats and lengths including: brochures, editorials, journal articles, policy briefings, workbooks, working papers, and books. Some of these formats may be published by an institution; others take advantage of third party publishers. Most organisations have formal or informal guidelines for their writing, review, design, publishing and distribution. Print publications are increasingly diverging in length – short working papers that can be easily read on long flights, marked up and passed along and longer reference books. Print publications are perceived as having a high level of formality and credibility. This is due, in part, to the perceived expenses of publishing. However, as digital printing technologies spread around the globe, print publishing has become more accessible to more people. More organizations now have the ability do higher-end printing with colour, special inks, better paper, dye cutting, etc.

As this occurs, print publications are becoming more numerous, with a corresponding drop in credibility and prestige. Knowledge networks, however, may reinforce the credibility of the print publications of members by serving as a form of peer review reinforcement.

3.3.3 Workshops

Workshops are another familiar communications tool for sustainable development organisations and knowledge networks. Workshops may be organised as stand-alone events or as part of larger international conferences. Increasingly, knowledge networks are choosing to hold workshops as part of existing conferences as a way of keeping costs under control and increasing networking opportunities. Unfortunately, in order to accommodate the ever-increasing number of organisations wishing to participate in conferences, most workshops are held in a panel format. At most, this provides 10-20 minutes for any particular presentation. This is not enough time to explore the nuances of an experience. For that reason, workshops within other conferences tend to be most useful for cementing existing relationships or for establishing new relationships. They are not very good at conveying substantive information to people with previous knowledge of the topic.

On the other hand, one- or two-day stand-alone workshops can be extremely effective mechanisms for communicating with policy-makers. Such workshops allow better targeting of participants and provide necessary time for discussion and relationship building. Other communication products can also be distributed during workshops.

3.3.4 Web content

The Web is an increasingly popular communications media. Given the growth of access within the academic, business, and non-profit sectors around the world, Web content can theoretically reach a broad and diverse audience. While this audience is still predominantly young and male, trends indicate that a growing number of senior professionals are becoming more comfortable with the technology as well. In the early days of the Web (1994-7), it was assumed that the Web was an inexpensive publishing medium. Funds normally allocated for printing and distribution could instead be invested

in content development. Unfortunately, experience has shown that Web publishing is at least as expensive as print publishing. Additional expenses must be accrued for training, ongoing site maintenance, and marketing. Most organisations make an initial investment in the computer and network infrastructure to control their own Web products and services. They must also invest in training staff not only in HTML coding, but also in writing for the Web, graphic design, and information architecture. Given the rapid evolution of Web standards, they must also invest in redesigning existing Web content as standards and technologies evolve.

3.3.5 CD-ROMs

CD-ROMs have had a rough ride as a communications tool for sustainable development. While there was great enthusiasm in the early 1990s, they fell out of favour as the Web gained in strength. Today, however, CD-ROMs are seen as a useful technology for reaching organisations that may have unreliable or costly Internet access. They are also useful for users who travel frequently and may wish to browse the material from a laptop while flying to meetings. Web sites can be saved onto CD-ROMs and mailed to organisations at a low cost. While this approach does not take full advantage of CD-ROM technologies and potential user interfaces, it is cost effective. Packaging Web sites on CD-ROMs also serves as a way of familiarising people with how to use the Web, so that they will be more comfortable with the interface and tools when they become locally available. Specialised CD-ROMs are most appropriate for training since they allow a high level of interactivity.

3.3.6 Email messages

Email is one of the most powerful communication tools in existence. It is the easiest way to send small quantities of information to large numbers of people around the world. According to IDC, the number of emails sent on an average day was roughly 10 billion worldwide in 2000. By 2005, this will more than triple to a staggering 35 billion emails sent daily.¹¹

¹¹ IDC. "Email Deluge Continues with No End in Sight"

<http://www.idc.com/software/press/PR/SW101000pr.stm> (10 October 2000)

However, gaining access to the email addresses of individuals within your target audience can be quite expensive. To create a direct marketing mailing list requires extensive time for research on the Web. When the SDCN completed its online Introduction to Sustainable Development, the network co-ordination unit decided to send out a short marketing e-mail regarding the Spanish version of the module. A program assistant spent one week searching online for the email addresses of Latin American professors and university departments teaching sustainable development. One hundred thirty addresses were found in this exercise. Given the careful targeting of the recipients and the phrasing of the message and subject line, no negative feedback was received. Had the network been less careful, its reputation could have been damaged by people perceiving the email message as spam.

An alternative to direct marketing is to rely upon existing email discussion groups. Most sustainable development discussion groups today contain very little discussion. They serve primarily as opt-in advertising channels. Individuals subscribe in order to learn what new products and services are being developed by related initiatives. Subscribing to a small number of specialised groups is a cost effective way of reaching a large audience with a short message. There are also a growing number of institutional (e.g. IISD's New and Notable, REC Announcements, Earth Council Updates) and thematic opt-in mailing lists (e.g. Subsidy Watch, Climate-L). Knowledge networks and their constituent member organisations should co-ordinate their efforts to ensure that announcements are released in a timely manner through all related international and regional lists. If targeted, written and formatted well, list members will usually then distribute these messages to additional lists and individuals who may be interested in the subject.

