

# Strategic communication for development programming

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Throughout the 10 years MDF has worked in the Indo-Pacific, several factors have been vital to its success. Among these is an understanding of the power of high quality communication in achieving program objectives. Traditionally, communication has been seen as a reporting function, churning out annual plans and reports; or as a public relations function, creating good news stories for the consumption of program stakeholders. While both these functions are integral elements of program implementation, MDF's experience has been that communications can be so much more. In a program like MDF there are multiple strategic outcomes to which our communications team is integral.



## Communicating with diverse stakeholders

MDF connects with a wide spectrum of stakeholders, spanning the public (funding and partner governments) and private sectors (farmers, firms and industry associations) as well as the media and job seekers. The diversity of audiences makes sharing information on MDF's work a challenge. Businesses, for example, have very different needs and incentives compared to government stakeholders. MDF has, therefore, worked to adapt its 'pitch' to different audiences. This has meant developing a suite of communications that are professional and accessible.



## Actionable intelligence and a persuasive online brand

When MDF approaches the private sector, the facility is presented as an investor that brings not just finance, but also credible market intelligence, backed by evidence. This has been a key element of MDF's 'value add' to its many different stakeholders.

The program started to formalise its market intelligence function during the early stages of the pandemic. As countries and economies started shutting down, there was a dearth of real data on what was happening in places that had, overnight, become inaccessible. Traditional economic data, with its long time lag, was nearly useless in the context of the unprecedented speed, and scale, of change. These intelligence briefs became highly valued by stakeholders in the private sector, partner governments and funders.

But again, access to data is only one part of the puzzle. A more challenging component is communicating information in ways that stakeholders can quickly understand, and use to inform their decision-making. This is where smart communications strategies come into the picture.

MDF's intelligence briefs have been published as thought pieces in key development and industry forums as well as through MDF's platforms. The facility focuses on simple, accessible language, storytelling that links macro trends with relatable, real-world examples, and attractive designs that entice the audience to keep reading.

As the country teams capture market insights into business and household dynamics in the Indo-Pacific, MDF is regarded as a credible source of information that is relevant and actionable for businesses, industry bodies, think tanks and governments.

The audience is also increasingly online. MDF has leveraged its growing digital presence to strengthen its brand identity, building an online presence that is synonymous with credibility, creativity, reliability and dynamism. This branding is essential to deliver on program objectives. The first thing potential partners do, whether they be in the private or public sector, is research MDF's online presence. Proactive digital branding put the facility ahead of the curve and makes a solid impression on promising collaborators, even before a first meeting.



## Changing behaviour and market systems

Outside of MDF, some classic communication campaigns make the grave error of prioritising what the sender wants to say, rather than what the listener needs to hear. Programs traditionally follow the communication-education-awareness model that concentrates more on broadcasting information and less on looking at whether the information is driving uptake and impact. MDF takes a different approach.

The facility prioritises using behavioural insights for intervention design paired with behaviour change communications campaigns. A key example is the Timor-Leste communications campaign to combat the spread of African Swine Fever. Using multiple platforms, such as TV, radio, social media and workshops, and diverse communication tools, such as posters, brochures and social media material, the campaign was able to measurably influence farmer behaviour at scale. This also supported other interventions in pig feed, breed and husbandry practices. The approach will continue to be a cornerstone of communications work in 2022.

For an MSD program to be successful, communications must incentivise or 'nudge' market actors toward the desired outcome. Such tactics will be an important part of MDF's approach to climate change, using behaviour change communication to steer market stakeholders to pursue adaptation and mitigation measures.



## Generating widespread impact

MDF recognises that success stories need to be told. This is not to make the facility look good but rather, communicating successful innovations to a wide audience can accelerate adoption and promote comprehensive change. Sharing positive experiences can subtly tip the risk-return calculus of strategic market actors. To influence national-level stakeholders, MDF's media engagement has helped shift the thinking of key decision-makers.

Using communications to prompt stakeholders' behaviour has required investment in website and social media platforms, particularly in social media analytics for improved audience targeting. This investment has also included building team capacity in content creation, visual design and creative tools, such as videos and animation.



## Communications and adaptive management

MDF has revamped its annual reporting cycle to improve its utility. Annual Reports usually sit in program staff drawers or gather dust on DFAT/MFAT shelves. Strategy documents often suffer the same fate. Instead, MDF has combined the two. The team writes this Annual Report with one objective in mind: if someone wants to know what MDF is doing and why it is doing it, they can find that information in this communique.

The Annual Report is designed to be a comprehensive - yet accessible - analysis of the MDF strategy in each country/sector/market. It explains why the facility has made the choices it has, what is working well and what isn't, what has been achieved to date and what the future will hold. The Annual Report is also an opportunity for the program to tell stories and write informative, introspective pieces to help the reader better understand the thinking that underpins the MDF strategy.



## Considerations for MSD programs

As the program enters into its new five-year phase in 2022, MDF has reflected on ways to maximise communications effectiveness:

- a. **Investing in social media and digital content is a win.** Strategic social media content goes beyond flooding a newsfeed with content. It should instead be viewed as a tool to build a brand around Australian support, attract potential partners and talent, and engage with a broad base of users who require very different information. Monitoring platform analytics and adjusting accordingly is key for the success of such a communications venture.
- b. **Reinventing legacy communication products requires a strategic rethink but also pays dividends.** Shifting from good news stories and routine reporting often entails a complete reframing of how communications are structured but the benefits are worth the investment.
- c. **Effective communication is a useful tool in a program arsenal.** Integrating communication with intervention design can come in many forms. It may be present in activities within larger interventions or as large-scale behaviour change communication campaigns. This requires communications and country teams to work together to understand the nature of change required and how working together may best achieve those objectives.
- d. **The future of content is short and visual.** Regardless of audience, the appetite for long-form material in print or online is dwindling. Programs that focus on jargon-free content, attractively visualised data, as well as short videos and animation, are more likely to win the attention war.

