RE*
ACT

A behavioural insights approach for designing effective communications with citizens in Europe.

Time to re-act

The world today stands at several crossroads, shaped by complexity and contradictions that touch every corner of society. While progress continues to unfold in remarkable ways, many citizens feel a widening distance between themselves and those entrusted to lead. In this landscape, trust has become fragile, and the voices of ordinary people often seem drowned out by noise.

It is precisely in moments like these that communication must serve as a bridge - a means to reconnect, rebuild, and re-energise people to be heard. RE*ACT introduces a new approach designed to do just that. It recognises the pressing need for realness, relevance, and connection. Rather than viewing disconnection as a barrier, this approach sees it as a chance to engage differently, to listen more closely, and to create narratives that resonate deeply. It acknowledges the growing demand for genuine connections and relatability and embraces these as guiding principles.

The strategies outlined here are more than a framework; they are a commitment to rebuilding trust from the ground up and reintegrate the citizen. They encourage engagement between institutions and citizens, inviting participation instead of delivering information. At a time when challenges loom large, this approach looks ahead with optimism - because the path to a stronger, more unified society begins with bi-directional connection.

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With more than 25 years of experience in communication strategies, Geert has developed a myriad of strategies in a wide spectre of markets and sectors. His work has influenced communication campaigns in more than 40 countries throughout the world. In the last 10 years, he focusses on corporate and institutional projects that target citizens and ordinary people. Geert is also an occasional lecturer in Strategic Communications in Ghent and Brussels, Belgium. His book 'The True Nature of the Marketer' (2010), applying basic Darwinian insights in communications, set the start of his continuous exploration of behavioural insights and human-centric communications.

brand date

WHY RE☆ACT?

Most communication models are 'same but not the same'. How is RE**ACT** different?

SLUDGE-NUDGE

Going beyond the problem-solution logic, it dives into understanding what cloudiness makes it difficult for people to make a conscious choice. Behavioural insights improve the effect as well as the longevity of the communication efforts.

DREAM!

Every communication project or campaign has its specific objectives. RE*ACT frames these objectives in the overarching or underlying idea to which the communication must contribute.

NUISANCES

Citizen communication is a balancing act. RE*ACT considers the potential backdrops of ideas and messages, turning realistic pessimism into a communication power.

GAUGE

While evaluation happens post-factum, RE*ACT integrates gauging the potential uptake of the communication before the implementation.

This guide has been developed based on proven communication principles and behavioural design principles. Reaching audiences with information or creating awareness is one thing, but impactful communication requires harmonious bridges and setting strong connections with realness. Citizen-proof communications include conscious shifts in perception and behaviour, empowering people to act with purpose.

HUMAN-CENTRIC

ENGAGEMENT

DATA INTELLIGENCE

COHERENT and CONGRUENT IDEAS

RE*ACT can be considered as a process or checklist that consists of 9 different yet logical steps. Each steps builds on the previous one, leading to coherence and connection with lasting effect in perception and behaviour.

Let's re-act!

Follow the **RE*ACTING** steps and define them in coherence with the other steps.

R **Receiver**
Understand who your target audience is.

E **Effect**
What is the communications' objective?

* **A little Dream Star**
What is the dream that shape the wider frame of the communications?

A **Avenues**
What are the best fit channels and touchpoints?

C **Cloudiness**
What is holding the people back currently?

T **Tracks**
Where can communications help overcome the clutter?

I **Inspire**
Which behavioural insights can help and what would be the message?

N **Nuisances**
What backdrops could undermine the communications and how to turn them into a strength?

G **Gauge**
Why would your audience pick it up, really?

RECEIVER

About

All communication must be human-centric. The first step is to understand your audience's context, dreams and needs. This step should be data-based and the topics below will help you define their situation, motivations, attitude and behaviour.
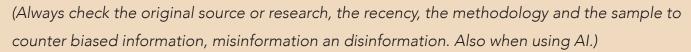
Checklist

What is the audience's sociodemographic profile?

Age

Location

Gender

Ethnic background

Social situation

Abilities/Saviness

What is their psychographic profile?

What and how do they think about the topic of the communications?

