

UTILIZING STRATEGIC COMMUNICATIONS TO OPTIMIZE PUBLIC SERVICE DELIVERY

UGANDA NATIONAL ROADS AUTHORITY CASE STUDY

Abstract

In November 2012, Elicia Blumberg, strategic communications specialist and resident instructor at IP3, conducted a week-long training for the Uganda National Roads Authority (UNRA) entitled *Communicating the PPP Process to Key Stakeholders in Uganda* funded by The World Bank. This paper is co-authored by Ms. Blumberg and the Executive Director of UNRA, Eng. Peter W. Ssebanakitta, and focuses on the significance of strategic communications, highlighting UNRA's steps to finalize a National Strategic Communications Framework.

What is “strategic communication”?

As defined eloquently by the United Nations Children’s Fund, strategic communications constitute “an evidence-based, results-oriented blend of advocacy, social mobilization and behavior change communication”.¹ *Two-way communication* between a government agency and broader stakeholder community that aims to tailor programs and policies to the needs and preferences of the service recipients differentiates strategic communication from typical one-off public relations endeavors. Customarily, governments use communication to roll out a new policy, informing their citizens of what service they will acquire and what they will pay for it. While the programs are conceived with the best of intentions, the manner by which they are relayed to the public often engenders skepticism or outright opposition. Employing the three facets of strategic communications—stakeholder consultation, public outreach and education, and media relations—requires the program sponsor to redefine the role of the public by including them in the process of defining the parameters of the service itself.

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¹ UNICEF. 2008. *Essentials for Excellence, 2008: Research, Monitoring and Evaluating Strategic Communication for Behaviour and Social Change with Special Reference to the Prevention and Control of Avian Influenza/Pandemic Influenza*. UNICEF Pacific Office, Fiji. <http://www.unicef.org/cbsc/files/Essentials_for_excellence.pdf> Accessed January 28, 2013.

Thus the government asks, “What services do you want and need? What is such a service worth to you?” Evidence worldwide indicates that this participatory, transparent approach results not only in better policy, but a more open and willing constituency.

It’s all about service delivery

The global economic crisis has brought about a shift from a primary focus on service improvement to increased emphasis on cost effectiveness. Governments need to pay more attention to whether the programs being delivered meet important social and economic goals and to the measurement of service performance.² Strategic communication, together with innovative approaches to service delivery, contributes significantly to the twin goals of cost reduction and service improvement.

Service management should be carried out with an integrated—or at least a coherent, coordinated and collaborative—set of policies and structures. This includes a policy to incorporate stakeholder input into the design of these services and systematically gather feedback during all phases of service delivery. The key is to organize responsibilities for the entire life-cycle of service delivery with a focus on citizen-centered service uppermost in mind.³

The UNRA Example



Figure 1. UNRA staff discuss the Authority’s communications challenges

In November 2012, the Institute for Public-Private Partnerships (IP3) was commissioned to provide training in strategic communications for the Uganda National Roads Authority (UNRA) as part of a series focused on enhancing the Authority’s capacity in the realm of public-private partnerships (PPPs). The modules were designed to meet the communication needs of UNRA and selected staff, focusing on the key concepts and trends in communicating the PPP process, with special emphasis on the relationship between a carefully thought out Strategic Communications Plan and the implementation and management of successful PPP projects in the roads sector. The group engaged in facilitated discussions about how to utilize

local and national media outlets better to successfully communicate the work of UNRA and its PPP projects, as well as how to properly identify key stakeholders and determine the proper methods and messages for effective consultation and public outreach (see Figure 1). The UNRA example illustrates how strategic communications can enhance an organization’s internal capacity to interact with its stakeholders in the provision of crucial services, with the goal of enhancing the quality of the service itself.

A relatively new entity, UNRA was operationalized in 2008 to manage the national roads network. UNRA’s mission is “To develop and maintain a national roads network that is responsive to the eco-

² <http://www.iccs-isac.org/en/pubs/FinalReport-June7-2010-FrontSection.pdf>

³ Ibid.

conomic development needs of Uganda, to the safety of all road users, and to the environmental sustainability of the national roads corridors.”⁴

The Authority has had to get on its feet quickly to respond to the intense pressures and demand of its mandate. According to a study conducted by the World Bank in February 2012, the greatest challenges faced in the roads sector in Uganda include providing adequate funding for road maintenance, improving rural road quality and connectivity, and improving road safety conditions.⁵ As the largest recipient of the country’s national budget,⁶ UNRA finds that its activities—both successes and failures—are closely scrutinized (see Figure 2).⁷

Training goals and outcomes

The government proactively sought strategic communications training to address some of these public relations challenges, which turned out to be timely as the government is completing a National Strategic Communications framework to be adopted and integrated by all government agencies. The training utilized interactive group brainstorming and priority-setting techniques, including a half-day World Café exercise (a participatory method for hosting a large group dialogue, utilized in decision-making processes) conducted with engineers; communications staff and managers of UNRA; and partners such as the Ministry of Works and Transport, Kampala City Authority, and Ministry of Local Governments. This group identified communications challenges and set the stage for the development of the Authority-wide strategic communications framework.

