

How to get your message out

An online communication roadmap for rangeland professionals



Amber Dalke, Retta Bruegger & Sheila Merrigan



This material is based upon work that is supported by the National Institute of Food and Agriculture, U.S. Department of Agriculture, under award number 2020-38640-31523 through the Western Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education program under project number WPDP21-026. USDA is an equal opportunity employer and service provider. Any opinions, findings, conclusions, or recommendations expressed in this publication are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the view of the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

What's in the Guide?

COMMUNICATION OBJECTIVE

- Background
- Why are you doing the online communication work?

TARGET AUDIENCE

- Who are you talking to?
- Empathy map

MESSAGE & CALL TO ACTION

- What are you saying to them?
- What should they do?

DELIVERING THE MESSAGE

- How will you deliver your message to your audience?
- Writing styles
- Storytelling

COMMUNICATION STAGES

- Project planning
- Editorial calendar



Why this Guide?

Background

Rangeland professionals know a lot about rangeland ecology and management, but maybe not so much about marketing strategies and online communication. This guide will help improve your skills and knowledge of online communication by outlining key strategies for communicating your rangeland or natural resources work to the right audiences.

Consider this the communication roadmap for when you want people to read a new publication or fact sheet, visit a website, adopt a practice, join a newsletter or group, give feedback, attend a workshop, webinar, or symposium, and much more.

Structured around the components of an online communication plan, the following pages will help you better understand your target audience, aid in creating relevant and engaging messages, and share best practices for communication channels and writing styles. A successful communication roadmap ensures that you are getting your message into the right hands at the right time, all while saving you time and energy.

What is the objective of the communication work?

Before you start any online communication work, consider the communication objective. *Why are you are doing the work?* Likely your objective is related to community engagement, increased awareness, trust creation, and – ultimately – participation. Be specific with your objective and think: What will success look like? What metrics or indicators will you use to assess your success?



Why are you doing the communication work?

Your objective should be as specific as possible

EXAMPLE

You are organizing a drought management planning workshop with science-based information, what is successful participation?

Who is doing what?

- Ranchers attending the workshop
- Landowners implement new strategies for improvements
- Land managers sign up for educational opportunities

What metrics or indicators will you use to assess your success?

- Number of people registered
- Number of new ranchers registered
- Number of people attending
- Taking action after the workshop
- Enrolling in other workshops
- Amount of time people spend on your website

Once you know exactly *why* you are doing the communication work, it's time to create your three-part online communication roadmap.

Target Audience

Who are you talking to?

Message & Call to Action

What are you saying to them?
What should they do?

Delivering the Message

How will you deliver your message to your audience?



Reinforcement is key

You must say something in multiple ways, multiple times, in multiple places for it to be used, learned & shared



Who are you talking to?

The first step to any successful communication work is clearly defining and understanding who your target audience is. This will allow you to focus relevant messaging to a particular audience.

On rangelands, we typically lump together ranchers, Extension professionals, university people, and agency staff. However, they all have different needs and goals. Consider segmenting these groups into more manageable units.



Examples of segmented audiences:

- Audience type: participants, supporters & influencers
- Demographics: age & gender
- Roles: ranchers, Extension, university & agency
- Similar interests or outlooks: family ranches, working groups, conservation organizations, NGOs & recreational groups



If you try to reach the general public or everyone, you will actually reach no one

People only pay attention to information that is important or relevant to them

EXAMPLE

For your drought management planning workshop, consider the specific groups of people that will attend and what your relationship is to those groups

- | | |
|---------------------|---|
| Participants | Ranchers & land managers who you want to attend the workshop – people who you need to focus on the most |
| Supporters | People who help you build trust with participants – someone who forwards the invitation on your behalf |
| Influencers | People with no stake in your workshop, but can still be helpful – cattlemen's associations, conservation organizations & professional societies |

Empathy Map

To better understand your target audience, use an empathy map to help you put yourself into the shoes of another group – what do they say, think, do and feel. This should be focused on the group as a whole, rather than one individual.