What's their perception and their attitude?   ☐ Positive   ☐ Neutral   ☐ Negative

Does the audience consist of very different profiles?   ☐ Yes   ☐ No

If yes, how can the audience be divided into different segments, based on characteristics or tendencies?

Segment: Characteristics: Substantiation:

Is the audience too big to reach or cover?   ☐ Yes   ☐ No

If yes, choices will need to be made:

Which segments or profiles?

Which countries or regions?

Why?

RECEIVER

Sources

Main sources: secondary research

Research data, reports, insights, learning from previous similar projects.

(Always check the original source or research, the recency, the methodology and the sample to counter biased information, misinformation an disinformation. Also when using AI.)

The **advantage** of these main sources is that they're quickly available and that there's a rich spectre of freely available data and insights.

The **disadvantage** is that they don't always clearly answer your question, that it might be difficult to check the methodology (esp. for articles on research) and that the details are behind an expensive paywall.

Other: primary research

Research that is organised especially for the project. The **advantage** is that the questions can be drafted in full alignment with your project needs. The **disadvantages** are that research takes time, the recruitment of the right sample profile might be a challenge, and it is expensive.

Responsible for this step

. . .

Consult for this step

Online, research dept. or agency, researchers, data analyst, think tanks, strategic consultants, previous project analyses and insights…

EFFECT

About

What is the planned impact
of the communications?

What should be the
difference before and
after the communications?

Checklist

Define the communication objectives:

Main objective:

Sub-objective(s):

Desired knowledge, attitude and behaviour?

Knowledge

Attitude

Behaviour

Write the desired effect as a mission statement

Mission statement:

The objective of the communications is for all *[audience (segment)]*
to *[objective]*
by *[desired knowledge, attitude and behaviour]*.

Example:

The objective of the communications is **for all Europeans between 18 and 24 years**
to **be aware of their social rights**
by **knowing where to find the right information, know how to exercise their rights, and
how to take action to improve their social situation.**

Responsible for this step . . .

Consult for this step *Policy, briefing, intiators...*

*THE DREAM STAR

About

Every communication is framed within a bigger dream.
Uniting people, creating prosperity, inclusiveness for all,
leaving nobody behind, creating jobs or a sustainable future…
The communications must fit into this frame by contributing a big or small part to
that dream, and taking a baby step or paving the path towards the dream.

Checklist

What's the bigger dream to which the communications need to contribute?

Sources

Previous reports, policy papers, speeches, articles, books, interviews and other
sources related to the decision makers, initiators or founders of the underlying
idea can give clear and strong indications of the basic dream that lies at the start
of everything.

Responsible for this step   . . .

Consult for this step   *Decision makers, leaders, consultants, initiators...*

APERTURE

About

Media aperture refers to the specific time or context during which an audience is most receptive to a particular communication delivered through media. It is a concept in communications that aligns the timing, medium, and context of message delivery with the audience's mindset, habits, and behaviours to maximise impact.

- *Running a back-to-school campaign in late summer sounds obvious.*
- *Online retail companies sends push notifications about discounts during evening hours when the customers are more likely to shop online.*
- *Physical shops send their coupons by the end of the week, before the shopping weekend.*
- *Politicians start communicating in the months before the elections, making use of the momentum and providing voters time to engage with it. Delivering a political manifesto too long before the elections may result in losing relevance.*

Checklist

What are the receiver's preferred ways of receiving communication?

What are the receiver's media consumptions?

What's the ideal context and moment for communications?

When is the receiver more likely to engage with the message?

Sources

Previous campaigns, research reports, media performance data, trend reports...

Responsible for this step   . . .

Consult for this step   *Media managers, media agencies, data analysts...*

CLOUDINESS

About

The cloudiness or sludge starts from the behavioural situation 'as it is' and provides the simple answer to the question why the audience doesn't have the desired knowledge, attitude or behaviour. What is keeping them from showing the encouraged behaviour?

The answer might be simple: because they don't know the existence of the provided solution. But it can also be very complex: distrust in politics and leaders, the feeling of not being heard, disinformation campaigns, stubborn myths, urban legends, or being disconnected with the topic.

Checklist

What is the desired level of knowledge?
What is holding the receiver back from being savvy?

What is the desired attitude?
What is influencing the receiver's perception?

