



10. National Campaign Director of Communications

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National Campaign Director of Communications

Stéphanie Yates and John Chenery

A national campaign's director of communications is responsible for developing the communication strategy following the party's brand. This strategy serves as the backbone to devise a slogan, determine key messages, orient media reach, and work out the campaign calendar, in collaboration with the senior campaign management team. During the campaign, the director of communications oversees all communication activities – providing communication assets for candidates and the media at every tour stop – and works closely with local campaigns. The director is also part of daily meetings with the rapid response team to determine the daily policy message as well as how to respond to problematic issues or attacks. Moreover, the director collaborates with the digital manager to reach out to the party's supporters through social media platforms. Yet even the most carefully crafted communication strategy cannot always overcome structural components that influence an election outcome, such as strategic voting.

Le directeur des communications d'une campagne nationale est chargé d'élaborer la stratégie de communication en fonction de l'image de marque du parti. Cette stratégie sert d'assise à la conception d'un slogan, à la détermination des messages clefs, à l'orientation des relations médias et à la préparation du calendrier électoral, en collaboration avec l'équipe de la haute direction de la campagne. Pendant la campagne, le travail consiste à superviser toutes les activités de communication, à fournir des ressources de communication aux candidats et aux médias à chaque étape de la tournée, et à travailler en étroite collaboration avec les campagnes locales. Le directeur des communications participe également aux réunions quotidiennes avec l'équipe d'intervention rapide pour déterminer les messages politiques quotidiens et la façon de réagir aux problèmes ou aux attaques. De plus, il ou elle collabore avec le directeur de la campagne numérique pour rejoindre les partisans du parti par l'entremise d'outils web et des médias sociaux. Toutefois, même la stratégie de communication la plus sophistiquée peut ne pas permettre de surmonter des facteurs structureaux qui influencent le résultat électoral, comme le vote stratégique.

THE ROLE OF A PARTY'S director of communications is to promote and protect the party brand. The individual bearing this title must ensure that the vision, mission, and policies of a party align with its corporate identity and brand, which itself “evokes emotional connections to specific images and stimulates loyalty among target audiences.”¹ To do so, the director of communications must frame the content of the electoral platform, ensuring that campaign commitments are attractive and understandable, while still faithfully reflecting the party’s brand image and, more generally, expressing the world views commonly associated with this political body.²

More specifically, the director of communications is responsible for embedding and anchoring election commitments – and the vision thereby offered by a party – in an overarching communication strategy for a national political campaign. This strategy will serve as the backbone to devise a slogan and determine key messages, based on the general theme of the campaign. Various iterations of the key messages are then created to cater to different segments of the electorate.³ With this communication strategy, the director of communications targets voters as well as secondary audiences.⁴ Party members, for instance, must be mobilized and invested in the campaign: critical efforts will thus pinpoint their queries and grievances. This remains true even if technological practices have become paramount in fundraising.⁵

The director of communications starts to work on drafting the communication strategy a few months before the election, for instance in the spring for a fall election. The strategy takes into account lessons learned during the previous campaign, information gathered during the political term, as well as the themes likely to take centre stage during the upcoming campaign. The process can repeat itself many times as circumstances evolve. The final decision on the campaign slogan generally happens one or two months before the launch of the campaign, with key messages following. At this stage, online surveys or focus groups are usually conducted to test different slogan ideas. Key messages are developed internally in conjunction with key stakeholders who provide valuable input

at every step: the leader, deputy leaders, campaign working group, members of the cabinet, and senior staff. The campaign working group is composed of the campaign manager, deputy campaign managers, director of communications, executive director, and policy director.

One of the fundamental goals of the communication strategy is media reach, which first includes advertising through traditional media (i.e., television, radio, print, “out-of-home” displays such as billboards and transit ads). In conjunction with a media placement agency, the director of communications collaborates with the national campaign manager and other senior members of the campaign team to plan media buys, often focusing on districts where the party has strong chances to achieve political gains, thus optimizing spending. Social media and other digital advertising platforms are also firmly entrenched in election campaign strategies.⁶ However, in 2019, the decision by Google to exclude political advertising from its platforms during the official campaign period forced parties to re-evaluate their digital advertising strategies, to the point of reinvesting resources in traditional media. Facebook’s advertising rules, which stipulate that partisan ads must go through an approval process before being published, is also a time-sensitive factor. Advertising strategies on that social media platform need to be planned earlier on, and iterations aimed at reacting quickly to events or a party’s attacks can no longer be done instantaneously.