EXAMPLE

For your drought management planning workshop,
your primary target audience is ranchers

What do ranchers experiencing drought say, think, do, and feel?

Say

- Can't make it rain
- When is it ending
- What should I do
- Its bad, but anyway...
- Don't have enough feed
- Should I sell my cattle

Think

- Will I make it?
- How long will we have water?
- How will I survive this?
- I'm going to lose everything
- How will I provide for my family?
- What happens if it never rains?
- Will I lose my legacy?

Ranchers

Do

- Downsize, sell stock
- Stress out and panic
- Buy hay and sell cows
- Consider opinions of neighbors
- Tries to survive
- Reads trade magazines
- Attends Extension workshops

Feel

- Frustrated
- Fearful and Panic
- Angry
- Conflicted
- Sorrow
- Uncertain
- Worry

What are you saying to them & what should they do?

Now that we better understand our target audience, we will explore how to create engaging messages that will always include a call to action – something for your audience to do.

To make content more engaging and relevant, consider the follow styles. These styles can help your audience feel understood and heard, which builds trust between you and them.

EXAMPLE

For your drought management planning workshop, let's take a basic call to action, like **register for the workshop**, and look at ways to make it more relevant:

Rewarding

If you plan today, you can rest easy knowing you did all you could. (reward is less uncertainty)

Responsive

We are here for you and we'll be only a phone call away as you implement what you'll learn

Realistic

Drought is daunting. Confront it head on with rangeland professionals and other ranchers experiencing drought.

Revealing

Did you know that 60% of ranchers have a drought management plan – but 100% of ranchers in the state are experiencing drought.

Real-Time

This drought could go on for months. Now is the right time for you to create a plan.

Refreshing

Ready to be flooded with drought management planning information? (refreshing is twisting the message)

Regardless of the style you select, always remember the call to action:

Register for the workshop

Other calls to action: read a publication or fact sheet, adopt a practice, give feedback, visit a website, or join a newsletter.



We don't want to just put information online

There should ALWAYS be a call to action or next step that provides additional information to engage people

How will you deliver your message to your audience?

With target audience, relevant message, and call to action prepared, we need to identify the best communication channels. This section will share best practices for identifying the best people and places to deliver your message using the most effective writing style.

Consider who are the best people to share your information. These should be the most trusted members of your network that can deliver your message to your target audience. *Be aware, it may not be you.*



Trust is critical in communication

We listen to people we trust

EXAMPLE

For your drought management planning workshop, who are the best people to share your workshop?

Ranchers who have already created or used a drought plan

A trusted climatologist warning of worsening drought



80% of people only read the headline

Spend as much or more time on headlines & subject lines as you do on the actual content

Consider where to share your message, keeping in mind the places your audience uses. Think: email, newsletters, LinkedIn, Twitter, Facebook, website article or blog. Does your audience use social media or prefer direct emails?

Often building a quality email list can meet your target audience better than sharing through social media.



Writing styles to deliver your message to your audience

How we craft our message to our audience is critical. Use the most appropriate writing style to connect with your audience. If we want to motivate people to action, we will be required to use a different writing style than what we use to publish peer reviewed journal articles or official reports.

There are six common writing styles used to connect audiences to relevant, actionable information. Consider which writing styles should be used and when.

News Writing

Start with the most newsworthy information at the top, followed by important details, and then other background information last. The first paragraph should include anything that is timely, impactful, controversial, or is novel or odd. Used in fact sheets, alerts, newsletters articles. This writing style is factual and straightforward.

Thought Leadership

Thought Leaders are experts who communicate well, which leads to writing that is authoritative and opinionated. This style requires a point of view (opinion, not just facts), a personality to do it well, and value statements (good, better, best). Can be used when you are asked about your opinions, beyond the facts, during a news article, podcast, or presentation.

