

Jane's Twenty-one Questions:
A Communications Strategy Planning Template
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Introduction

Planning an issue campaign and the communications that move it forward is not a simple task. Over the course of my career, I've developed a checklist of core concepts and key questions that have served me well in charting strategies. Asking tough questions can hone emerging strategies, flesh out assumptions, and expose missing elements, which can, in turn, build a stronger campaign plan that can produce bigger and better results.

To give credit where credit is due, these concepts and questions are an amalgamation of lessons learned from the partners at Belden Russonello & Stewart and the team at Communications Consortium Media Center during my years at Biodiversity Project, as well as insights gained from the work of the Frameworks Institute, SmartMeme (now the Center for Story-based Strategy), the Kellogg Foundation evaluation project, colleague Marian Farris, the wisdom of many other colleagues, the on-the-ground experience of clients, and my own experience in the field.

The questions (and yes, there are more than 21 if you count the sub-questions) are grouped under these categories:

- Context
- Goal
- Theory of change
- Timing
- Resources
- Audiences
- Message
- Key language and concepts
- Overarching narrative
- Facts
- Images/Graphics
- Evaluation

Answers can be easily used in logic models, theory of change templates, and content for "SMART" (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, and Time-bound) planning.

➤ Context

1. **Background on the issue – why is this important *now*? Who cares? Who will be affected?**

➤ Goal

2. **What is the primary goal – what are we trying to achieve, what's the expected impact?**
 - Win = What?: Define what victory means at the beginning and measure against that in evaluation; Does this definition affirm and advance our core values and positive social change?
3. **What role will communication play in achieving that goal?**

➤ Theory of Change

4. **What is our theory of change? i.e., by what means will our goal be achieved?**
5. **A. As we think about this campaign, can we answer these questions clearly ...**
 - What problem are we trying to solve?
 - What's compelling us to address this?
 - What result are we seeking?
 - What factors will influence this issue?
 - What strategy will we employ?
 - What assumptions are behind how/why this will work?
6. **B. Aligning the strategy: Is this campaign about...**
 - Moving policy decision-makers toward a single action or endpoint?
 - Increasing social literacy?
 - Shaping public will on a cause (or many related issues), i.e., do we need key constituencies with basic knowledge and concern to create demand for responsive action on the issue(s)?
 - Changing individual behavior and actions?
 - Something else? –choose the right strategy for the objective.

➤ Timing

7. **What is our timeline?**
 - How long will this take, and what assumptions is this estimate based on?
 - How much time do we have to get going?
 - When are pivotal events likely to take place?

- Is there a hard deadline or “point of no return?”
- What are our benchmark dates for evaluating progress?

➤ Resources

8. What specific communication resources do we have?

- Internal staff capacities?
- Public opinion research?
- Media lists and personal media relationships?
- Money/Budget for materials, production, and outreach?
- Activist lists?
- Social media capacities—which ones, and what is our “reach?”
- Capacities and commitments of allies—at what level?

➤ Audiences

9. Who are our audiences; why are they targets?

◆ “Insider” audiences

A. Decision-makers

- Who are they?
- What decisions will they make?
- Who do they listen to?
- What message will decision-makers respond to and why?
- What are our desired reactions/responses?

B. Influentials

- Who influences the decision-makers?
 - Who are the positive influentials (on our side)?
 - Who are the negative influentials (opposed to our position)?
- What makes them influential?
- What message will they respond to and why?
- How do we plan to influence the influentials – what actions will we take?

◆ The media as an audience

C. News Media

- What and who are they?
 - Newspapers
 - News and talk radio programs
 - Television news programs
 - News magazines

- Blogs, and podcasts
- Social media (Facebook, Linked In, X, Instagram, etc.)
- Who do they influence?
- What message will they respond to and why?
- What will be newsworthy during key phases of this campaign?

D. Non-news Media

- What and who are they?
 - Lifestyle publications
 - Feature stories (about place, people, food, recreation, etc.)
 - Talk shows (radio, television)
- What/who will connect with them?
- What message will they respond to and why?

E. Our Leadership and Allied Leaders

- Who are they?
 - Who are the specific organizations and their key contact people; who are our primary allies and supporters?
- What do we want them to do?
- How will we persuade them to take action?
- What message will they respond to and why?
- How will mobilization of the troops take place?
- What key tactical decisions will our allies play a part in?
- What specific messages can our allied organizations provide to amplify the core message?

◆ Public Audiences

F. What segments of the public are our primary targets?

- What do we know about their attitudes, lifestyles, and demographics?
- What will speak to them?
- What information sources do they use/trust? Do we have capacity to access these information sources?
- What reactions or responses are we hoping to see from these target audiences?

➤ Message

10. What is the core message that will guide all our *public* communications?

11. Have we addressed all the key elements of a short message paragraph?

- Values: why our audience should care at the gut level or “level one” frame.
- Concerns: why is our audience worried? (How does this issue affect the lives of

- our target audience?)
- Solutions: What will address our audience's concerns; what's the fix?
- Reinforcement: What value(s) will underpin the need to take action? E.g., responsibility, accountability, leadership, etc.
- Hope and efficacy: What will persuade our audience that the solution we propose will work?
- Call for specific actions: What, exactly, do we want the person who receives this message to DO?
- Traction: Will our audience know how, where, when to take action?

12. How can we ensure message repetition and reinforcement over the course of the campaign?

- What is our plan and timeline for sustained communication?
- What are the FAQs?
- Do we have clear, straightforward responses to the FAQs that convey our frame and message?

13. What's the "push back"?

- What are our opponents' likely messages and arguments, and how do we answer them?

➤ Key Language and Concepts

14. What is the underlying FRAME for our issue? (Or in what way do we want it framed?)

- At the value level? (e.g., freedom, responsibility, future generations)
- At the "What kind of an issue is this" level? (is this a science issues, public health issue, environmental issue, etc.)
- At the "specifics for action" level?

15. What terms, words, and metaphors reinforce our core message and frame? Do they speak to our target audience?

➤ Messengers

16. Which messengers are the most compelling, authentic, and credible for each of our target audiences?

➤ The Overarching Narrative

17. What is the "big story" that describes our goal and actions?

- Who are the heroes?
- Who are the countervailing forces?

- What is the “quest”?
- What bold and courageous action will win the day?
- Who wins; who loses?

18. Stories, Anecdotes

- What human stories are we telling/can we tell to make this visceral, personal, compelling, and not about dry policy or statistics?
- Are we collecting and re-telling the human stories that make our case?

➤ Facts

19. What facts do we need to support a compelling case for which audiences and in which context?

➤ Images/Graphics

20. What visuals do we have/need that carry our message, support our frame, illustrate our metaphor, and tell our story? Are we putting people in the pictures?

➤ Evaluation

21. Evaluation/mid-course corrections:

- What is our strategy to evaluate and assess outcomes and process throughout the campaign and to make changes and adjustments?
- Remember our definition of victory? How close did we come to achieving our defined victory?
- What lessons have we learned for future campaigns?