Chapter 6
Right Message, Right Audience, Right Time

"Nothing in life is more important than the ability to communicate effectively."
— President Gerald R. Ford

You've probably heard the saying, "Timing is everything." It's a favorite among communicators because it's profoundly true. A message your audience completely ignores one day can easily become the center of their attention the next based on what's going on around them.

While we can't always plan for or control all the factors that contribute to catching someone's attention, there is a lot we can do to get the right message to the right audience at the right time. It all starts with **understanding what your audience cares about and how your information benefits them**: how your content fits into their world—what they want, what they need, and how you can help improve their jobs or lives in some way.

From there, determine **the timing for communicating with your audience based on their needs.** They'll be most receptive to your message if they receive it right before they actually need it. This "just in time" delivery helps them process your information and quickly take the needed action in response. Take, for example, communication around holiday gifting policies; your audience will be much more receptive to this message in late November than they will be in August.

While that may seem obvious, other examples will be less clear, and compliance departments have been known to let their own priorities drive the timing of communication. However, it's important to always think from the end user's viewpoint and deliver the information when it will be most relevant and timely for them.

Speaking of the compliance department, what happens when your priorities don't align with the needs of your audience? For example, your boss wants to get a message out on her timing, but she isn't considering all the other content hitting employees that week. Or a client-facing communication is written with a focus on benefits to the company, not to the client. In these situations, you must balance the audience's needs with compliance's goals, with a bias toward audience needs.

While this can feel uncomfortable at times, it will make your message more effective in the end. If your department publishes something it's happy with but that only serves your goals, you might temporarily feel good about getting it done, but you'll be unhappy later when no one reads it or takes the action you need them to take. Use the worksheets on pages 105 – 108 to help you plan for and reconcile disparities in the needs of the compliance department and the audiences you're seeking to reach.

Pro Tip from Stef

What's the best way to keep an audience-first mindset when creating compliance communications? It's to constantly monitor what employees actually care about.

Take a step back as an employee yourself. What's on your mind? What challenges or opportunities are you facing, and how could compliance partner with you to address them?

For those in companies with robust intranet sites, another great approach is monitoring likes and comments on intranet articles. The big topics, like company earnings, rarely get much employee engagement, but announcements about news that directly impacts employees—such as pay, benefits, or changes to work arrangements or spaces—will garner significant engagement. Take note of what content employees interact with and the sentiment of their comments, and think about how you can use that insight to inform the communications you plan to do on a given topic.

5 Key Publications Milestones

Once you determine how to get the right message to the right audience at the right time, you need to work backward from your ideal delivery or publication date to set milestones to accomplish all the necessary steps that need to happen beforehand. This will vary greatly by company but can include any of the following:

1. Approvals

How many rounds of approvals are required for the content? Who provides the ultimate sign-off? This may apply both on the compliance side and within communications or any other group involved in this content based on the topic.

2. Translations

In multinational or global companies, it's often required, even legally, to translate key information into local languages. Depending on your company culture and the specific information you're communicating, you may need to plan time for translations and understand the process for getting content translated.

3. Publication

You'll also need to know required lead times for getting content published in various company channels. Certain vehicles may have schedules, but content may "book out" well in advance on editorial calendars. You'll want to plan for this as you work backward from the ideal timing for your audience to receive your message. Finally, the communications team will likely require a certain number of days to process your content—giving it any final edits, queueing it in systems for publication, and more.

4. Advance notice/pre-inform process

Consider which groups, if any, need to receive an advance copy of your content before you share it with your ultimate audience. Depending on the culture of your organization, this might include executive or leadership teams of the departments involved in creating and producing the content, departments involved in managing relationships with the end-user audience, or others.

5. Printing and/or shipping lead times

Printing and shipping deadlines can add significantly to the lead time required to produce content and get it into the hands of your audience, so plan ahead for this if applicable. (It is becoming less applicable, since increasingly fewer corporate materials are created as physical copies; depending on your situation, however, it could still apply.)

Use the worksheets on page 109 – 112 to help you identify what applies in your organization and how to manage it all.

Finally, consistently and regularly monitor the feedback your audience is giving you about the content you're sharing with them. In today's social media world, there are more ways than ever to engage in two-way dialogue with your audience, whether that means monitoring the tone and sentiment of comments on articles or webpages or analyzing actual statistics on open rates, clickthroughs, or time spent reading web-based content. Your corporate communications department can help you understand what's available and how you can get access to that information. Use the worksheet on page 113 to help you keep track of audience feedback and generate your own ideas about other ways to listen to your audience.

Compliance and ethics can oftentimes be frustrating. Links and connections that you see may not be ripe or seen by others yet. Early on in my career, I experienced a situation with environmental, social, and governance (ESG) reporting. It was the early days of these efforts—a time when it was still called "corporate social responsibility."

As a young securities lawyer, I had a point of view on the importance of repeatable and consistent measures of performance that were created to meet reporting standards. I felt very strongly that over a period of time, ESG would mature and the smaller groups of stakeholders that were requesting visibility, transparency, and accountability would grow larger and likely impact SEC reporting for public companies.

There wasn't much agreement about those perspectives then, but I chose my timing and audience strategically to begin developing support. As part of the work, I spoke the "language" of each audience to win them over. For finance and accounting, I spoke in terms of auditability and reporting. For legal, I spoke in terms of disclosure risk and liability. For the public relations and ESG leaders, I spoke in terms of trust, credibility, responsibility, and the reputational risk of "greenwashing."

It was important to sequence communications, use language that resonated, and center the message on values to win others over. The message was timed properly to begin the journey—although my ideas about the importance of ESG and reporting took a little longer to rise to the prominence we see today.

— Lisa Beth

Pro Tip from Stef

Learn from this communicator's mistakes! Don't just plan time for translations; plan time after you receive the translation back to have a native speaker within your company perform a quality check. Even high quality translation services require a check from local language speakers to capture local dialects and other nuances that can be hard to capture from a central resource. It's always wise to check it internally.

If your company doesn't have an established roster of people around the world who will help with this, here's your chance to put in place something that will benefit the compliance department and others company-wide!