Africa Prize business guides

How to communicate effectively: from media to marketing

Authors: AprilSix Proof, Proof Africa

A guide to communication that gets your business what it needs
Why communication is a necessity

Communication is a part of every aspect of business. Whether updating stakeholders, writing a report for funders, approaching customers or talking to your own team, every interaction is a communication opportunity that could drive a business forward.

Communicating effectively can help secure funding, gain new customers, or get the support needed to establish a pilot project. Yet, in spite of its clear benefits, communication is often considered an add-on activity for many businesses. Company tweets, Facebook posts or press releases are created last minute, people do media interviews or conference presentations without preparing their talking points, and employees operate without a common, overarching communications plan.

This guide will help you build communication into your business culture and business plan, create consistent messaging, and only spend time and money on communication that purposefully grows your business.

Understanding your audiences and objectives

The most powerful communication is linked directly to business objectives. Each report, email or phone call, and every interaction at a conference or event should be anticipated and prepared for. Communication will only help drive business results when your core messages are based on your business goals, and used consistently in all your communication.

Developing a communication strategy is a crucial first step for startups in ensuring that your communication efforts have purpose and stay on track. Every effective communication strategy should be made up of the six core components listed below:

1. SWOT analysis

Analyse your business’ strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats by using the questions below as a guide.

STRENGTHS
1. What do we do best?
2. What unique knowledge, talent, or resources do we have?
3. What advantages do we have?
4. What do other people say we do well?
5. What resources do we have available?
6. What is our greatest achievement?

WEAKNESSES
1. What could we improve?
2. What knowledge, talent, skills and/or resources are we lacking?
3. What disadvantages do we have?
4. What do other people say we don’t do well?
5. In what areas do we need more training?
6. What customer complaints have we had about our service?

OPPORTUNITIES
1. How can we turn our strengths into opportunities?
2. How can we turn our weaknesses into opportunities?
3. Is there a need in our team that no one is meeting?
4. What could we do today that isn’t being done?
5. How is our field changing? How can we take advantage of those changes?
6. Who could we support? How could we support them?

THREATS
1. What obstacles do we face?
2. Could any of our weaknesses prevent our unit from meeting our goals?
3. Who and/or what might cause us problems in the future? How?
4. Are there any standards, policies, and/or legislation changing that might negatively impact us?
5. Are we competing with others to provide services?
6. Are there changes in our field or in technology that could threaten our success?

2. Communication objectives

Create communication objectives that support the goals in your business plan. For example, if you need to secure investment, your communication goal is creating awareness about your organisation among investors. Similarly, if you need to achieve a sales target, the communication objectives will be to educate the market about the benefits of your product. Try to avoid seeking ‘awareness’ without a clear focus on who you want to reach and why – otherwise the outcome, no matter how impressive, will achieve little in real terms.
3. Audience identification

Identify the right audiences. What kind of investors, customers or partners do you need? Do you know who they are, where they gather, and what they read or watch? Do they know who you are? Are they currently using a competitor product? Be as detailed as possible.

Consider researching the behaviours and demographics of your audiences, to inform which communication platforms and topics you pursue. There are many useful tools for understanding more about influencers and their behaviour, such as BrandWatch and Pulsar, but these can be expensive. Explore the many free tools online for gaining insight into online communities – such as Followerwonk and Google Trends. Sometimes, something as simple as reviewing the social media followers of your biggest competitor, or a brand you admire, can yield valuable insight.

4. Create messaging

Decide what it is that you want to say. Is there something unique about your product that you want to highlight? What is the scale of the challenge you wish to address? Your messages must be true, and may differ by audience. To develop audience-specific messages, imagine one person that represents each of your audience categories, and ask yourself:

• What does this person think of our organisation?
• What do we need this person to think of our organisation?
• What information/messages can we share to change their current perception into our desired one?

5. Choose the platform

How will you now convey these messages? Communication ranges from conference speeches to emails, telephone calls, news articles, or even a tweet. Which platform to choose should be guided by the message and the audiences. For example, only news of wide-ranging interest should be sent to media; sensitive pitches should be shared face-to-face; and you don’t need a press release if a well-prepared phone call will do. If you want to reach a few big potential customers in a specific market, a presentation or stand at an industry event may be the best option.

6. Evaluate the results

Did that press release result in media coverage? If not, did it go to the wrong journalist? What did make the news instead? Why are your emails not answered? Why did people not approach you after a presentation at a conference, but spoke to someone else?

Build these lessons into your next plan and learn from your experiences. As with any business document, a communications strategy should evolve over time, responding to changes to your markets or business, as well as the results it has achieved to date.
Communications toolkit

The basics: website, branding and social media

Websites, branding and social media establish credibility quickly. A simple logo, consistent font and two or three company colours create consistency. You don’t have to go all-out on branding in the early stages. Write a strong company profile that summarises your unique selling point and offering – this can be used across print and online. Decide on the right spokespeople for conferences and media interviews.

