

Briefing Notes for Educate Together Workshop

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Re: Role of Communications in ET, Rolling out Local Activity

Communications at National Office Level

What is the role of the new Communications function at Educate Together?

Communications is a wide brief which includes media relations, lobbying, marketing, information dissemination, message management and brand development. Though these may sound like corporate terms, all well managed NGO's have Communications functions which ensure that...

- the organisation is getting its message into the public domain
- the message is reaching the right people
- the message is easily understood and explainable
- all messages issued are consistent over time
- the organisation is presented as competent and well run
- the soul of Educate Together is palpable in our public voice
- a brand image is created that is instantly recognisable
- communications are issued in a planned, measured way to support the achievement of overall organisational goals.

How is this being financed?

Educate Together has secured funding from the One Foundation to implement its strategic plan for the next five years. These funds are allocated against specific tasks and objectives and Communications, Lobbying and Marketing have budgets attached to them.

What resources will Educate Together bring to bear on Communications?

Educate Together has appointed a Communications Manager who is part of the senior management team. He is currently recruiting an Officer to assist in the roll out and implementation of the communications programme detailed in the strategic plan. The budget also allows for the support of third party suppliers where needed. Communications will also be enhancing the marketing resources of the RDOs and advocate groups.

How does Communications integrate into the Educate Together structure?

The communications unit will work on its own specific briefs and function as a support to other parts of the business particularly the CEO, the Regional Development Team, Fundraising and event management. It also has the aim of broadening and deepening communication channels within the school network for principals, boards of management, staff and parents alike.

What are the priorities for Communications at Educate Together?

There are two fundamental objectives for ET Communications; to raise universal awareness of its work and to foster understanding of its approach. To achieve this ET segments the marketplace into distinct audiences and creates engagement strategies for each across a full year of activity (see table 1). All this activity will operate under defined guidelines on branding, organisational voice (tone) and consistency with ET message strategies (no solo runs).

Table 1: Key Audiences & Communications Objectives

Audience	Objectives	Approach
Parents & Community Groups	Raise Awareness Generate Support Create Preference Build Database	Using regional and national media (news, editorial, advertising), targeted online campaigns, roadshows, face to face briefings, bespoke publications, advocate word of mouth
Department of Education	Illustrate Demand Present supported argument Influence through championed opinion	Submission of position papers, desired decision results, FOIs, regional updates on demographics, parental support statistics, market research results. High level face to face meetings, ongoing interaction and relationship building at executive level
Government Minister of Ed Oireachtas Committees Opposition Seanad Local Gov	Enhance understanding Influence decisions Create Champions	Direct advocacy and lobbying, submission of position papers, personal and open briefings, positioned media pieces. Create support surge with petitions, public events, ambient events (ie photo calls and publicity stunts)
Catholic Church Other Patron Bodies	Enhance understanding Foster positive relations Dispel myths	Programme of direct engagements, regular briefings & meetings, invite collaboration on areas of common interest, assuage concerns, challenge obduracy, gain respect
ET School Staff Management BOMs & PTAs Start up groups	Improve information flow Generate & report news Enhance local skills Create army of advocates	Create new and enhance existing suite of communication resources, dedicated web pages, newsletters, ezines, briefing papers, toolkits etc. Support local activity with advice, presence on ground. Conduct local briefings, training sessions for advocates/spokespeople

Communications at Local Level

How will ET support local communications activities?

The expansion of ET's communications capacity will result in better physical resources for existing action groups, start up groups and parent activists. As well as Comms staff there will also be enhanced capacity in the RDO team to advise on media and lobbying activity.

Proposed Communications Toolkits (online)

- Writing a Press Release
- Identifying and creating a news story
- Creating a newsletter, formatted template supplied
- Establishing an online presence and using social media
- Key message checklists
- Dos & Don'ts of media relations – working with journalists
- How to conduct a radio/broadcast interview
- When to engage with media, silence can be golden

Lobbying Toolkits (online)

- Engaging your local representatives
- Form letter templates
- Suggest local activity lists
- Links to contact lists

What should local communications activity hope to achieve?

Advantages of Visibility

Firstly they have to create traction in their peer group – let parents know they are there and inform them what you represent. The higher your profile the more likely you will attract people to your proposition and support your cause. Also, once briefed and trained, when your communications are reasoned, rational and consistent you create a sense of wellbeing about your message – supporters are reassured, detractors are assuaged or have no ground to make unsubstantiated claims. Also a visible, capable local group will act as a deterrent to hostile commentators as they know they will be engaged and media outlets will seek a response in balance to claims.

Be informed, present yourself as informed to effect influence

Any local influencer (journalist, TD, Councillor) is most comfortable dealing with well-informed, preferably expert lobby groups. In many cases the influencer will not have a firm position on your issue and is looking for guidance or an identifiable, well-reasoned process that will benefit him/her to champion. The more professional you are in how you present your case and the more able you are to explain its intricacies the more likely you are to garner support. Passion and emotive arguments can gain attention but without reasoned representation they will fade or worse get dismissed as crank representations. Fundamentally you want the influencers to identify themselves with you and your cause.

Working with local media

Generating media coverage takes time and work. You have to research your local media outlets (press, radio, online, tv) and build relationships with the newsdesk journalists and education/political correspondents. You need to tell them who you are and what you offer them. You also have to be judicious how you manage these relationships – don't let people down, file stories on time, respond to queries promptly, format releases correctly, submit releases to the appropriate section - hard news, community diary items, editorial pieces etc. Also for regional media it is very important that you have a local angle on your news, reference local names, events etc as much as possible. The more consistently you do the right things the more the journalist will respect you and pick up your stories – but it doesn't happen overnight.

Stay alert and on top of current issues – reactive news

Sometimes a local event or occurrence can offer the opportunity for comment or reaction that wouldn't otherwise be there. A local protest about traffic volumes or parking can present an opportunity to discuss child safety and the considerations for the location of the school you are pushing for.

Building relationships with local representatives

The more groundwork you put in here the better. Local TDs and Councillors are always keen to enhance their profile and reputation with voters. If they view you as representative of a significant lobby group they will court your favour. If you have a clear plan of action that makes it easy for them to support you – the more likely it is that they will. Be regular correspondents with your representatives. Keep them appraised of developments on your issue at local and national level.

Meet them every few months (formally or informally) so they don't forget you. Keep asking them to raise your issue on the order of business in the council chamber or to submit a question to the Minister in the Dáil. Circulate them with your publicity material and newsletters. Send letters/emails of congratulations for their achievements – whatever the issue particularly if it is of benefit to your local community.

Try not to show any particular party allegiance so as not to alienate other potential supporters. Never brief one politician and exclude the others. You may have a representative who is prepared to go to bat for you but you should, out of courtesy, keep his peers informed. Be careful that the politician does not hijack your agenda for his/her own ends or that they become the face of your campaign. You have to be strong here.

Stay Positive, stay in touch

Do not lose heart when things go against you or you receive a setback. Perseverance is essential and will pay off. If you don't go away, maintain your support base and stay visible it will happen.

Also you should stay in touch with ET online, your RDOs and the communications department if you need advice or help.