

Communication Matters

Communicating the Value of Transportation Research



Guidebook Overview

NCHRP REPORT 610

National Cooperative Highway Research Program

TRANSPORTATION RESEARCH BOARD

OF THE NATIONAL ACADEMIES

GUIDEBOOK OVERVIEW

This overview summarizes the guidebook published as *NCHRP Report 610*. The guidebook and overview were created, and the research behind the guidebook was conducted, under NCHRP Project 20-78 by NuStats LLC in association with Texas Transportation Institute, Northwestern University, and Public Information Associates.

COMPANION RESOURCE MATERIALS

Guidebook

This comprehensive document provides transportation researchers, planners, managers, and others with professional advice on how to design, plan and execute effective communication campaigns that convey the value of research projects or programs. It covers the elements of good communication practices, the communication process, evaluation and feedback, and targeting specific audiences. This is a practical document, offering quick tips, detailed how-to descriptions, and useful resources and templates. The guidebook is published as *NCHRP Report 610* and can be purchased or downloaded from the TRB website (www.trb.org).

Workshop

A workshop has been created that presents the guidance developed from this project. It shows transportation researchers, research managers, transportation engineers, and others how to incorporate basic communication strategies, overcome typical communication challenges, and institute best-practice communication activities into the research process. The result is greater success in conveying the value of transportation research to the public, agency decision makers, policy makers, and the media.



*This **Overview** briefly introduces the need, process for and good practices of integrating communications into transportation research. The full guidance is contained in two companion resource materials. The **Guidebook** provides in-depth guidance, including best practices, quick tips, and case studies. A **Workshop** presents the guidance, best practices, and templates in an interactive format.*

The Value of Transportation Research

Research plays a critical—and growing—role in our national transportation debate.

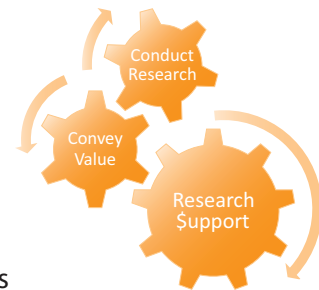
Transportation research is vital in providing solutions to improve mobility, build better roads, provide safer conditions for drivers and pedestrians, and increase the service life of bridges. The devastating and tragic collapse of the steel deck truss bridge in Minneapolis, MN, in August 2007 reinforces the need for robust federal and state transportation research programs that can solve these problems today for tomorrow's users. Still, the value of transportation research can be a tough sell. While most people conceptually grasp the value of research and its results, this does not link directly to research support—particularly for those innovations or new technologies that take years to develop. Decision making and budget cycles take place in the here and now.

Communication Matters

The value of transportation research is measured in terms of the good it does—or can do. While technical research reports provide quantifiable results, such information can be complex and not easily understood. Communication is a key component in furthering the transportation research agenda. The challenge is to tell the story of how society can benefit from the research in ways that decision makers, elected and appointed officials, the media, and society as a whole can understand and appreciate.

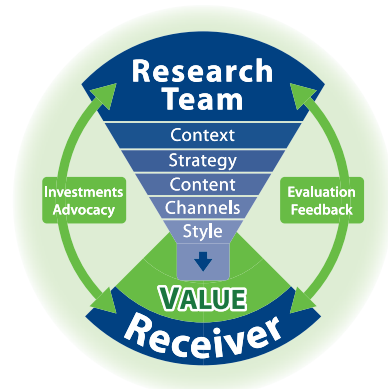
Communicating value is more than just providing quantifiable statistics and dollars. It also includes translating the benefits into understandable terms.

“Communicating the Value of Transportation Research” offers a blueprint to state and federal transportation officials and their research managers, as well as others in the transportation research community for integrating communication into their research programs. It contains practical advice on how to communicate the results and return on investment that research programs produce to diverse audiences, including Congress and state lawmakers and other decision makers. It highlights the importance of integrating communication at the onset of research planning—at the proposal stage. At this stage, important communication objectives can be established and serve as a starting point for subsequent planning to bring research outcomes to fruition. This guidance was based on an empirical examination of communication efforts used to promote federal and state investments in various transportation research programs that was funded through the National Cooperative Highway Research Program.



The Communication Process

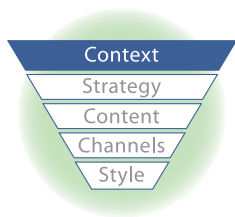
Decision makers assess the value of transportation research in terms of perceived worthiness of the expected outcomes. A skillfully applied communication process is necessary to effectively market that value. Successful communication links researchers and results with their intended audience(s) by strengthening the information flow throughout the research process. The communication process funnel illustrates how this can be achieved.



