

PROGRAMME COMMUNICATION CONCEPTS 2014-2020

INTRODUCTION

The communication landscape has undergone considerable changes since 2006-2007, when the current North Sea Region Programme (Programme) platforms for communications were established. The current setup was mainly a means of keeping various target groups informed about applications, procedures, project management and news. Given media platform changes and the strong progression of social media platforms in professional working environments, it is clear that Programme communications for the future needs a more community oriented and project focused approach.

Today, websites and other online communication channels cater to audiences, who are looking for accessible, easy-to-find, digestible and targeted information, with a possibility to join the conversation share experiences. Social media is part of the media mix in our society, and would be expected to be part of any current communication plan.

The European Communication Monitor 2013, a survey of 2,700 communication professionals from 43 countries, indicated that 'today's most important issues in communication management are linking business strategy with communication and coping with social media'.

This paper provides a brief overview of the current state of North Sea Region Programme communications and suggests a way forward towards a strategy for 2014 – 2020.

EXPERIENCES FROM THE 2007 – 2013 PROGRAMME

The Programme website was developed as, and still remains to a large extent, a one-stop communication channel, which holds key information relevant to beneficiaries and potential beneficiaries as well as background information for media and others.

A project life cycle graphically illustrates the different stages of a North Sea Region Programme project and links to further information relevant for each step of the cycle. Furthermore, relevant key documents, guidelines and Programme publications are available on the programme website. The amount of information available for different target groups, however, gives the website a somewhat unstructured look as well as a very strong Programme focus.

A number of sections has been added to the website during the course of the Programme, such as the project section. The quality of the project section depends on projects uploading documents, photos, events, etc – a time-consuming task which is many times not prioritized, due to time constraints and the fact that it duplicates work done on the dedicated project websites. This means that the accuracy and relevance of the information related to projects on the Programme website is often dated and that information is lost at later stages, since many project websites close down or become dated as soon as final payments have been made.

The Programme is currently developing a results tool by which stakeholders can access information about the Programme and aggregate and collate information in a variety of ways. Subsequently, a feature tool (video animation) will be developed, with the aim of presenting the Programme and some of its key achievements. Finally, the Programme has recently published a new newsletter, which presents project stakeholders and beneficiaries with key findings from closing projects. These tools have been added along the way to make project as well as programme results more accessible.

The Programme has gradually been building its presence on the most important social media platforms since some time.

The level of connectivity needed between platforms (back office, online tools and the web interface) in order to successfully manage tools such as the project section on the website was not foreseen in 2006. This resulted in a number of ad hoc solutions at later stages, when bridges had to be made between the CMS, the application structure and the Programme's monitoring system.

Lessons learned

- The website and other communication tools should be integrated with Programme management tools
- A flexible communication platform is desirable so new media can be integrated during next Programme as needed
- The new website should have a stronger project orientation and focus on user-friendliness
- Projects should not have to enter or upload data to more than one channel as it compromises accuracy and transparency and may lead to loss of data after project closure
- Project and Programme results should not only be communicated in words on a website, but be supplemented by project databases, videos, newsletters, etc
- Social media should be part of the media mix, but the relevant channels needs to be evaluated

INTRODUCTION TO 2014 – 2020 COMMUNICATIONS

Effective data management and the development and maintenance of relevant online tools using this data (such as the results tool currently under development) rely on data transferability between relevant structures.

A major challenge from the communications 2007-2013 has been keeping up-to-date with the many project changes and updates. A system that has a better integration between structures would allow for automatic updates and data transfer and provide a higher level of transparency and accuracy.

It should be a main priority of the set up of future communications to secure this connectivity at all levels. It is crucial that the structure for communications 2014-2020 is forward looking, flexible and has in-built potential to connect to all relevant content such as the application system, monitoring system, relevant databases and any Commission related structures for content transfer and between programmes.

The ongoing evaluation on communications suggest that, at least for some stakeholders, a shift to focusing more on communicating cluster results to Programme stakeholders might create a better understanding of the potential of transnational cooperation in the North Sea Region.

National Contact Points (NCP) serve as a vital bridge between the Programme secretariat and the countries and regions of the Programme. They facilitate contact between potential beneficiaries and administrations, politicians and policy makers at different levels in the regions and play an important role when creating awareness of and interest in the Programme. The 2014-2020 regulations will most likely make the role of NCPs in connection to communication more clear.

This would be in line with findings in the on-going evaluation of NCPs supporting the communication of projects in coordination with the Programme Secretariat. The ongoing evaluation report indicated that the 'national contact points should channel project results to relevant stakeholders at the regional level (e.g. newsletter, website) and link project communication to specific regional agendas and policies'.

The proposed Common Provisions of the next programming period highlight the importance of working with communication as a strategic tool throughout the entire programming period. It is proposed that the Programme communication plan among other things include annual updates on communication initiatives and results and a description on how to measure the impact of communication. The communication strategy / plan should be approved by the Monitoring Committee within six months after the OP is adopted.