As the start of the campaign approaches, the team that the director of communications oversees grows significantly with the hiring of short-term contract personnel to fulfill various functions, including graphic design, video editing, social media content, writing, and editing. At all times, the director of communications works closely with the senior campaign management team (i.e., the national campaign manager and deputy managers). With the leader’s input, the senior campaign team devises the campaign calendar. This essential campaign component includes the timing and location of the campaign launch, platform launch, and announcements of various policies that it contains – these elements are broken down

into a weekly time frame. In preparation for the campaign, the director of communications determines the outreach strategy and main talking points related to the different announcements. The specific material that will accompany each campaign announcement (e.g., one-pager, fact sheet, press release) is finalized as the campaign unfolds, allowing for adjustments when needed. Several external factors are considered when developing the campaign calendar, particularly the dates and locations of the televised leaders' debates. Moreover, scheduling takes into account the specific interests of voters in each electoral district, media availability, and the party leader's itinerary, while also remaining flexible to handle unforeseen events and seize opportunities as campaigning evolves.

Duties in an Election Campaign

As is the case with most of the positions involved in political campaigns, the pace of work of a national campaign's director of communications drastically accelerates once the campaign is officially launched. The job entails overseeing all communication activities and working closely with other teams – mobilizing squad, leader's tour team, policy group – from the beginning of the campaign to election day. Communication assets for candidates and the media must be ready and available at every tour stop. The director of communications watches the volume and tone of media coverage as it happens through a proprietary media monitoring and distribution platform. The director ensures that advertising deadlines are met and that the multi-platform ad campaign stays on track.

Traditionally, a director of communications works from the party headquarters for most of the national campaign, collaborating closely with the team that accompanies the leader on tour. Indeed, the person ensuring the leader's liaison with the media also liaises with headquarters to gather strategic feedback on the campaign. This allows the director of communications to collect insights and adapt the key messages accordingly.

Whereas the overall election communication strategy is developed and finalized some time in advance of the campaign, a daily policy message – also known as a script message – is determined for every campaign day. The national campaign manager and the director of communications generally agree on this message the day before, depending on the schedule of campaign events and announcements. Delivering this message to the national campaign team and local campaign teams by 7:30 a.m. Central Time is crucial. Doing so allows candidates in eastern Canada to prepare their messages for the day.

That being said, and despite the strategy planned beforehand, a director of communications and the team must be ready to adapt quickly to the news cycle. The big challenge is to maintain focus and stay on message while working with campaign management and the rapid response team – that is, the war room – to deal with negative storylines generated by the flood of “oppo,” research supplied to the media by opposing parties and their surrogates.⁷ To this end, the director of communications takes part in daily meetings with the rapid response team. The director participates in early morning discussions about the day’s news cycle to determine how to respond to problematic issues, mostly involving attacks by other parties or their affiliates.

These attacks can take many different forms, from offensive or embarrassing episodes in the lives of party leaders to inappropriate social media content posted by otherwise unknown candidates. All political parties struggle to varying degrees with the challenge of vetting their election candidates. Their opponents go to great lengths to identify and capitalize on any misstep. Adversaries do so because critiquing an opponent’s weaknesses serves several objectives: generating negative media coverage of the opposing party, potentially eroding public support for it, and forcing the opposing leader and campaign team to expend precious time and effort responding to the exposé. Research shows that negativity in political campaigns can indeed increase voter turnout, depending on timing

and circumstances.⁸ In every instance, the team must determine whether and how the party should comment or refrain from doing so, knowing that in some cases commenting on or responding to an attack can fan the flames. Similar discussions occur about attacks against a party's policies – whether stated directly, through social media, or as part of a rival party's advertising strategy.

Per the team's decisions and leader's input, the director of communications works with the rapid response team to craft the message: that is, the line that the party will take on any given issue. Ideally, the national campaign manager makes the final decision on a response, even if this level of approval is not always reachable given the fast pace of a campaign's decision-making process. In urgent situations, there is no time to follow the chain of command, and the highest available person in the campaign hierarchy can be asked to make an immediate decision.⁹ It is up to the director of communications to ensure that the response is communicated externally, via the media, and internally to staff, candidates, and their campaign teams by sending them timely information and talking points to help them deal with local inquiries. Through all of this, the communications team must make every effort to ensure that these frustrating episodes do not prevent them from delivering on the objectives of the campaign communication strategy.

Another task of the director of communications during the campaign is to collaborate with the digital manager to reach out to the party's supporters through social media platforms. With the intention of ensuring consistency across the national campaign initiatives, the director will oversee the posting calendar, tactics, monitoring process, and stakes involved. Although the digital manager is given a free hand to create social media graphics and messages related to context and platform, all content is subject to approval by the national campaign manager before being posted online. Digital platforms offer a dynamic range of messaging options, from posts that simply reinforce the daily platform announcement or key message to short videos (either custom made or shared from other sources) to various memes. The digital manager routinely

shares and retweets content from the social media feeds of the leader and other supportive individuals and organizations.

Finally, the director of communications works with local campaigns to ensure that their activities are consistent with the national campaign and party brand. The director works closely with candidates, local campaign directors, and campaign communication leads, sharing the latest updates on the national campaign and providing them with tools and the best advice to increase their efficiency, for instance proposing design templates for signs and brochures and offering advice on local advertising and media outreach. The director also prepares a series of visual assets designed for digital media tactics, along with guidelines on what to post, when, and how often. Instructions are provided on how to respond to and when to ignore online trolls or unfavourable comments. Yet, for the most part, the day-to-day management of local campaigns and digital media is in the hands of local teams – aside from key ridings, where the national communications team is more deeply involved in matters of campaign materials, messages, and strategies.

