LEVELS OF ENGAGEMENT: communication tactics for achieving consensus
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ABSTRACT

In the first half of 2008 the University of Melbourne developed and adopted a new 10-year strategy for its scholarly information environment, collections, services and technologies. The new strategy forms part of the University’s broader direction, the Growing Esteem agenda, which also includes long-term strategies for the ‘triple helix’ of research, learning and teaching, and knowledge transfer.

The Information Futures Commission faced two complex communication challenges. First, adding a new dimension to the Growing Esteem agenda required the support of researchers, academic staff, students, professional staff and other key ‘influencers’ in the University community. Each of these stakeholders held different assumptions and preferences about the nature and value of scholarly information.

Second, the Scholarly Information Futures strategy would be a response to highly disruptive changes in the external social, business, technological and academic environments. The strategy therefore needed to be based on both a broad view of those external changes and a detailed, up-to-date understanding of how those changes were affecting individuals and practices within the University.

This paper describes the approach taken by the Information Future Commission in designing, implementing and evaluating a communication and engagement plan. We provide a brief review of some possible tactics from the fields of organisational communication, public policy development and user-centred design. Each of these fields offers a selection of techniques and tools that suit varying situations, audiences and purposes.

We describe a structured process for selecting particular techniques and tools, and for weaving these into a coherent communication and engagement plan. We describe some metrics for evaluating the effectiveness of specific initiatives.

In conclusion, we summarise some outcomes from the Commission and suggest how the University could continue to use selected communication techniques in its ongoing planning and operations.

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BACKGROUND

In the first half of 2008 the University of Melbourne developed and adopted a new 10-year strategy for its scholarly information environment, collections, services and technologies. The new strategy forms part of the University’s broader direction, the Growing Esteem agenda, which also includes long-term strategies for the ‘triple helix’ of research, learning and teaching, and knowledge transfer.

The Information Futures Commission was led by the University’s Chief Information Officer and supported by a small project team of four (including the authors). The Steering Committee was chaired by the Vice-Chancellor and included deans, student representatives and senior executive staff. Two further groups provided advice: an Expert Panel of specialist professional and academic staff, and a small group of External Reviewers.
COMMUNICATION CHALLENGES

The Information Futures Commission faced two complex communication challenges. First, adding a new dimension to the Growing Esteem agenda required the support of researchers, academic staff, students, professional staff and other key ‘influencers’ in the University community. Each of these stakeholders held different assumptions and preferences about the nature and value of scholarly information.

Second, the Scholarly Information Futures strategy would be a response to highly disruptive changes in the external social, business, technological and academic environments. The strategy therefore needed to be based on both a broad view of those external changes and a detailed, up-to-date understanding of how those changes were affecting individuals and practices within the University.

The Commission addressed a wide spectrum of related issues, covering four types of scholarly information:

1. Published information and collections, particularly those traditionally collected by or provided through the University’s library, archives and museums.
2. Materials created for learning and teaching purposes.
3. Information created in the course of research activities, for example data collected from scientific instrumentation; responses to surveys; transcripts of interviews; records of conversations between collaboration partners; and models, plans or images.
4. Research outputs such as papers, chapters, monographs, articles, letters, presentations, posters, performances, demonstrations and speeches, processed research data, visualisations of large datasets, models, web sites and multimedia objects.

The Commission had limited time in which to contact and engage actively with as many stakeholders as possible. The project team was formed in January 2008. To fit with the University’s planning cycle, the final draft of the proposed strategy would need to be submitted to the July meeting of University Council.
SELECTING TECHNIQUES AND TOOLS

The Commission’s project team was drawn from professional staff with experience in a variety of fields including librarianship, IT management, project management, corporate communication, teaching, usability, student services, policy development and public sector administration. Each team member was thus able to propose and apply a set of well-tested approaches and techniques to the work of the Commission. Below, we highlight a few of these approaches.