Summary

- The structure for communications 2014-2020 should be flexible and have potential to connect to all relevant content structures

- Communicating cluster results to Programme stakeholders might potentially create a better understanding of the importance and potential of transnational cooperation

KEY HEADLINES FOR 2014 - 2020

A strategic and targeted approach to Programme communications should be the aim for 2014-2020 – different messages and communication channels for different target groups.

The focus should be on involving and co-creating communications and publicity with project stakeholders. The main way to achieve this would be to connect the project communication channels to the Programme channels. There also needs to be an emphasis on training key project stakeholders at early stages of the Programme by involving them in seminars and workshops on communications

Based on current experiences, the following overall strategic headlines can be formulated for 2014 - 2020:

1. Project/ community oriented - co-creation and ownership
2. Integration and flexibility (open source)
3. Single platform for projects
4. Facilitation of knowledge transfer and good practice between projects on how to communicate results to stakeholders successfully
5. Increase the visibility of the clusters and their thematic area
6. From words to visuals (graphics, photo, video, e-education)
7. Website as main platform to link further towards other communication channels (e-education and social media)

WEBSITE

The 2014-2020 website should have a stronger project orientation than the current website does. Community orientation, involvement and ownership should be key words in the set up and design of the 2014-2020 interface.

The website should be the main Programme interface for communication. Stakeholders would have individual log-ins and there would be back office interfaces for those needing to access management information.

Projects should have individual websites designed and managed by the projects, but hosted by the Programme. I.e. the Programme would designate server space and capacity, and a shell website, through a sub section of the Programme website, and create a direct link between the Programme website and the project websites. Each project would then be responsible for the design of the specific website, the uploading of news, information, etc.

This would allow the projects to have their own individual websites while the Programme would maintain a level of control of the storage and archiving of the content, to minimise the risk of data and information loss, and to avoid duplication of work, as identified in lessons learned 2007-2013.

Key social media platforms, should be closely linked to the website and be an integral part of the setup of the website. Relevant social media platforms should be used to complement and reinforce Programme news and messaging, and used to have relevant conversations with Programme stakeholders.

Furthermore, it is recommended that video and e-learning tools are hosted through open source freeware and made available through the website as a compliment to written guidelines, fact sheets, calls and instructions.

Summary

- The 2014-2020 website should have a stronger project orientation
- For the 2014-2020 programming period, the Programme should designate website server space and shell website to projects
- Social media should be an integral part of the website
- Videos and e-learning tools should be implemented

JOINT BRANDING

In terms of corporate identity, INTERACT has facilitated the development of a proposal for a more harmonised branding of European Territorial Cooperation in the programming period 2014-2020. In the current programming period, nearly 100 programme brands and more than 3,000 project brands were developed to visualise and communicate cross-border, transnational and interregional cooperation.

Beside substantial costs for developing numerous – and in case of projects short-lived – brands, the diversity has resulted in a low visibility of European Territorial Cooperation towards potential partners and stakeholders on all governance levels.

An update from the Interact Working Group on Joint Branding, held 11-12 December in Brussels, will be given during the meeting.

Example, proposal:



Summary

- In a process facilitated by INTERACT, a more harmonised branding has been suggested, which might increase Programme visibility

NSRP CORPORATE IDENTITY

The baseline for the North Sea Region programme's corporate identity (CI) and subsequent logo should build on the existing CI and logo, which are well established and highly functional. A small design tweak has already been undertaken with the interim 2014-2020 logo. The full remake does not need to follow directly on from this, but should rather have a fresh take on the current 2007-2013 logo.

The INTERACT initiative would not have any implications on the North Sea Region Programme logo as such, but would re-instate 'Interreg' as the common umbrella for branding and streamline basic Programme and project logo and brand communication. The 2014-2020 NSRP logo and subsequent elements, should be developed using the current logo as a baseline and take into account the outcomes of the brand harmonisation process.

Summary

- The corporate design for the Programme 2014-2020 should take into account the outcomes of the brand harmonisation process and build on from the current logo

TERMS OF REFERENCES

An update of the latest developments regarding the terms of references related to 2014-2020 communications will be given in the meeting.

CONCLUSION

The major changes in the communication landscape since the 2007 – 2013 Programme communications were planned combined with the increased importance of communications as a strategic business tool means that a new approach is needed when developing the 2014 – 2020 communication strategy and plan, and in the subsequent implementation.

The main changes would implicate a design and setup of communications to involve projects and stakeholders in the communication, to have a community oriented approach and to make external communication more project oriented.

The key success factor for future communications will be platform connectivity (the ability of different parts of the system to work together and share information), and this should be reflected in the TOR for the 2014-2020 communications.

The group is asked to consider:

- The key headlines for 2014 – 2020 communications
- The basic concept of the new website and next steps for development of the ToR