



**Understanding  
communications:**

a brief guide for charity trustees

# What is communications – and why does it matter?

Communications is sometimes seen as a bit of an optional extra – not part of a charity's "real" work, merely a means of publicising it.

But take a look at the best known and supported charities in the UK and you'll see they think very differently. They understand that when communications is made central to what a charity is and does, they – and their mission – thrive.

Far more than a collection of stories about a charity's activities, communications is a core element of the operation. It helps determine what work a charity does and how it goes about achieving impact.

Charities don't just communicate to tell people about the change they make in the world. They communicate to make change happen.

## Why communicate?

The best communications engage and inspire others to act.

Your organisation might communicate to:

- Inform beneficiaries and service users about their rights and how to secure them
- Provide lifesaving information
- Mobilise public support and build pressure for changing policy and practice
- Raise awareness through the media of the vital cause you champion
- Drive organisational growth by attracting and keeping new donors and funders
- Help recruit and retain great talent to work in your charity.

## Communications in your organisation

Your communications team – or person – uses different channels to engage audiences with key messages about what your charity is trying to achieve.

Depending on the resources available, comms teams will:

- Define your charity's key audiences and decide the right ways to engage them to best deliver your organisational objectives
- Develop the messages that you need to talk coherently and purposefully about your organisation and your issues
- Deal with the media (both proactively and reactively)
- Communicate internally to staff and other stakeholders
- Run your digital and social media channels
- Publish magazines, newsletters or your annual review
- Provide information and advice
- Work in these and other ways to maintain your charity's brand and reputation.

Your communications colleagues will have expert knowledge of your audiences and values. Given appropriate recognition and support by the leadership of your charity, they will have a thorough overview of what's going on across your organisation, from fundraising to policy, services and all points in between.

They should have valuable insights to share about the external environment for your charity: what people outside think and know about your organisation and your issues.

Based on their knowledge and experience, they will decide what to communicate, and with whom, to deliver the greatest impact.

# How comms helps you fulfil your responsibilities as a trustee



Trustees are responsible for the financial wellbeing of the organisation; for its behaving appropriately as a charity and abiding by any charity laws; for the reputation, the strategy and the performance. Comms activity can help trustees fulfil their responsibilities in achieving these things.

**John Grounds, chair of trustees, CharityComms, and communications consultant**

As every trustee knows, joining a charity board entails taking on a commitment to help ensure good governance in the charity.

Less widely understood, perhaps, is the extent to which a strong communications function can help you to fulfil that commitment.



We meet with our trustees regularly to talk about governance, editorial policy, sign-off, and all the different mechanisms we use to minimise or mitigate against risk.

**Jack Lundie, director of communications, Oxfam GB**

The Charity Commission issues guidelines to trustees setting out their responsibilities in detail. The guidelines say, for example, that trustees must be able to explain how all the charity's activities are intended to progress or support its purposes. Trustees must also understand how the charity will benefit the public by carrying out those purposes.

In order to address their responsibilities fully, trustees need to understand the roles communications professionals perform in pertinent areas, such as:

- impact reporting
- awareness raising
- accuracy of information

- reputation management
- risk mitigation and
- transparency.

Many trustees are becoming more aware of the need to engage with their comms teams over issues like these, which have a bearing on governance standards. The role of trustees has received greater government and regulatory attention since a number of charities were criticised for alleged governance failings in 2015.



The trustees want us to make a step change as an organisation, maximise our potential, follow good practice and understand how to measure and communicate the impact we make. They also want to make sure we have our own house in order, just in case we ever need to explain or justify what we do.

**Richard Hawkes, CEO, British Asian Trust**

As a trustee, you should never hesitate to ask your comms team how communications products and activities could support you in meeting governance challenges. This could be through strategic support, promoting good practice or managing risk and reputation, for example. You might also want to ask how comms expertise can help to improve the quality of information produced by other departments and disciplines.



If we were to close or transfer a residential care home, our trustees would ask: How are we communicating this to key stakeholders? What are the key messages? Who is speaking for the charity? They would expect to see how we are communicating on their behalf a position that the board has taken.