Your website should explain what you do, who you do it for and how to reach you. It should include news releases, interview contacts, and high-resolution images of staff and products.

Add success stories over time – case studies, client references, awards or high-profile investors and customers – to boost your profile and credibility with visitors by demonstrating that your business has attracted independent endorsement. You can re-purpose the same content for a simple brochure. Always remember to include contact details – if your audience can’t contact you after learning about you, you won’t achieve your business objectives.

Choose social media accounts carefully based on your need and the time you have available. The expected response time on social media is much shorter than on other platforms, so monitor your accounts 24/7, and allocate them to someone senior enough to understand stakeholder politics, with enough free time to respond quickly.

LinkedIn is ideal for B2B sectors like engineering, science, medicine, energy and finance, and for reaching investors. Share news and interesting articles from a company page and personal accounts. Find and join relevant LinkedIn groups to post content to an already-engaged community. Expand your network and explore new opportunities by connecting with your stakeholders.

Facebook pages are affordable website substitutes. Create a photo library, strong ‘about us’ sections, and share relevant content weekly. Facebook allows excellent targeting of customer segments because it collects data on everything from age and job title to location and social network. Use polls to gain powerful insights into customers and stakeholders and use promoted posts (paid-for advertising) to reach key target audiences.

Twitter is good for industry discussions, event hashtags, to promote news/products/goods, and as a Q&A touchpoint. If you don’t have a wealth of your own content, re-tweet posts from your industry that you find interesting – it will show you are ‘plugged in’ to the latest news and trends. Every tweet should be informative and engaging, so do not post for the sake of it.

Search engine optimisation should be used to drive traffic to your website. Develop a consistent set of keywords linked to your products or services to use in the title, first paragraph or metadata (such as website banners) of all communication, from blogs to tweets. Link to relevant authoritative websites in your website or blog copy. This will help drive your company higher up the Google rankings for those search terms, thereby making you more visible to the right people.

Build an engaged community around your company by providing consistent, engaging content for your followers who can act as online ‘brand ambassadors’ by sharing your content with their own followers. Leverage high-profile partners or customers with large social media followings to help drive traffic to your page by encouraging them to use your hashtags or keywords when sharing content about your company.
Building on basics: conferences and networking

Contact your stakeholders regularly to maintain your network: share new business goals, news and case studies, and explore opportunities for introductions to new stakeholders. Face-to-face is best, but emails and newsletters work too. Call potential partners, register on industry association websites and directories, and read about your industry extensively to identify new communication opportunities.

Conferences can be a great way to keep in touch with your current stakeholders, as well as reach a captive audience of potential partners, investors or customers. Choose conferences that justify the budget and time spent out of office. Talk to a variety of people once there, and email new contacts the same day to capitalise on the enthusiasm of the face-to-face meeting. Avoid paying for conference participation by pitching an idea for a speaking or panel slot if you can.

Some of the most prestigious and well-attended technology and engineering conferences include:

- Africa Tech Summit Kigali
- The Africa Energy Indaba
- Blockchain Africa Conference
- Africa Tech Week
- Women in Tech Africa
- IoT Forum Africa
- MEST Africa Summit

Working with media: what is a story?

Media coverage is a powerful communication tool. A well-placed story can impress an investor, attract government support, or reach new customers. But what is a newsworthy story?

To most media, only new information is newsworthy: disruptive innovations, world-firsts, new research, high-profile new awards, investments or customer wins.

A journalist’s job is to give their editors stories that are compelling, detailed, relevant, visual, and easy to compile on deadline. Your story must be all those things to stand out among the latest political scandal or breaking news.

Then, put yourself in a reader’s shoes – what would make you stop to listen to or read a story? Is your story good enough? Does it link to current news? Have you provided professional photography, or made it easy for photographers to represent your story? Is there a visual story for television – the opportunity to film prototypes in production or being tested, or the opportunity to film interviews with customers or partners?

Here are some top tips for media:

- Watch and read media for obvious opportunities – if you work in water conservation, pitch your story during a drought. If your innovation helps save money, contact business reporters during tough economic times.
- Do you have a pilot project or prototype? Invite media to see it.
- Harness your successes. Tell your story through your customer’s journey. Make them the star of the show - but ensure that you prepare them thoroughly, and get necessary permissions from management and communications teams.
- Contact media specific to your sector – these magazines and radio shows are often on the lookout for stories that are well-researched, have good photos or spokespeople, are new, and fit into the bigger picture of current affairs or economics.
- Look out for ‘breaking news’ stories relevant to your industry and offer journalists engaging, insightful comment on the story. Over time, you could become a public expert voice and a go-to source of comment on issues pertaining to your industry. This boosts your company and spokespeople’s public profile and improves SEO.
Making the most of opportunities

Once you have a journalist or producer’s attention, make the most of every opportunity. Even small newspapers can lead to big impact. Preparation is key – choose the right person to do the interview, brainstorm potential questions and answers as a team, consider how each of your target audiences would interpret that answer, and collect statistics, case studies, quotes and images that could help you tell your story.