What is the desired behaviour?
Why isn't the receiver taking the desired action?

Sources

Research data, reports, insights, learning from previous similar projects.

(Always check the original source or research, the recency, the methodology and the sample to counter biased information, misinformation an disinformation. Also when using AI.)

Focus groups; interviews with umbrella organisations and stakeholders...

Responsible for this step   . . .

Consult for this step   *Online, research dept. or agency, researchers, data analyst, think tanks, strategic consultants, previous project analyses and insights…*

TRACKS

About

Which tracks or avenues can pull the receivers out of the cloudiness and guide them in the best fit direction to achieve the objectives? Different tracks are possible; the next steps will help decide which track is the most appropriate. The following aspects must be considered when building the tracks.

Checklist

Knowledge:

Empowering the people to make more conscious choices.

☐ Does it give access to correct and clear information?

☐ Is it accessible to all?

☐ Is it bite-size and easy to assimilate?

Relevance:

Connecting to people's lives.

☐ Does it propose a solution to an unmet need or a new and better solution to an existing one?

☐ Is the added value clear and present?

☐ Does it apply in a positive way to their daily life?

Realness:

Building trust and confidence.

☐ Is it transparent and sincere?

☐ Does it reflect the concerns of the audience?

☐ Does it show the human side of things?

Resonance:

Creating a meaningful connection.

☐ Is it aligned with the receiver's needs, values, and context?

☐ Is the tone appropriate and does it evoke the intended emotions?

☐ Does the message leave a lasting impact, inviting them to reflect or act?

Responsible for this step   . . .

Consult for this step   *Communication experts, creative and strategic consultants, senior project experts...*

Congratulations, only half way to go! Take a break and think a minute about this:

THE CITIZEN IS ALWAYS RIGHT

Behaviour is happening because the circumstances make it happen that way. If it's not happening, the circumstances need to be set up to make it happen. Don't blame the behaviour, blame the set-up.

INSPIRE

About

In relation to your main challenge, different behavioural insights apply. Check the main challenge and discover which insights will help the impact and efficiency of the communications.

INSPIRE
**AWARENESS
KNOWLEDGE
COMPLIANCE**

EAST FRAMEWORK

EAST provides a practical starting point to make information easy to understand and remember. Its simplicity makes it accessible as a quick guide to infuse behavioural insights into projects.

Make it EASY:

Use **clear, concise messaging** and make the communication as effortless as possible. **The more background information** that is shared, **the lower the probability** that the audience will read, listen of watch the full content.

Make it ATTRACTIVE:

Visual elements, surprising and creative expressions, and personalisation through relevant and localised content will draw attention to key information. **Bye-bye stock images, hello creativity.**

Make it SOCIAL:

Inspire people to share the information. Not with some cheap trick, but by leveraging social norms and peer influence.

Social currency: people want to be seen in a positive way by their peers. Give them the social currency to achieve that and let them feel smart, exclusive or savvy through your content.

Practical value: help people in their daily lives. Not only will they use it, but they will also share it.

Triggers: integrate keys that trigger the memory and your message. Think of music, an expression or visual keys.

Make it TIMELY:

Presenting information and prompt people **when they are most likely to be receptive** sounds obvious but can also be a challenge in institutional communications.

Remember the media aperture!

INSPIRE
AWARENESS
KNOWLEDGE
COMPLIANCE

SOCIAL PROOF & COMPARISON:

Social norms and proof are powerful influencers of human behaviour because they **tap into people's desire to be part of a group or community**. Apply the principle to **show that others are engaging** with the information. Be it by data (e.g., 58% of 15-24 year-old are aware of the danger of misinformation) or by references ("Young Europeans expect their housing to be sustainable and climate-neutral.").
Obviously, it is essential to use fact-based information and data.

FRAMING:

How information is presented significantly impacts its interpretation. People generally **respond more positively to messages framed in terms of potential gains** rather than losses. Positive frames and wording work better than negative. Use framing effects to present information in a way that resonates with the audience as part of the choice architecture.

CHUNKING:

Breaking down complex information into **smaller, digestible pieces can improve comprehension and retention**. Consider providing information chunks over a certain period rather than sending out all information at once and repeating it several times. It is easier to remember a series of **smaller pieces of information** than a list of information in one piece.

