



Research and Evidence 101

USING DATA TO MAKE YOUR
COMMUNICATION MORE EFFECTIVE

What do we mean by research and evidence for communication?

In the world of ocean conservation, many people are accustomed to working with research and evidence to help design impactful ways to protect the ocean. However, did you know that **research and evidence can be used to help make our communications efforts successful too**? Research and evidence can be used at multiple stages of communications campaign development and execution to ensure that strategies are well-designed, that they reach and resonate with the desired target audience, and that they **help change attitudes and behaviours**.

This document is not an exhaustive 'how to' for research, but rather an introduction to the ways in which research can be built into the communications cycle.

1. UNDERSTANDING YOUR AUDIENCE

Understanding your audience is the foundation of an effective communication strategy. Strategic communication is designed and delivered with the specific intention of affecting or changing how a group of people thinks, feels and acts. This group of people could be as broad as a segment of the general public or as specific as a small group of policymakers. Imagine you were talking to a journalist, a school pupil and an elderly relative about the climate. You wouldn't say the same thing in the same way to each of them, which is why it's important to adapt how we communicate based on the audience. This is where research comes in. The more that you know and understand about your audience, the more you can tailor your message and the way you deliver your content to suit them.

Research can help answer questions such as:

- *Who* is the intended audience of your communication?
- *Where* is your audience? (What are their current attitudes and where do they engage?)
- *How* can you reach and resonate with your audience?

We live in a data heavy world. This means that there are many different types of information that could help you define and understand your target audience. Some types of information you might find useful include:

- **Demographics:** For example age, location, profession.
- **Psychographics:** Their values, beliefs and interests.
- **Behaviour:** What do they currently do or not do related to the issue you are communicating around.
- **Media consumption:** What channels do they use, what content types do they engage with, who are their trusted information sources.



Sources for this information include: Social listening tools; audience surveys and polls; interviews and focus groups; website and social media analytics; member or customer databases. To create as full an understanding of your audience as possible, combine and cross-reference data from multiple sources.

2. DEVELOPING YOUR STRATEGY AND CONTENT

Now you have a good understanding of both your audience and the communications challenge (ie the attitude or behaviour you are trying to change) you can develop a 'theory of change' for your campaign. A theory of change sets out how you think a specific set of communications activities will lead to a desired set of outcomes and impacts. It shows how you hope to influence your audience and what effect this will create.

Once you have your overall theory of change, you can develop a communications strategy for how to reach your desired audience - using what you know about them to make decisions on aspects of the campaign such as what formats, platforms, channels and creative approaches you will take. These should all correspond with what you have learned about your audience. Below are some examples:

- **Dissemination approach:** Decisions around which channels, platforms or media outlets you want to use for your campaign can be made based on which media you know your audience uses. For example, you might want to target a young audience through a platform like TikTok rather than Facebook.
- **Content type:** As with the above, understanding your audience's media consumption habits can help you decide which format of content to use. For example, long form op-eds in specific news outlets may target particular policymakers, while short TikTok videos may be more appropriate for a younger, environmentally-focused audience.
- **Message:** Messages should be carefully tailored to respond and appeal to the interests, needs or beliefs of your target audience. Different groups will find different messages, tones and types of language compelling.
- **Creative execution:** Creative execution is a critical component of the campaign. Different visual identities, metaphors, analogies or aesthetics can be developed to fit your audience. Think about what 'feel' or visual identity would make the campaign appealing to your audience: Playful? Serious? Awe-inspiring?

3. TESTING YOUR CONTENT

In the content development and creation stage of a campaign, you are working with the information you have gathered around what type of communication will resonate with and influence your target audience. Once content is developed, research can be used to test whether those theories are accurate. Is the communication you produced achieving its intended objective? Is there a way of adapting it to be more effective?

Focus group testing is a way of understanding how your content is performing. If there is budget available, you could commission a market research agency to test your content with the target audience. Testing the content means exploring people's reaction to the product.

If you don't have any budget, you might want to run your own focus groups or, if this isn't possible, share the content with other individuals to see their reaction. Ideally this would be with people representative of your target audience, but at the very least it is good to test your content with people outside of the ocean sector if this is the intended audience of the content.

The questions you ask when testing content are important to consider. Key recommendations are:

- What is the first thing that comes to mind when you see/watch/hear [insert content type]?
- What does it make you *think*?
- What does it make you *feel*?

When gathering feedback on content from colleagues and peers, avoid asking people whether they 'like' it and instead focus on the question 'To what extent do you think this content will achieve its intended objectives?'

4. MONITORING AND EVALUATION

Once a campaign has been designed, developed and disseminated, data can be used to understand how successful that campaign has been - by 'successful' we mean the extent to which the campaign has achieved or made progress towards its specified objectives. It is important to note that this data collection and analysis can take place throughout the campaign so that tweaks and changes can be made to improve impact, rather than just at the end as part of final reporting.

It is important to have a firm theory of change as the basis of your campaign, against which to measure success. Broadly speaking, data gathered for monitoring and evaluation purposes can be divided into two categories.

Indicators of performance can demonstrate the extent to which a campaign has run as planned, i.e. has content been created that reached and engaged the intended audience in the intended numbers? Metrics can include pieces of campaign content produced, engagement and reach.

Indicators of impact are intended to indicate the extent to which the communications succeeded in achieving the intended objectives of a change in attitude, awareness or behaviour in the target audience. Indicators of impact can be more complex to gather and use than indicators of performance, this is because communications often work in conjunction with other influencing factors (such as policy changes, cultural shifts and peer influences), or indirectly to contribute to broader shifts over time. This makes it more tricky to measure or prove direct impact. However, a firm theory of change (or hypothesis of how and why your communication will work) can define intended pathways of influence and identify key points where impact indicators can be measured.

More in depth resources on monitoring and evaluation will be developed later in the Advancing Strategic Ocean Communication project.

RESEARCH AND EVIDENCE RESOURCES FOLDER

There are a number of studies already in existence that offer insights to help make ocean communication more effective. The Research and Evidence Chapter Group collated some of those resources in the folder above. It is a great place to start, although please note that in a communications environment things can change quickly! We would also like to recognise that much of the research focuses on global north audiences and we are keen to source more diverse data and insights. If you have any research or studies that you think would be useful to include in this resources folder, please do send them over with a brief description. We will be regularly updating [this folder](#) with resources.

As part of the Advancing Strategic Ocean Communication project, a range of global experts from our chapter groups co-created better practice principles on how to use research and evidence to improve your communications. You can read more about the principles and how to apply them to your work through the link below:

[BETTER PRACTICE PRINCIPLES](#)



© Gregory Piper - Ocean Image Bank

Ocean Insight & Strategy Unit^o

Powered by Communications INC

CONTACT US



Communications INC



@CommsINC



oceanisu@communicationsinc.co.uk



communicationsinc.co.uk/oceanisu