Overcoming Obstacles

For the director of communications, the overall tone of the election campaign can present both opportunities and obstacles. In the campaign of 2019, the famous misquotation of former Prime Minister Kim Campbell – “an election is no time to discuss serious issues” – could have been the shared slogan of the main parties.¹⁰ Many veteran political commentators said that it was among the nastiest campaigns in memory and bemoaned the fact that the relentless attacks and counterattacks left little room for anything else, including serious discussion on issues and policies. The parties blamed each other, but there was plenty of blame to go around.

The following anecdote illustrates the type of climate that prevailed. An acclaimed documentary about the 1992 Clinton campaign’s communications team has made “the war room” shorthand for the teams that work long into the night at party headquarters trying

to stay one step ahead of, or at least trying not to get run over by, the news cycle. Mostly, these operatives are anonymous, but in the 2019 campaign at least one party decided that its war room warriors needed to stand out. From various parts of downtown Ottawa came reports of young men and women walking the streets wearing jackets emblazoned with the Conservative Party logo and underneath the words *War Room* – a term that applies, for this party, to the whole national campaign office. Working on an election campaign can feel a lot like going through a war. In 2019, some of the campaign soldiers had a uniform.

In this context and in common with the other parties, the Green Party had to deal with a number of different controversies, primarily the product of meticulous opposition research on its candidates' social media histories going back a decade or more. A few candidates withdrew from the election and were replaced by the party, but most of them apologized, disavowed past positions, and resumed campaigning. As Churchill himself put it, “politics are almost as exciting as war and quite as dangerous. In war you can only be killed once, but in politics many times.”¹¹ This complicated game of “gotcha” involved many players – the party workers who unearthed the damaging material, the media that ran with it, the social media amplifiers who made sure that it reached the widest possible audience, and the unfortunate targets, most of whom suddenly found themselves in the eye of a storm created by words that they had typed years ago and forgotten. For the Green Party, the severity and frequency of the attacks were new terrain. They were somewhat expected given that the Greens went into the campaign with their best-ever poll numbers, record fundraising, strong membership growth, and a general sense that a breakthrough was in the offing.

As frustrating and distracting as these attacks were, they were not the Green Party's biggest communication challenge. That came, as it does in every election cycle, during the last weeks of the campaign as the party struggled to prevent its support from bleeding away to strategic voting. Canada's first-past-the-post electoral system

rewards parties that can convince voters to choose them as the lesser of two or more evils. It was predictable, therefore, that Justin Trudeau would use the last week of the campaign to warn voters repeatedly about the consequences of not voting Liberal: a Conservative majority government. NDP canvassers used the same message on doorsteps to move Green Party votes to their side.

In 2019, it looked as if the Greens might weather the storm. The party stressed that a citizen's vote was no less than a citizen's voice; thus, it was paramount to vote according to individual will and beliefs. The party also insisted on the idea that it could hold the balance of power in a minority government.

Through the final week of the campaign, the time when Green support historically starts to slide, daily poll numbers were holding steady at just under 10 percent. The bad news came in the last poll before election day – 6.5 percent. In light of these results, it appears that the work of a national campaign director of communications remains at the mercy of such elements. Even the most carefully crafted communication strategy cannot always overcome structural components that influence an election outcome.

In conclusion, even if the role of the director of communications during a national campaign might be more encompassing in a party with a small organization, such as the Green Party, one can draw useful general insights into the position. First, the chapter has highlighted the multiple tasks overseen by a director of communications and the collaborative relationships that individual has with other members of the national campaign team. Second, it has provided a detailed account of a campaign communication strategy's timeline. And third, it has enlightened the process allowing the determination of the script message of the day and a party's reaction to the news cycle.

Notes

¹ Burton and Shea, *Campaign Craft*; Marland, *Brand Command*, 36.

² Arbour, "Issue Frame Ownership."

- ³ Baines, “Political Public Relations and Election Campaigning.”
- ⁴ Ibid.
- ⁵ Johnson, *Campaigning in the Twenty-First Century*.
- ⁶ Lilleker, Tenscher, and Štětka, “Towards Hypermedia Campaigning?”
- ⁷ On the war room, see Kinsella, *The War Room*; on oppo, see Pitney, *The Art of Political Warfare*.
- ⁸ Krupnikov, “How Negativity Can Increase and Decrease Voter Turnout.”
- ⁹ Maarek, *Campaign Communication and Political Marketing*, 186.
- ¹⁰ Ferreira, “An Election Is No Time to Discuss Serious Issues.”
- ¹¹ Quoted in Hayward, *Churchill on Leadership*, 29.

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