Making Information User-Driven

Megan Lloyd Laney

Communications and Information Management Resource Centre (CIMRC), CAB International, Nosworthy Way, Wallingford, OXON OX10 8DE, UK.

E-mail: cimrc@cabi.org

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Summary

Tailoring information to suit your audience increases the likelihood that your information will be accessed and taken up. To provide user-driven information it is important to understand who your target audience is, what information they want/need, how they access information and whether you are trying to inform or influence your audience. Questionnaires can be employed to determine your audience's information needs and the media they use. With this knowledge you can provide the information your target audience wants, in media they can use, and place your information where your audience will look for it. If you are clear about who has produced the information, who it is intended for and its purpose, the user can make informed decisions about the value of your information. Involving end users in research is also more likely to produce outputs that are quickly disseminated and taken up. Awareness of the strategic role of information within your organisation can be enhanced by encouraging all organisation members to become involved in identifying information needs, dissemination and community building. Practices such as using a database of people who have requested information to regularly inform them about newly available materials, and ensuring that your organisation has a focal point responsible for responding to information demands will help you to reach your target audience.

Why is it important?

In order to successfully share knowledge generated through research and direct project experiences, institutions need to chronicle, analyse, package and disseminate information to a variety of different kinds of people.

For this information to be useful to different audiences, you need to know what people already know, what they need and want to know and what you can offer them that relates to their needs. You need to know how they access information and how to best 'package' the information for easy access by users. By asking yourself all of these questions, you are trying to make your information 'user-driven'.

By tailoring your information according to the answers, you stand more chance of getting your information into the hands of those that may need it (access), and getting it incorporated into the work that others are doing (uptake). Overall, this will meet your organisational objectives (e.g. improving uptake and development impact of research).

It is useful to think about a number of different, but related stages in making information user-driven.

Be clear about your intentions

Be clear about what you're trying to do

Are you trying to:

- **inform** your audience (i.e. *make them aware* of something for the first time. For example, that software exists to support integrated transport planning in Ministries;
- **increase their knowledge** about an issue e.g. that more than a dozen low-cost technologies exist to harness water in dryland areas;
- **influence** them (i.e. *to change their attitude* about an issue). For example, the need to pay for drinking water;
- **change** their behaviour (e.g. change hygiene practices).

Thinking about what you're trying to do with your information will influence how you go about both researching and communicating it to your target audience.

Be transparent about what you are communicating, who generated it, and its purpose

People want to know before they read all the way through a lengthy document, some or all of the following:

- who it has been written for (i.e. what levels of knowledge are assumed);

- who has written it (so that the reader/viewer can anticipate what sorts of experiences inform the content);
- what is its purpose (i.e. has the document been put in the public domain to share a range of tools for participative planning, or to persuade you to include a budget line for training in your energy project?)

Armed with the above intelligence, the user can then make an informed decision about whether or not to read/watch/listen to the information, discard it, or to pass it on to others who might benefit more directly.

Understand your audience

Be clear about who you're trying to reach

Be clear about exactly whom you're targeting with your information. Try to imagine an individual that you know who falls into the target audience (e.g. Project Officer, Water Aid with responsibility for designing and implementing projects with partners in sub-Saharan Africa) and make sure you understand what kind of information they need to do their job. Ask yourself the following information:

- what do they already know about this subject?
- what don't they know that you can tell them?
- how do they access information (e.g. through their professional journal, in-house training, attendance at workshops etc.)?

Understand what kinds of information people want

Recent work to assess the demand for information on transport and rural infrastructure for the World Bank[i] shows that the kinds of information required by different stakeholders depends on a number of factors including:

- what type of activities they are involved in (e.g. research, planning a programme of work, building a road);
- the intention for those activities (e.g. influencing motorcycle taxis to drive more safely, raising a community's awareness of load carrying options, making policy choices between different kinds of infrastructure interventions);
- what they already know.

They will look for facts and evidence; approaches used elsewhere to trigger new ways of working which might solve old problems; and 'cutting edge thinking' that might indicate new trends for those wishing to be ahead of the competition. They want information that reflects local realities and that is of practical use to them in their work. What this means in practice, is that you will not please all of the people all of the time with the information that you provide, so don't try to.

Practical ways to be responsive to user needs are:

- segment your audience;
- design systems of information generation and dissemination that accommodate people's changing needs over time;
- accept that you will need to respond to latent need (i.e. what you think people want) vs. expressed need (what they are saying that they want at any one time)
- Put in place adequate checks to gauge this latent need (e.g. by being an active member of that audience and aware of its current issues, or having an Advisory/Editorial Panel made up of representative members of your audience that sets themes for regular newsletters/website updates or reviews information products).