The Commission’s Communication and Engagement Plan described the mechanisms by which the Commission would broadcast its news and activities to the wider University community. In this mode, we employed typical public relations techniques: announcements, advertisements, flyers, articles and promotional activities aimed at a broad, relatively anonymous audience.

The strategy development process adopted by the Commission shared several features with the policy development cycle:

- identifying issues
- analysing the problem
- identifying appropriate policy instruments
- conducting consultation
- ensuring coordination among the various relevant agencies
- making a decision
- implementing the new policy
- evaluating the outcomes

In this cycle, consultation has three purposes: to develop ideas; to test the strength of the analysis; and to test the feasibility of the proposed response. (Althaus et al 2008, pp38-40)

A range of consultation mechanisms is needed, so as to “limit the inherent biases of any one approach by seeking opinion through a range of different avenues... It is important to advertise the consultation process, even if most who see the advertisement will choose not to participate.” (ibid, p120)

Organisational assimilation (Jablin 1982) describes the values and feelings a person experiences during the process of joining a new workplace. We found that an individual’s encounter with the Information Futures Commission was in some ways comparable to the stages of anticipatory socialisation (developing positive expectations of the project), encounter (experiencing the reality of the consultation process) and metamorphosis (making a choice about becoming a part of the process or disengaging). This framework indicates the importance of expectation management, ensuring that stakeholders’ mental model of the situation and the available options is based on a realistic understanding of the organisation’s culture, resources and priorities. Provided they are based on fact, the classic techniques of organisational (internal) communication can be valuable in this task.
Effective internal communication is based on trust. It aims to influence employees, equipping them with the information, authority and skills they need to help the organisation achieve its goals. Internal communication typically involves a mix of face-to-face (one-to-one or in groups) activities, printed materials, video and audio recordings, intranet web sites, events (launches, seminars, activities), design of the physical environment, social activities and written communications such as emails and memos. (Smith and Mounter 2008, chapter 8)

The Communication and Engagement Plan also served as a generator of input for the Commission – gathering information about individuals’ experiences and opinions, and about the University’s organisational culture. User experience design, with its roots in ethnography, human-computer interaction (HCI), customer service and product design, provided a rich array of tools for this function.

The first step in user experience design is learning about the organisation’s ‘customers’ – or, in our case, the students, researchers, teachers and others who create or use scholarly information. As Kuniavsky observed, “Finding out who your customers are, what they want, and what they need is the start of figuring out how to give it to them. Your customers are not you. They don’t look like you, they don’t think like you, they don’t do the things that you do, they don’t have your expectations or assumptions. If they did, they wouldn’t be your customers; they’d be your competitors.” (Kuniavsky 2003, p xiii)

The members of the Information Futures Commission could not be said, in themselves, to form a representative sample of the University community. Kuniavsky describes techniques for conducting contextual inquiry, task analysis, data analysis, focus groups, surveys, competitor research and literature reviews. Each of these was used in some form by the Information Futures Commission to gain a more nuanced understanding of scholars’ information-seeking behavior and opinions.

Some of Kuniavsky’s techniques were less applicable in the Commission’s consultation process. For example, developing an ongoing relationship with library users was not possible within a six-month project.

Developing the user-centred theme a little further, the final stages of the consultation process took on elements of participatory design, a practice in which stakeholders actively participate in creating the product, service or policy that was the overall aim of the project.
DESIGNING A COMMUNICATION AND ENGAGEMENT PLAN

The Communication and Engagement Plan was designed to facilitate three broad types of interaction. Each interaction type represented a different balance of the size of the target audience, the effort required of the Project Team and the potential for returning value to the Commission’s work.

The most basic interaction was one-way communication (sometimes called marketing or public relations), where the Project Team provided information to identified audiences. This one-way communication would be a channel for delivering project updates or for providing background information to help stakeholders understand the issues to be addressed in the final strategy. The communication aimed to reach the largest possible audience while minimising the Project Team’s effort. The value gained was in the raising of broad awareness about the Commission’s purpose and timelines.