The key challenges identified by the participants included:

- Absence of a formal communication strategy;
- Unclear communication channels;
- Decentralization of public relations responsibility from communications unit to station managers without requisite training; and
- Desire to achieve a shift in attitudes about communication, and enhance cooperation among the consultants, public sector employees, and politicians.

One situation that has brought UNRA’s communication challenges to the forefront has been the recent shift within the Authority that positions station engineers in direct contact with public and media, a



⁴ Uganda National Roads Authority website. <<http://www.unra.go.ug/>> Accessed January 28, 2013.

⁵ Ranganathan, Rupa and Vivien Foster. February 2012. *Uganda’s Infrastructure: A Continental Perspective*. The World Bank Africa Region Sustainable Development Department. <http://elibrary.worldbank.org/content/workingpaper/10.1596/1813-9450-5963>

⁶ According to the Uganda Road Fund Q1 FY 2012 report, for example, UNRA received 45, 467.5 million Ushs. for FY 2012-2013.

⁷ Nkwanzu-Isingoma, Virginia. November 2012. *Handling Effective Communication*. Presented during the UNRA training, Kampala, Uganda. Ipsos Synovate Inc.

role they were not formally trained to undertake. All of the participants, including the station engineers, agreed there was a need to bring about a cultural change within the organization to cope with its visibility and handle both media inquiries and road users' complaints consistently and effectively. By involving the station engineers in the strategic communications training and subsequent planning process, UNRA has begun to embark on a significant culture change that will percolate throughout the Authority. At the end of the training, station engineers expressed a new understanding of the importance of their new role and an openness and interest in engaging the public and the media.

Communications innovations: the case for M-government for UNRA

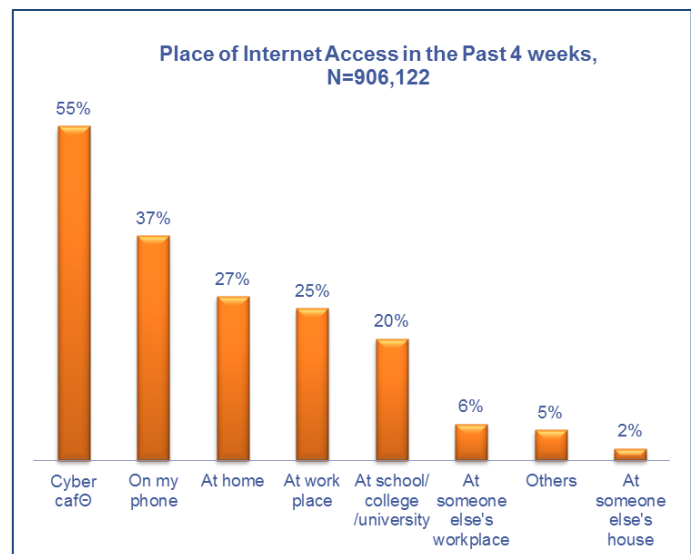
Training participants were eager to discuss ways to improve both internal and external communications. One idea that arose was the possibility of harnessing mobile technologies as part of the broader communications strategy. Doing so would allow UNRA an opportunity to differentiate itself, and place itself at the forefront of innovative service provision. Other government agencies are utilizing short messaging service (SMS) blasts with great success in Uganda.⁸

Uganda has moved from approximately 250,000 available fixed telephone lines before 2003 to over 17 million available mobile telephone lines by the second quarter of 2012, with a penetration of more than 50%, thereby making Uganda's telecommunications market one of the fastest growing in Africa. There is now sizeable information and communications technologies (ICT) deployment in the functioning of government organizations, as well as in the private sector.⁹

A 2012 survey of nearly one million Ugandans indicated that the mobile penetration is rising rapidly and stands to far outpace other ICT. (Figure 3).¹⁰

Furthermore, recent studies demonstrate that the country has an appetite for public service provision using mobile technologies. For example, the mobile money transfer system in Uganda has over three million subscribers and is set to grow further with the launching by Warid and Orange of Mobile Money. As of 2012, approximately 50 billion UGX are sent through mobile money per day. An African innovation, mobile money services now exceed Western Union global transactions.¹¹

All of this data indicates that as government agencies in Uganda consider the most effective way to reach the public, mobile telephony



⁸ Ngonzi, Bryan. November 2012. *Alternative Media Usage in Uganda*. Presented at the UNRA Strategic Communications Training, Kampala, Uganda.