INSPIRE

ATTITUDE
PERCEPTION
IMAGE

EMOTIONAL APPEAL

Messages that evoke emotions are more likely to be remembered and inspire action. Research from Nielsen shows that ads with emotional content perform up to 23% better than ads with rational content.

HUMOUR:

Humour captures attention and research revealed that incorporating humour in communications can **increase the recall rates** with 34%. Being aware of the all-present reluctance to use humour, here, here, here, here, and here are some recent **researches** that help.

To maximize the impact of humour, it's crucial to ensure that it remains **relevant to both the subject matter and the target audience**. It creates a **more engaging and memorable** communication experience that resonates with your audiences.

FEAR + SOLUTION:

Fear is a very powerful persuasion element, but avoid only tapping into fear without bringing a solution. The objective is not to inspire a reaction against something.

To **maximize** the impact of fear-based communications:
1. **Clearly articulate** the threat or risk.
2. Create a **sense of urgency** around the issue.
3. Offer a **concrete, actionable solution** that impacts your audience's daily life.
4. **Empower the audience** to take control and act.

JOY:

Use **optimism and hope** in the communication. They evokes positive feelings and create a **favourable association**. Always end your messaging with a positive note as **the last emotion will be considered the general emotion** that is associated with your message.

PRIDE:

Appeal to a sense of **accomplishment and self-worth** of the individual, group or community. The bigger the group to which the pride applies, the bigger the impact of your communication will be.

INSPIRE
*ATTITUDE
PERCEPTION
IMAGE*

ANCHORING:

Mostly, the **first piece of information encountered becomes the reference point** for the choice to be made.
When a city initially announced a 12% tax raise that is then adapted to 7%, citizens will consider it more positively as it is lower than the initial 12%. Even though the taxes are raised by 7% in the end. The purpose is not to use this insight as a disrespectful marketing trick, increasing prices right before the sales period, but to be aware of the impact of anchoring.

CONFIRMATION BIAS:

People tend to **seek out information that confirms their existing beliefs**. Confirm people in their opinion first, even if it is to counter it afterwards. However, always leave people in their self-esteem and never ever present your communication as THE solution or your audience's opinion as wrong or less smart.

AUTHORITY:

Using **credible, knowledgeable and independent experts** can significantly influence opinions and behaviours. Avoid self-declared or converted experts but use experts your audience can relate to: local, **speaking the same language and able to explain topics in plain language**.

INSPIRE
BEHAVIOUR ENGAGEMENT ACTION

LOSS AVERSION

The feeling associated with loss is stronger than the one associated with gain. **People avoid loss**. The classic examples: people prefer a solution where 20% of the people are guaranteed to win over one where 80% will lose, even if it means the same. Remember 'framing' and 'joy' that were mentioned earlier.

COMMITMENT & CONSISTENCY

Intention and commitment are the first step into actual behaviour change. Encouraging small initial commitments that are low-threshold and easily achievable like pledges and lead to larger actions later. Integrate the Gradient Effect to increase the chances of behaviour change.

PLANS & FEEDBACK

Providing clear action plans and regular or instant feedback improve goal achievement and behaviour change. Instant feedback can trigger the feeling of gratification, motivating the audience to take the next step in the plan.

CHOICE OVERLOAD

The more options people are given, the more difficult it is to make a choice. Worst case, people decide not to make any choice and ignore the options.

Default Options: When presenting the options, set the best option for your audience as the default choice to guide behaviour while preserving freedom of choice. This will help people making choices.