The second type of interaction, feedback, involved providing a variety of ways for interested parties to offer comments or suggestions to the Project Team. In return for additional effort by the Project Team, this interaction provided informative insights into the variety of experiences and opinions held by the University community.

Engagement was the most intensive form of interaction, involving mutual participation by stakeholders and the Commission members. An example was the collaborative writing of the final strategy document by the Project Team and Expert Panel. Engagement activities were generally targeted at individuals and small groups who would be influential in the decision-making process towards the conclusion of the Commission’s work.

In drafting the Communication and Engagement Plan the project team was cognisant of the short time available for consultation and conversation among staff, students and other stakeholders. The introduction of the new Melbourne Model curriculum and related changes engendered strong competition for the attention of staff and students. As well, we needed to consider the relative effectiveness of different communication channels in engaging interest and stimulating debate, and to bear in mind the Commission’s limited staff resources.

The Communication and Engagement Plan was developed in five steps:

1. Confirm measurable goals for the plan
2. Identify stakeholder groups
3. Identify available communication channels
4. Determine deadlines for specific activities or outputs
5. Draft the plan

A first version of the plan was drafted in January. The plan was revised in March, taking account of feedback received in the first two months.
Step 1: Setting measurable communication goals

The Communication and Engagement Plan was designed to meet four goals:

1. Ensure as many members of the University community as possible were aware of the Information Futures Commission and its agenda
2. Gather information from a wide range of people about the current state of scholarly information practices at the University of Melbourne
3. Persuade key stakeholders to actively support the Commission’s work
4. Achieve broad consensus on the Commission’s final recommendations

The first two goals were about the Commission’s process. They were readily measurable during the project: we could count the number of people who wrote submissions or otherwise participated in Commission events. We could also draw some qualitative conclusions about the types of opinions expressed. These process measures enabled us to review and fine-tune the Communication and Engagement Strategy as the project was being implemented.

Goals 3 and 4 were about outcomes and could only be measured at the conclusion of the project. If the Commission’s final recommendations were accepted by the University’s governing bodies, then goals 3 and 4 had been achieved.

Step 2: Identifying stakeholders

The Steering Committee and Project Team members were individually and collectively responsible for ensuring that stakeholders relevant to each Information Futures Commission activity were identified and that appropriate methods of stakeholder engagement were used. These responsibilities were articulated in project team meetings and at the Steering Committee’s first meeting.

Methods for identifying and engaging with stakeholders included:

- Providing the Steering Committee with the draft Communication and Engagement Plan for their feedback and seeking their support
- Attending relevant University information sessions, committee meetings and other events, to identify and engage with relevant stakeholders
- Using established University communication channels for promotional purposes and for inviting participation or feedback
- Gathering intelligence about the attendees at Information Futures Commission forums and information sessions, eg via a printed form or by asking questions from the podium
- Sharing information and news through email, the web site and formal and informal meetings
- Storing project documentation, especially stakeholder lists and discovery/intelligence documents, on the project fileserver for access by all Project Team members
At project start-up, the following key stakeholders were identified.

- University governance and management: Vice-Chancellor, Chancellor, Provost, Deans, members of relevant University committees, Academic Board members, University Council members
- Project governance: Steering Committee, External Reviewers, Expert Panel
- Senior influencers: all academic staff, postgraduate research students, faculty and department managers
- Other internal stakeholders: postgraduate coursework students, undergraduate students, staff of the Information Services (library and IT) division, related University entities such as Melbourne University Press and the residential colleges, all other University staff
- Other external stakeholders: alumni, retired staff, benefactors, peers at other institutions (researchers, librarians, curators, technologists), professional associations, news media

These stakeholder groups were mapped against the three levels of interaction (one-way, feedback and engagement).