E-conference interventions are another often overlooked communications medium. Organizational and network reputations can often be enhanced by well-conceived interventions in e-mail conferences. Just as in face-to-face conferences, e-conferences provide ample opportunity for people to have a platform for sharing their own experiences. Unfortunately, many individuals do not participate significantly in e-

conferences since such participation can be overlooked. However, while participation may not increase a person's standing within their own organisation, it can significantly increase their reputation and ability to form alliances externally. Signature files in e-conference interventions should always indicate the person's name, job title, organisation, network affiliation, email address and relevant URLs. Messages should also be written in such a way that they maintain coherency if conference participants forward them to non-conference participants. While this is technically a breach of netiquette (Net etiquette), it happens frequently. Make that work to your advantage.

3.3.7 Theatre and the arts

Theatre and the arts are used with greater frequency and consciousness in developing countries than in industrialised regions. The field of development communications has long recognised the power of live theatre, music, and the visual arts to convey important messages about environment and development. Sustainable development organisations in North America and Europe are beginning to relearn how to consciously use such techniques. Benefit concerts organised by local or regional coalitions have been dominant in this area. However, recycled fashion shows and photography exhibitions are also growing in popularity.

3.3.8 Audio Visual

With the growth of broadband Internet access and media convergence, there is a growing resurgence of interest in audio-video communications. Radio, television, and film are all very powerful communications methodologies. Not only are they excellent for reaching out to illiterate populations and providing training, but they are also effective conveyors of emotions and values. These are as important for influencing decision-makers as for reaching the general public. For example, IISD's video on Inuit observations of climate change in Arctic Canada has had a far greater impact on government policy-makers and the media than a working paper on the subject would have had. Images and voices from the remote Inuit community drove home the message of massive change in a way that text could not.

3.3.9 Leveraging the media

Sustainable development organisations and networks should take advantage of media institutions and channels for sharing their research and solutions. Media events, press releases and op-ed pieces are all useful methods for communicating with the media. Media events for a knowledge network can often be planned in conjunction with network workshops or network management meetings. The SDCN was able to take advantage of the presence of most network members in Costa Rica in May 1998 to schedule a press conference with Costa Rican journalists. The Earth Council, headquartered in San Jose, Costa Rica, served as the local host and organiser. A more routine way of working with the media is the development and distribution of press releases. These can be done for new product launches; they can be especially useful if the new product launch is held as part of a larger conference. Many conferences provide a table in the media centre where conference participants may leave press releases with contact information. These press releases may lead to follow up interviews and coverage by print, radio, and television journalists. Organizations such as the Institute for Media, Policy and Civil Society <<http://www.impacs.org/>> and the Panos Institute <<http://www.panos.sn/>> are growing to meet the media relations training demands of civil society organizations and networks.

3.4 Evaluation and Revision

Effective communications strategies require periodic evaluation and revision. Evaluation is the measurement of results against the objectives you set during the planning process.¹² When conducting an evaluation, always consider:

- Was the development of the communications activity adequately planned?
- Did recipients of the message understand it?
- How could the communications strategy have been more effective?
- Were all audiences reached?
- Was the desired organizational objective achieved?

¹² Ohio Arts Council. "Evaluation." *News Media Resource Guide*.

<http://www.oac.state.oh.us/resguide/evaluation.htm>

- What unforeseen circumstances affected the success of the program or activity?
- Did the program or activity fall within the budget set for it?
- What steps can be taken to improve the success of similar future activities?

Revision of the strategy should be based upon answers to such questions as well as updated intelligence on audience needs and desires.

4 Conclusion

In order to achieve any substantial impact on sustainable development policy and practice, knowledge networks must strive to maintain steady and increasing contact with policy-makers and practitioners both directly and indirectly. This will require the network to make difficult choices about which relationships are most important to achieving their goals. These relationships should be actively cultivated through the use of tailored information products and services. This does not mean that other stakeholders can be ignored, however. In an increasingly interconnected world, unsatisfied non-target audiences can quickly damage a network's reputation. Therefore, networks must:

- ensure that they communicate their focus and expertise as clearly as possible; and
- cultivate relationships with other networks in order to refer less-appropriate inquiries to those who can better serve an individual's needs.

However, such activities are only fully possible within knowledge networks if the member organizations have expertise in communications and relationship management. Unfortunately, many civil society organizations do not have standardised internal procedures for these critical activities. Knowledge networks, therefore, must explicitly address the need to build communications capacity within member networks as well as to harmonize their collective engagement efforts. If they attract funding for these activities, knowledge networks can serve as powerful mechanisms for bridging the gap between sustainable development research and action.