In-studio and telephone interviews:

• Watch or listen to the show you will be on a few times before your interview.
• Practise typical questions and answers on your phone camera or voice recorder to improve.
• For television, wear comfortable clothes that do not have busy patterns, and practice your posture before the day.
• Have your key messages front of mind, so that they come through in your answers.
• Speak in ‘soundbites’ - full sentences that have a beginning and an end – this gives the interviewer a chance to ask more questions, and can help editors ‘cut’ your answers for final inclusion.
• Always have an ‘ask’ or ‘action’ – what do you want audiences to do with this information?
• Do not answer questions you do not know the answer to! It is ok to refer the interviewer to other individuals or organisations better equipped to deal with the query, or to send information as a follow up.

Site visits: Make sure everything is functioning correctly, your customers/users are prepared and willing to participate, and that you have access to all areas you need. Take photos ahead of time to make sure it’s visually appealing – should you repaint your prototype, choose a customer more reflective of your target audience, or go in a different season?

Print journalists: Read stories by the journalist or paper that is interviewing you. Provide all the information you can – photography, extra research, statistics, and customer testimonials. Don’t be afraid to follow up once they’ve left or hung up the phone if you remember something relevant, or to say you don’t know the answer to a question that you can follow up on afterwards. Explain concepts using examples, and use your case studies, success stories and customer testimonials to back up your own words.
Testimonies: communication in action

While media coverage is only one form of communication, it is a powerful way to reach your audience.

Over the last five years, AprilSix Proof and Proof Africa have helped Africa Prize for Engineering Innovation entrepreneurs reach their business goals through media coverage. Each of these stories were researched for hours before being sent to media. Photos were carefully selected, and the right journalists identified to match to each and every innovator. Over 1,000 pieces of media coverage have been secured for the shortlist, finalists and winners of the Africa Prize across 28 countries.

Impact

Media coverage helped one candidate secure a high-profile speaking slot at a relevant conference, and attracted comments from national political leaders for others. Newspaper coverage helped secure a meeting with government that led to a national pilot project, and Facebook founder and CEO Mark Zuckerberg lauded an Africa Prize winner on his Facebook page after seeing the news. Large scale business deals and grants from organisations as far-reaching as the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation can also be traced back to media coverage.

Africa Prize alumni share their experiences:

“The media coverage was such a valuable marketing tool,” Hindu Nabulumba, Yaaka Digital Network, Uganda

“Coverage gave us credibility when applying for grants or funding,” Dr Askwar Hilonga, Nanofilter, Tanzania

“Media exposure created a sense of trust in the products from users,” Edwin Inganji, Okoa, Tanzania

“[Our] websites gained many more site visits as a result of media coverage,” Samuel Njuguna, Chura, Kenya

“Coverage improved our digital footprint and SEO,” Ian Mutamiri, NatiV, Zimbabwe

“Media coverage helped to keep us accountable to our goals,” Lawrence Ojok, Green Rock Drill, Tanzania
Communications case study

Brian Turyabagye, Uganda

Shortlist for the 2017 Africa Prize for Engineering Innovation

Innovation: MamaOpe

MamaOpe is a biomedical smart jacket that helps doctors and health workers identify pneumonia faster and more accurately.

Before the Africa Prize I rarely considered the impact of communication. I spoke my mind, didn’t consider who was in the audience, and as an engineer, fell back on technical terms.

Developing better communication skills has changed our business. In each situation, we’ve learned to consider business goals, what we want from each audience, and what they expect from us. Most of our communication happens quickly over email, and thinking through ideas in advance helps us be clear and concise.

Be it an email, phone call or public talk, I take the time to research each new audience. I’ve learned to talk to potential funders with confidence, back up our claims to create credibility, and capitalise on media exposure. Media exposure quickly opens doors to the kind of support startups need. You’re exposed to various sources of investment, knowledge and guidance. For MamaOpe, media coverage has accelerated our business through partnerships in technical skills, implementation and mentorship.

It’s important to know what to share. Consult your team and draw the line between intellectual property and useful information for potential customers and partners. Share key changes so that external stakeholders can gauge your progress. But manage expectations, follow your strategy and don’t be pushed into sharing information when not ready.