Communication Process

Getting Started: Five Steps

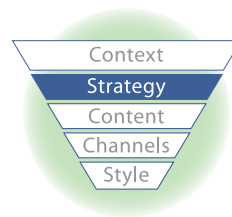
The communication process funnel demonstrates that communicating the value of research is a multi-layer challenge—the upper layers of context, strategy, and content are just as important, or even more important, than the lower layers of communication channels and style. The paragraphs below explain each of the figure's elements.



1. Context

The context in which communication

takes place—including the problem to be addressed by the proposed research— influences strategy, content, channels, and style. Communication is frequently a response to a particular situation that takes into account historical, social, political, and cultural considerations. For example, transportation research programs that originate in legislation often raise issues about public visibility, and trade-offs against other (perhaps more popular) programs. It's critical to learn what the audience deems as politically acceptable.

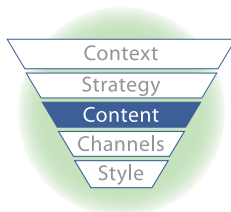


2. Strategy

Strategies for communicating value

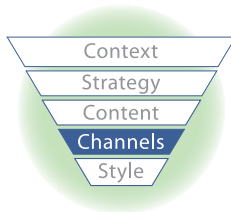
depend on an ability to understand the audience and the purpose of the message. Since the goal is to influence value perceptions, strategy depends on developing a clear understanding of who must be influenced and what they care about (i.e., their value profiles).

The value profile identifies the criteria the audience will use to evaluate the exchange of information. The objective is to gain an in-depth understanding of how members of the target audience determine value, what comprises value for them, and how they express value.



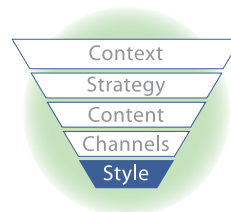
3. Content

The content of the message does not stand alone; it depends on both the context and the strategy. Selecting accurate and appropriate content is critical. If content is inappropriate, the audience is likely to dismiss the communication, and if content is overly complex, the audience will disregard it completely. If content is inaccurate, communication loses all credibility. Determining the appropriateness of content involves considering the target audience and their values and the action to be advocated.



4. Channels

Communication channels are the modes or pathways through which parties communicate. There are four basic types of channels: (1) printed/published materials; (2) oral channels (e.g., personal contacts); (3) broadcast media (e.g., radio, TV, videos); and (4) Internet and computer-based modes. Some channels are especially well suited for particular contexts or audiences, so it is essential to choose the appropriate channel for both your message and your audience.