GRADIENT EFFECT

People's tendency to strive towards a goal increases with proximity to the goal. Not how far they've gone motivates them but how close the goal is. Give people an overview of how far they are from the goal but moreover, give them clear and instant feedback that they're getting closer to the final goal. See also 'Plans & Feedback' and 'Commitment & Consistency'.
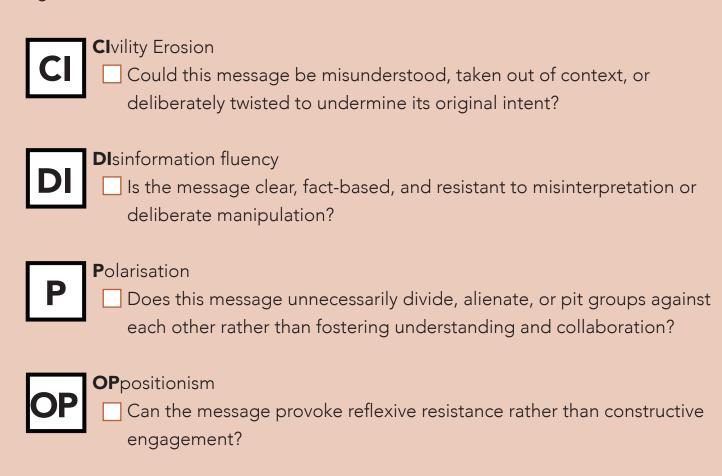
NUISANCES

About

Citizen communication requires a balanced approach.
Citizen communication must be CIDIPOP-proof
and PACO-free.

Checklist

CIDIPOP-proof, preventing the message being hijacked and being used against its original intent.

CI

CIvility Erosion
- [ ] Could this message be misunderstood, taken out of context, or deliberately twisted to undermine its original intent?

DI

DIsinformation fluency
- [ ] Is the message clear, fact-based, and resistant to misinterpretation or deliberate manipulation?

P

Polarisation
- [ ] Does this message unnecessarily divide, alienate, or pit groups against each other rather than fostering understanding and collaboration?

OP

OPpositionism
- [ ] Can the message provoke reflexive resistance rather than constructive engagement?

NUISANCES

Checklist

PACO-proof, preventing message inefficiency due to an inappropriate tone or style.

P **P**atronisation: conveys a sense of superiority, treating the audience as if they are less capable, less informed, or less important.
- [ ] Is the communication giving unnecessary guidance or explanation?

A **A**rrogance: an exaggerated sense of self-importance, superiority, or entitlement
- [ ] Is the sender or the message presented as THE solution?

C **C**ondescension:
Talking down to the audience as if they are incapable of understanding.
- [ ] Does the communication assume that the audience lacks the ability to understand the topic?

O **O**veruse of Commands:
Giving instructions in a way that feels authoritarian or controlling.
- [ ] Is the communication framing too many instructions in a directive tone without offering context, choice, or collaboration?

If any of these PACO-aspects apply, **how can the communication make the receiver feel appreciated and recognised?**

When the checklist above mentions 'audience', it applies to all the segments and profiles of the audience.

Responsible for this step   . . .

Consult for this step   *Communication experts, creative and strategic consultants, senior project experts...*

GAUGES

About

Effective communications aim at changing people's behaviour. Evaluating the impact of communications happens after the campaign (when it's too late to adapt or improve) or in pre-testing (which consumes time and resources). The questions below help to evaluate the intended communication and messages.

Checklist

Self-gauge

- [ ] **Does it really grab the audience's attention?**

    Why and how?

- [ ] **Are the message and the language simple, clear, and easy to understand?**

    How?

    What's the score in the Flesch-Kincaid reading ease test?

- [ ] **Can people connect with or relate to the message?**

    Where's the relevance and the audience's advantage?

- [ ] **Is there a clear call-to-action?**

    What is expected of them? Mind that 'going to a website' isn't a call-to-action.

    In that case, what are they expected to do there?

- [ ] **Will it resonate?**

    Why would they remember the message and change their behaviour?

EAST Framework:
Attractive

Plans & Feedback

YOU MADE IT!

Although creating effective communication never ends, you made it, completely ready for a jump-start.

When you are facing sensitive or complex matters, (and let's be honest, it's often the case) there is ony one thing left to do:

Confirmation Bias

Gradient Effect

Emotional appeal:
Humour

Commitment
& Consistency

Choice Overload
& Default Options

Loss Aversion

☒ Keep smiling.

☒ Use the RE*ACT approach.

You know how to start creating more impactful and effective communications with confidence and how to RE*ACT. You're not afraid of using the power of humour☺, facing the future with optimism and re*connecting with citizens.

Emotional appeal:
Joy

Emotional appeal:
Pride

You have this!

Want to know more?

Looking for strategic support?

Check out **branddate.be**

or **linkedin.com/in/geertstox/**

brand
date