**Step 3: Identifying communication channels**

Using the Project Team’s collective knowledge about the University’s operations, we compiled a list of potential communication channels, for both internal and external audiences. The channels included:

- publications, in print and online: newsletters for staff, graduate students, alumni, specific organisational units and communities of interest; highly-trafficked and trusted web pages; the University newspaper; audio and video podcasts; a specially-created web site, blog or wiki (including RSS newsfeeds)
- meetings: regular committee meetings, at all levels of the University; the Commission’s own Steering Committee and Expert Panel; online discussion forums; professional associations and networks
- advertising and marketing: noticeboards in academic departments and student centres; notices in the student portal; email distribution lists; media releases, other contact with external media
- opportunities for interaction, online or face-to-face: seminars, lectures and forums for students and/or staff; workshops and focus groups; online discussions; market research surveys

For each potential communication channel we identified the main audience, editorial guidelines and likely costs. We noted the approximate preparation time required and, where relevant, the deadline for submission of copy or other materials to the publisher.

Where possible, we identified channel-specific metrics for gauging the delivery of and response to a particular communication mechanism. Some of these measures were relatively simple: for example, the number of email addresses to which a newsletter was normally
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delivered. Other metrics were constructed from several separate measures. For example, the success of a ‘guest lecture’ event would be measured by a combination of RSVPs received, actual attendance, questions asked by the audience on the day, survey forms handed in at the conclusion of the lecture, number of times the online video was viewed, and follow-up questions received via email or other means.

Finally, we considered the list of communication channels in relation to the three levels of interaction. Some channels were clearly suited to one-way communication, while others could be used to facilitate more intensive interaction.

At this stage we did not filter or sort the list of communication channels. Stakeholder groups are a convenient concept for project planning; however, they are not necessarily homogenous in their information-seeking behavior. Some people pay attention to email newsletters; others prefer to attend a weekly staff meeting or periodically check an RSS feed. The Information Futures Commission would need to employ a variety of techniques to reach each group of stakeholders.

Step 4: Determining deadlines

This step consisted of mapping the project’s deadlines against the publication cycles for the identified communication channels.

Project deadlines consisted mainly of the meeting dates for the Steering Committee, Expert Panel and the other University committees that would eventually endorse the recommended strategy. The project calendar also made allowances for significant events in the academic year, such as Orientation Week and the Easter mid-term break, and for staff absences on business trips or personal leave.

Matching these dates against the publication cycles enabled us to understand the feasibility of using particular communication channels at different times during the Commission’s project plan.

Step 5: Drafting the plan

The fourth step involved bringing together the three sets of data produced so far: the matrix of stakeholder groups and interaction levels; the list of communication channels; and the chart of project deadlines and publication cycles.

For each group of stakeholders, we asked five questions:

1. At what points do we want them to be actively involved in the Commission?
2. What form should that participation take?
3. In order to participate, what do the stakeholders need to know about the project?
4. When do they need to know it?
5. What’s the most effective way to interact with them?
The answers to these questions enabled us to match communication channels to stakeholder groups, while allowing for the constraints of deadlines. This produced a two-phase Communication and Engagement Plan:

- Phase 1 would be aimed at opening up a vigorous conversation within the University community: exploring issues, exposing assumptions, asking open-ended questions and identifying possible options for the University’s future activities
- Phase 2 would analyse and synthesise the outputs of Phase 1, discarding some options and developing others into a set of recommendations for the University to consider adopting

This was similar to Berkun’s model of the creative phase of a software design project (Berkun 2008, chapter 6). In fact, we successfully used a modified version of Berkun’s ‘problem space’ diagram to explain to stakeholders the Information Futures Commission’s consultation process.
IMPLEMENTING AND MONITORING THE PLAN

The Information Futures Commission operated as a fast-track project, commencing in January and delivering its final recommendations in July 2008. To prevent unnecessary delays, it was essential to ensure clarity and consistency of message, regardless of delivery channel.