**Mark Atkinson, CEO, Scope**

# How to support effective communications

A sound professional relationship works two ways. If comms is to help trustees secure good governance for your charity, trustees need to ensure the comms team is properly recognised and supported.

There are many ways to do this.

## • Become a comms champion

Every trustee board should include individual trustees with particular experience or interest in key charity functions, including communications. The comms champion is in regular contact with the comms department; he or she is a sounding board and supporter of comms activity in the charity. If your board doesn't already have a champion for comms, consider whether you – or another trustee – could take that role.



Our comms champion has an extensive background in health comms. He is able to challenge our thinking, whether that's about a brief to a website agency, or saying, "Are you doing enough on this issue?" It's a vital role that I really value.

**Deborah Alsina, CEO Bowel Cancer UK**

## • Get to know your comms people

As a trustee board, even if you don't yet have a comms champion, make sure you get to know your comms lead – and help them get to know you. Tell them your interests, specialisms and concerns. Invite them to your board meetings and, where appropriate, meet up outside the boardroom too.



Our external affairs director attends all board meetings and will very often present a paper or introduce a discussion. We are fortunate to have a chair who expects the management team to contribute actively to conversations at a board.

**Mark Atkinson, CEO, Scope**

## • Engage with comms at a strategic level

Expect your comms lead to contribute to organisational strategy, planning and policy formation. Get them to talk to you about the communications strategy and how this feeds in to the charity's overarching strategic plan. Ask them to demonstrate what difference comms work is making to your organisation and its goals. If you think it might strengthen your confidence or understanding, ask for some training in the principles of strategic communications.



My board asks me: How is investment in our comms function going to enable the charity to meet its mission? ... Lots of comms teams – particularly when you have very little capacity as mine had – can end up just servicing other teams, whereas now, with board support, we are investing so we can carve out a proactive comms agenda.

**Deborah Alsina, CEO, Bowel Cancer UK**

## • Respect the executive/board remit

Understand the difference between executive and board remits. Don't overstep the governance line so that you risk interfering in operational comms work. Marking homework is not a job for trustees. At the same time, you will need to respond sensitively to your own context. Many smaller charities depend on competent trustees to offer both strategic and practical comms work. In larger charities, the boundaries may be more defined, but trustees may still contribute to executive work where this adds value.

## • Offer your media skills and talents

It may be you have comms expertise that is missing in your executive team, or a gap needs filling. Or perhaps your expert knowledge on one aspect of your charity's work makes you a go-to person for a particular type of assignment. Playing due regard to executive/governance remits (see above) you could act as a media spokesperson or expert speaker or advise on a particular aspect of communication practice, such as brand, digital or marketing.



The chief executive will call on me as needed. For example, when the crisis hit in Kids Company, we were involved as a similar charity. I acted as a media advisor and did interviews on Channel 4 news and Sky News. I was playing a role for them, a bit like what I do in my day job, but it was all informal.

**Peter Jenkins, trustee, Cambridge House and managing director of external affairs, Leonard Cheshire**

### **Support your organisation on social media**

If you are a social media user, try to act both proactively and responsibly where your charity is concerned. The objective is to promote, and also protect, your charity's brand and reputation. Don't be shy to ask comms for training if you are new to social media or want clarity about what you should and shouldn't communicate. Read and comply with your charity's social media policy if there is one.



On social media, people have to be allowed to be themselves. But if they are going to take to social media and be a Samaritans trustee, then I would expect them to engage with our social media team, just to discuss the rules and regulations around it. We've got guidelines on social media that the comms team has prepared.

**Jenni McCartney, chair, Samaritans**

### **• Use your contacts for the cause**

Take opportunities when they arise to promote your charity through your own networks and contacts.

### **• Hold comms to account**

Your communications function should benefit from being held accountable to trustees. By making sure you know what you can expect comms to deliver for your charity, you ensure comms is taken seriously and operates at an appropriate level. Use our infographic to help you get the best out of your comms team.

# How to hold comms to account

You may be familiar with the Charity Commission's checklist: 15 questions trustees should ask about their charity's governance, finance and resilience.

In similar vein, here are 10 questions you should ask your comms team or person:

## 10 questions trustees should ask comms