⁹ Government of Uganda Ministry of Information and Communications Technology (ICT). September 2012. National ICT Policy for Uganda- First Draft. www.ict.go.ug

¹⁰ Nkwanzi-Isingoma, Virginia. November 2012. *Handling Effective Communication*. Presented during the UNRA training, Kampala, Uganda. Ipsos Synovate Inc.

¹¹ Nkwanzi-Isingoma, Virginia. November 2012. *Handling Effective Communication*. Presented during the UNRA training, Kampala, Uganda. Ipsos Synovate Inc.

should be at the top of the list.

M-government is on the uptick globally. An excellent example applicable to the UNRA case is that of Malaysia. Malaysia has established mySMS 15888 Government Gateway that uses SMS technology to give citizens easy access to government services and enables government officials to communicate easily with citizens. For example, Ministry of Agriculture officials can send an SMS to farmers' mobile phones to alert them of rising water levels that could damage their farmlands. MySMS 15888 helps to bridge the digital divide between Malaysia's government and many of its disadvantaged citizens.¹²

How does this apply to UNRA? Participants in the training expressed interest in "rebranding" the Authority, enhancing service provision while simultaneously earning public good will. The release of a new ICT Framework for the country that highlights the use of mobile technology, together with the ongoing development of a Strategic Communications Plan based on the new national framework, indicate that the stars have aligned for UNRA to present a new face to the country's road users. Participants discussed the potential for utilizing SMS to enhance service effectiveness. For example, text messages could be used to alert road users of construction, delays, broken bridges, traffic, etc. and effectively "brand" UNRA in a positive light by demonstrating the Authority's commitment to public safety and convenience. These ideas should be pursued in depth as UNRA's Strategic Communications Plan is fleshed out.

The way forward

The Government of Uganda has stated in its recent National ICT Policy that one of the key objectives is "To promote value added services, access to information and service needs to all sectors of society, especially the marginalized sections of society (rural or poor communities, women, and people with disabilities)." What is its strategy for doing so? "Develop provisions for regulation of value added services provided over telecommunications networks, like Mobile money."¹³

The time is ripe for UNRA to harness strategic communications tools and methods to bring added value to Uganda's road users. With the GOU declaring both strategic communications and use of mobile telephony as national policy objective, coupled with the Authority's demonstrated dedication to improving its internal and external communications, it seems that the iron would be hot for striking for UNRA to become a leader in this realm.

About the authors

Eng. Peter Ssebanakitta is the first Executive Director of Uganda National Roads Authority (UNRA). He has over 30 years of experience in the road sector in Uganda. He has spent considerable time planning, programming, and implementing road maintenance activities and gained an intimate knowledge of both the national road network and the road industry in the country. During his five-year tenure as Commissioner for Roads, he was responsible for the management of all development and road maintenance activities on the national roads, as well as for developing and coordinating policy for the district, urban, and community access roads network countrywide. As the Road Agency Formation Unit's (RA-

¹² Kernaghan, Dr. Kenneth. March 2010. *International Innovations in Public Sector External Service Delivery*. Brock University, Canada. <http://www.iccs-isac.org/en/pubs/FinalReport-June7-2010-FrontSection.pdf> P. 37-38.

¹³ Ibid.

FU) Engineering Division Manager, he was responsible for the management of all upgrading and rehabilitation projects on the national roads network.

Eng. Ssebanakitta holds a Bachelor of Science (Eng.) Honors degree from Makerere University as well as a Master of Science in Highway Engineering from the University of Birmingham in the UK. He has worked in various positions in the Ministry of Works which he joined in 1981 as a pupil engineer, rising to the rank of Commissioner for Roads before joining RAFU, first as the Maintenance Division Manager and later as the Engineering Division Manager. He was appointed Executive Director of UNRA in 2007. His experience spans road maintenance management, road development projects management and planning.

Elicia Blumberg is an environmental scientist and stakeholder communications specialist at IP3. She has 18 years of experience developing, managing, and implementing programs to protect natural resources and enhance basic service provision. Since becoming an instructor for IP3, Ms. Blumberg has created and delivered training modules for more than 20 core and individualized courses. In addition, she has developed a self-paced online course entitled *Strategic Communications: Engaging Stakeholders, Conducting Outreach and Harnessing the Power of the Media*, available on the IP3 website. Ms. Blumberg regularly coaches public sector representatives from around the world to incorporate strategic communication plans as part of their regulatory reforms and government agency programs.

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