Lifestyle Writing

Casual and informal yet highly engaging content that always provides a hook that creates action (read or register now). One popular form is a listicle, a piece of writing or other content presented wholly or partly in the form of a list. For example, 9 Things You Should Know about The Rangelands Partnership, Five Least Effective Restoration Practices, Top 3 Practices for Drought.

Microcontent

The headline and subject lines matter because this short but powerful text is actually read. Use general response words (You, My, Numbers, How, To, Deadlines, Questions) or rangeland specific words (carbon, soil health, sustainability). For example: What you need to know about Beef and Climate Change. Used for presentation titles, social media, email headings, newsletters.

Conversion Copy

Microcontent that motivates immediate action by always eliciting immediate action. This style emphasizes a sense of urgency (use: hurry, quick), speaks directly to the audience (use: you, your), and is clear, short, and direct with a single call to action. For example: Register now for the free workshop. Used when soliciting a survey, requesting donations, workshop registration.

Storytelling

Narratives that include characters, descriptive details, emotions, and plots. Using a simple framework, anyone can become a creative writer and make information more accessible and engaging for audiences. Think of yourself as offering your services as the "solution" or supporting character in how the central character overcomes the challenge. You are never the center of the story.



When using any style, always tell stories in an ethical manner, where people have agency & are not portrayed as victims

More on Storytelling

The Challenge Plot

Three acts:

1. Introduce a character
2. Introduce the villain or challenge the character faces
3. How the character overcomes the villain or challenge



EXAMPLE

Challenge Plot

Anne is a fifth-generation rancher in southern Arizona. As she says, “the land is in her blood.” She feels lucky to be raising her children on the land that means so much to her, and hopes to one day pass down the operation down to them. But years of drought have made this future less certain. Anne knows she needs to do something. A neighbor told her about their drought management plan created through a local workshop. Anne is ready to try. At the workshop with other ranchers and rangeland Extension professionals, Anne created a drought plan. She also now has more drought resources and access to the Extension staff in her county. Drought hasn’t gone away, but now Anne has a plan, a broader community to help, and less uncertainty for the future.

The Creativity Plot

Four parts:

1. A well-understood problem
2. A standard response that just does not work
3. A new approach – test runs or theories are ok
4. Vision of a new reality



EXAMPLE

Creativity Plot

Agriculture is full of challenges, but historically for farmers and ranchers on the west slope of Colorado, water wasn’t one of them. John started his orchard in 2010 as a first-generation farmer. Things went well for a few years. However, starting in 2018 with several years of dry conditions, once-reliable water for irrigation is no longer a sure bet. “We ran out of water ½ way through the season. The drought brought about so much extra labor, expense and stress that I wondered if farming was worth it for me – and wondered what I could realistically do in the face of drought.” Through engagement with drought technical professionals, John began to make a drought plan. “It opened my eyes to my blind spots – that we actually could plan and prepare for drought conditions, but I needed to take the time to invest in management.” Today, John is still farming full-time and feels he and his farm have a place in the future. Experts predict continued aridification in the decades ahead, but John is actively making changes with this future in mind to make sure his farm is there to be a part of it.