5. Style

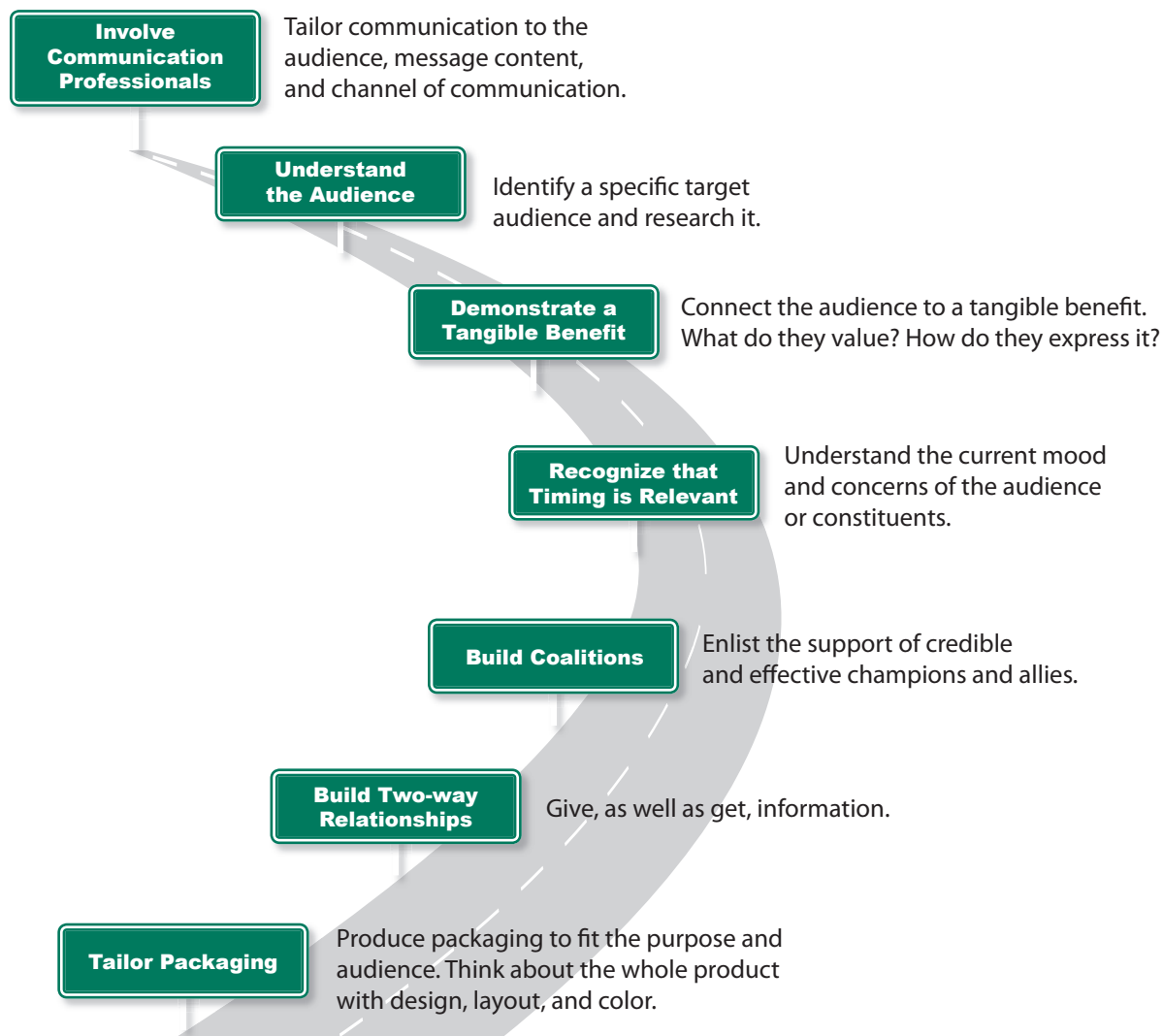
Style describes the packaging of the communication. Think of it as the physical wrapping or features that distinguish one communication activity from another. As the most visible aspect of packaging, physical features (such as design, layout, color, and typeface) may affect the perception of value. Whether it is through the thickness of a report, the arrangement of images and text on a website, or the folder used to house fact sheets, every encounter between a member of the audience and the transportation research advocate is immediately influenced by physical packaging. Packaging is also an important consideration for oral (e.g., face-to-face) communication. Speakers lacking good communication skills will face an uphill battle when it comes to effectively reaching the target audience and influencing their perceptions.

Communication is continuous. Advocating support for even a single research project or program usually takes an extended period. Within this timeframe, there are opportunities to learn, adapt, and improve. This effort or approach calls for continuous reassessment of the context, as well as of strategy, content, channels, and style.

The Guidebook provides detailed guidance on the five steps of the communication process funnel along with case studies of their real-world application.

Signs of Good Practice

The research for this project examined best practices in communicating the value of research by looking at successful research projects and programs both inside and outside the transportation community. This information led to several common threads or attributes of effective practices. These are:



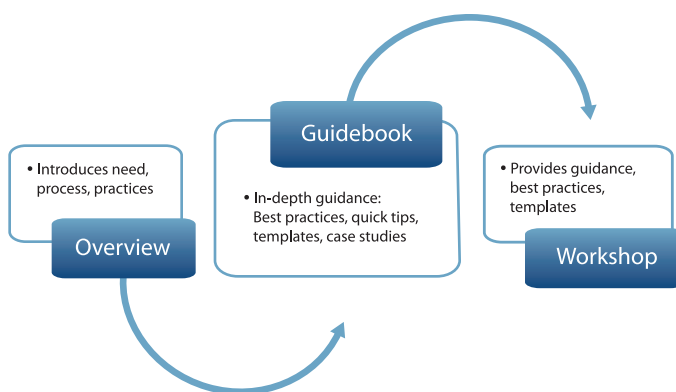
The Guidebook presents the key lessons learned from case studies and examples of good practice from successful research projects and programs both inside and outside the transportation community.

Taking Communication Seriously

Communication must be an integral part of the research process, not just an add-on when the research concludes. Ongoing communication brings a network of researchers, decision makers, and other stakeholders together and ultimately builds lasting relationships.

Taking communication seriously includes having communication professionals craft and deliver messages to different audiences. It also means building the communication skills of researchers and providing resources to support and enhance the communication capacity within the research team itself. These resources include printed materials (e.g., communication manuals and guides), workshops and forums to share best practices and review communication processes, and programs to provide researchers with funds to improve or expand communication to target audiences

Consider this Overview and the accompanying Guidebook and Workshop as resources, too.



Ongoing communication builds a bridge between researchers, decision makers and stakeholders.



Not all transportation researchers can be expected to excel as effective communicators.

Broaden your research team by bringing communication professionals to the table. They assist with up-front planning and can monitor the ongoing communication and dialogue with key audiences throughout the process.

Transportation Research Board

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