The first significant deliverable for the project was a Consultation Paper, published at the end of February. This document was based on industry intelligence, competitor research and internal benchmarking data. It outlined the various issues to be addressed by the Commission and related them to the University’s established strategic directions. A public call for responses to this discussion paper garnered 75 written submissions and stimulated a range of other interactions.

Via regular briefings and updates we ensured that, at all times, the Steering Committee and Project Team members would be able to articulate:

- The current progress of the project, and next steps
- Substantive issues currently under discussion
- Opportunities for stakeholders to become engaged in the project

Where possible, the language of written communications was re-used in multiple ways. For example, the same short ‘overview’ paragraph could be used in a media release, published in an email newsletter, and appear as an introductory blurb on the project web site and on a printed handout distributed at a staff forum.

The project web site at www.informationfutures.unimelb.edu.au was promoted as the single source of authoritative information about the Information Futures Commission and its work. The site was updated at least every 48 hours during the first four months of the project, and at least weekly thereafter. A web form and email address (info-futures@unimelb.edu.au) enabled stakeholders to easily contact the Project Team.

To ensure consistent, clear articulation of key messages, the Project Team developed a ‘communication toolkit’ comprising documents such as:

- Summary statement, describing the scope of the Information Futures Commission in a single A4 page
- Summary project plan
- A short blurb that could be used in publications, newsletters and media releases, summarising the Information Futures Commission’s role and contact details
We tried to ensure that every one-way communication included a ‘call to action’ – a prompt to the audience, encouraging feedback and participation in the consultation process. Wherever possible, the call to action was specific and included a deadline:

To comment on this document: email your suggestions to info-futures@unimelb.edu.au by 31 March 2008
To RSVP for this workshop, call extension 47257 before close of business on Wednesday 30 January

When messages did not require a specific response, they nevertheless cited the Information Futures web address as the source for further information about the project.

When feedback and questions were received the Project Team responded in several ways, depending on the specific circumstances.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TYPE OF FEEDBACK</th>
<th>RESPONSE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Written submission</td>
<td>Publish online (if permission is given)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Review with Expert Panel, to consider issues raised and ideas proposed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Include in ‘acknowledgements’ section of final report</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Email to info-futures@unimelb address</td>
<td>Acknowledge receipt</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Where relevant, include in consultation process</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Otherwise, respond to specific enquiry</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Issues of concern about policy, strategy</td>
<td>Invite participation in consultation process</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The most frequently-utilised communication channels were:

» Weekly item in staff email newsletter
» Frequent updates of Information Futures home page and posts on the associated weblog
» Items in email newsletters for graduate students and alumni
» Articles in the University newspaper
» Links from relevant web sites, eg University home page, Library home page, Information Services public and intranet home pages
» Presentations at University committee meetings

These mass-communication outlets enabled us to reach a broad audience with minimal effort. News and opportunities to participate were also promoted at each face-to-face event.
The monthly Information Futures Forum series, where guest speakers addressed topics relevant to the Commission's investigations, were popular events. Although attendance in person was sometimes lower than we hoped, the online video recordings of these lectures attracted a strong audience. Through these forums staff and students gained an understanding of relevant strategic issues and external trends. In return, via the question-and-answer section of each forum, the Commission was able to identify topics of interest and importance to the audience.

We conducted a survey to understand how staff and students currently find, evaluate, use and share scholarly information. The design of the study was based on previous work by Kingsley (2008) and Wesch. The survey collected some demographic information and solicited anecdotes and commentary about the scholarly information environment. Suitably anonymised and incorporated into discussions at meetings and presentations, the sharing of those personal stories led directly to an improved understanding by senior executives of people’s current behaviors, frustrations and aspirations. This kind of storytelling was a powerful tool for exposing and debunking assumptions about how scholars do their work.

Of particular importance was regular in-person engagement with senior ‘influencers’. This was achieved via attendance at committee meetings and through personal interviews and correspondence. Feedback from these interactions was shared with the Project Team and applied to shaping the Commission’s final recommendations. Because this level of engagement was highly interactive and personalised, the senior decision-makers and opinion leaders gained confidence in their understanding of the issues and proposed solutions.