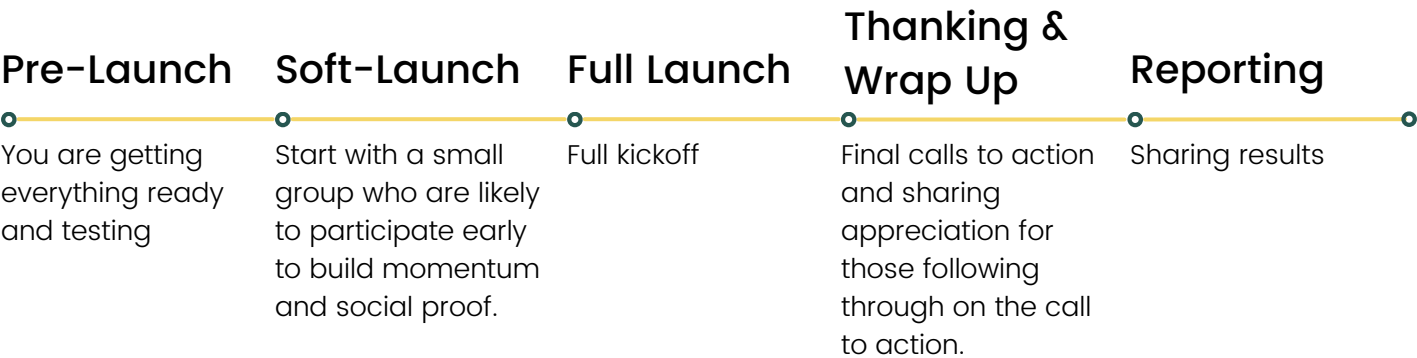
Stages of your communication work

Rangeland professionals wears a lot of hats with field work, ranch visits, projects, and workshops. In the rush, we can fail to fully market and communicate the projects, webinars, and publications we produce. Planning out the communication stages may be useful for leveraging momentum and increasing visibility.

Organize your communication activities over the entire project at the beginning. This will allow you to feel confident that you are doing what you need to do at the right time. The five stages are:



Reinforcement is key
Just one announcement
for an event is not
enough



Things to Consider	Examples
Your message will change over time through the stages	Join our workshop in two weeks vs. Registration deadline is tonight
Repurpose content throughout the communication work	Putting the content in different formats or communications channels
Some important things to keep in mind at each stage	Think messages, offers, urgency, stories
Save time for reflecting on results and impact	How could you improve communication in the future

Editorial calendar

Ready to level up your communication work? Use an editorial calendar to organize and plan the stages of your communication work. These calendars help you determine how many weeks your communication will be, what channels you will use, describe the pace of your communications, clearly define the content needed, and who will create that content.

EXAMPLE

For your workshop, plan the communication work

- When (week)
- Where (channels)
- How often to share
- Types of content needed (writing styles)
- Who will create content

When	Email	Website	Newsletter Article	LinkedIn	Twitter	Facebook
Week 1	Soft launch with key participants (storytelling, RB*)	Live	Cattlemen's (storytelling, RB)	2/week (news writing, AD)	3/week (micro, SM)	3/week (micro, SM)
Week 2	Listserv & share (revised storytelling, RB)	Full launch	SRM Sections (storytelling, RB)	1/week (lifestyle, AD)	3/week (micro, SM)	2/week (lifestyle, AD)
Week 3	Directly invite trusted messengers (news writing, RB, AD, SM)	Add Content	Agency (news writing, SM)	1/week (micro, AD)	3/week (micro, SM)	2/week (conversion, RB)
Week 4	Evaluate missing influencers (news writing, AD)		Cattlemen's (lifestyle writing, RB)	1/week (conversion, RB)	3/week (micro, SM)	2/week (micro, AD)
Week 5	Last call to all (conversion - all week, RB)		SRM (SM)	2/week (AD)	3/week	3/week (RB)
Week 6	The Event!					
Week 7	Thank you & Recap (RB)	Add content (SM)	Recap & Reporting (AD)	Recap direct to website (SM)	Recap direct to website (SM)	Recap direct to website (SM)

*Initials of people on the project team (e.g., RB, AD & SM)

One step closer to better online communication

What we learned

This guide has outlined strategies to better understand your target audience, help create relevant and engaging messages always with a call to action, and shared best practices for communication channels and writing styles.



Access webinars & more resources

<https://rangelandsgateway.org/communication>



The Rangelands Partnership

<https://rangelandsgateway.org/>



Nonprofit Marketing Guide

<https://www.nonprofitmarketingguide.com/>