Consultation forums and exploratory workshops provided students and staff with the opportunity to make suggestions, raise issues and ask questions. The openness and transparency of these events clearly conveyed the Commission’s genuine desire to be guided by the University community in its deliberations.

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1. Kansas State University anthropologist Michael Wesch has produced several short videos about changes in the scholarly information environment. See weblog entry at http://tinyurl.com/29yru for links to the videos.
MONITORING AND EVALUATION

The Commission used a range of metrics to evaluate the effectiveness of the Communication and Engagement Plan, both during the six-month implementation and at the conclusion of the project.

The Project Team collected data and feedback throughout the project, and as specific communication activities were completed. General performance measures included:

- Regular reports on enquiries received and resolved via the info-futures@unimelb.edu.au email address
- Number of people attending Information Futures Forums, consultation forums and information sessions
- Number of people viewing online videos or downloading audio podcasts
- Number of times the Consultation Paper, Final Report and Strategy documents were downloaded from the eprints repository
- Data from feedback forms collected at forums and information sessions
- Number of individuals participating in online discussions, degree of engagement (e.g. relative proportion of lurkers and active participants)
- Number of submissions received from individuals and organisations
- Usage of the project web site www.informationfutures.unimelb.edu.au and associated weblog
- Mentions in external media and other organisations’ newsletters

The progress and success of engagement and communication activities was reviewed monthly during the project, and the plan was adjusted as necessary to suit emerging needs.
CONCLUSION

In the long history of the University of Melbourne, 2008 will be remembered as the year in which the Growing Esteem vision became a reality. The first students enrolled in New Generation degrees and the University visibly reoriented itself as an institution built around targeted research, graduate schools and knowledge transfer.

It was also the year of the Information Futures Commission. The Scholarly Information Future Strategy is a result of seizing a rare opportunity – an apposite moment to re-assess and re-imagine our scholarly information environment at a time when disruptive technologies are causing transformational change in society.

The Information Futures Commission produced three key documents, all publicly available via the University of Melbourne Eprints Repository (UMER):

1. “Scholarship in a Digital Age: choices for the University of Melbourne” (also known as the Consultation Paper)
2. “Final Report of the Steering Committee”
3. “Melbourne’s Scholarly Information Future: a ten-year strategy”

Together these documents propose a program of transformational change for the University’s scholarly information collections, practices and technologies. Moving beyond traditional notions of strategic change, transformational change produces “multiple change outcomes, both horizontally across the organization and vertically up and down the layers of the organisation. Specifically, transformation includes the creation of novel organisational forms and changes in the products-services of the organisation.” (Ferlie et al 1996, p94)

The University formally adopted the 10-year strategy in July 2008 and seed funding has been allocated for the start of implementation in 2009. Elements of the strategy, and its underlying principles, have been incorporated into operational plans for the library and information technology division.

Many academics, students, alumni, information professionals and other members of the University community found time to contribute to the development of a new vision for our scholarly information future. We also benefited from the generosity of industry leaders, professional bodies and colleagues at other universities, within Australia and overseas, who shared their ideas and urged us to be bold.

An important priority for the University Librarian and Chief Information Officer will be to deliver far-reaching changes that respond to the interest and excitement generated via the Commission. Partly, we believe, this can be addressed by continuing the high level of communication and engagement demonstrated by the Commission.

Particularly in the library and IT areas, our internal organisational structures and roles have already changed as a result of the Commission’s work.

In 2009 we will continue to hold regular Information Futures Forums, inviting Australian and international experts to discuss their ideas and innovations as they relate to the scholarly information environment. We have committed ourselves to seeking opportunities to collaborate, with local colleagues and with peers at other institutions, as we move towards implementing the 10-year strategy. And we will continue to advocate for user-centred approaches to designing and implementing services, tools and personal development opportunities for our students, teachers, researchers and professional staff.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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