Find out **HOW** *people access information*

People use a range of filters to select what information they look for, and use in their work. These include:

- *Visibility and accessibility:* i.e. do they know that the information exists, and can they get hold of it?
- *Is it credible?* i.e. does the organisation have a reputation or employ renowned individual specialists in that area?
- *Is it reliable?* i.e. is the information accurate and real, and is the analysis sound, rigorous and objective?
- *Reputation:* has this source been used before and did the information provided meet expressed needs?
- *Trust:* particularly true when an individual is the source of information; is the advice being issued, credible (i.e. likely to satisfy and not mislead the user?);
- *Timeliness:* both up-to-date content, and speed in responding to requests for information;
- *Cost:* actual price of information products as well as the time taken by the person to locate, download or travel to find the information etc.
- *Interactivity of source:* i.e. what potential is there for the user to interact with the author or originating organisation either by a feedback mechanism on a website, or by using the contact details listed on the document.
- *Identifiable*: users are nervous about anonymous information because they cannot use the filters normally used (e.g. is the author credible, what bias will probably be in the analysis because of the organisational politics etc).
- *Language*: both vernacular and level of jargon/technical detail or prior knowledge assumed by the document.

People also have preferred methods of accessing information, which is influenced by a range of factors including cost, equipment available, status (who chooses the radio channels in the household), time available and knowledge levels. It is important to consider barriers to accessing information (e.g.

expense, lack of equipment or internet access, lack of time, language barriers, etc.) You should think about the following:

- *Means of contact*: if the user cannot access the information directly, what intermediaries – people or institutional structures - can be used to 'pass on' information or to bring it nearer to the ultimate user?
- *Packaging:* a wide range of media exists to disseminate information, each with strengths and weaknesses in the *kinds of information* it can deliver and the *types of audiences* it can reach. Examples include: TV broadcasts, leaflets and pocket guides, radio, video, slide sets, software, workshops, e-discussion groups etc.

Make your information more accessible and usable to your target audience

- Develop a standard questionnaire to establish how your target audience accesses and uses information. Major questions to ask are: What are the three main sources of information that they have used most regularly in the last quarter?; What is their preferred channel for information delivery, (e.g. Internet, printed documents made available in specialist resource centres; video etc.?)
- Ask professional travelling staff to use these questionnaires in semi-structured interviews (e.g. over coffee breaks during workshops), with a range of offered incentives. Possible incentives might be:
  - That people giving five minutes to answer questions will receive regular information;
  - The names of those who complete the questionnaire are entered in a lottery and the winner will be selected to attend an international workshop;
  - People answering the questions will receive a costed publication for free;
- Communicate the patterns that emerge out of the analysis of responses back to the users, and let them know what your organisation is doing to meet these kinds of information needs. For example, as a result, newsletters will be made available as PDF files on the Internet; or an email circulation list is being developed to instruct people of new free publications every quarter etc.)
- Don't disseminate information using media that **you** are comfortable with (e.g. newsletters) unless you have evidence that this is also the preference of your target audience OR you have no choice (e.g. no money, no expertise in other information production). If this is the case do the newsletter for now but outsource expertise and retrain staff in appropriate information packaging.
- Be clear about whom you are trying to reach with your various information products, and find out how they access information so you can 'tailor' your information delivery. For example based on statistics on connectivity in Africa you could replicate in hard copies **and** index what is available on the net for those without internet access.
- Think about **how** your users are going to use information and use this intelligence to inform the way that you share information with them. For example, the Road Safety Network in Kenya want to share information with other members who have even less regular and reliable access to the Internet than they do in the capital city. Therefore, CD-ROMs are more useful than the Internet (and better for you because you will reach more than one user!).

Find out where people get their information and place yours there

- Researchers of transport and rural infrastructure working across sub-Saharan Africa say that they will look for information in the established Resource Centres containing grey literature (e.g. Institute of Agricultural Engineering) in the absence of good, reliable Internet connections.
- Information brokers exist across most subject areas (e.g. ILO-ASIST, IFRTD for transport): they are looking for information to disseminate and have 'reach' into specific groups that might be coincidental with yours (e.g. practitioners). It is therefore in their interests to promote 'your' information.
- Formal collaborations between organisations to provide 'joined-up' enquiry services (e.g. INTI for collaboration between European Organisations such as the Intermediate Technology Development Group and, VITA for answering technical enquiries from the south).

Involve your audience (or their peers) in the research itself

Research that is done with the participation of end users is more likely to produce outputs that are quickly disseminated and taken up[ii]. Research that is undertaken collaboratively with 'people who experience and understand the problems and the context in which problems exist', is more likely to be accepted than research conducted exclusively by 'outsiders'[iii]: this is true for practitioners as well as policymakers.[iv]

Make your organisation aware of the strategic role of information

Make all staff active engines of dissemination and communication

In many organisations, the staff that travel out 'into the field' (e.g. attend workshops, do research, present papers at international conferences etc.) are not the same people that write, edit and distribute the organisation's information materials (e.g. database managers, newsletter editors, information officers). You need to ensure that these 'front line workers' are actively engaged in identifying demand for information, disseminating appropriate materials, and building up a community of people with whom ongoing relationships can be developed. This can be done in a number of ways:

- Raise awareness among staff of the role that information has to play in the organisation's mission and in achieving objectives (e.g. through a workshop presenting an overview of who is being reached with various information and the results. Present monitoring data in an accessible way that makes a connection with people's jobs and their potential role as information disseminators). Involve top management in such a workshop to show that the subject is taken seriously.
- All staff should be made aware of the full range of information materials that you produce which they could be making available to people they meet. You could produce an overview in a leaflet that is regularly updated (In-house Desk Top Publishing can produce professional documents that can be printed 'on demand' as and when you need them).
- Work with management and human resources to get information responsibilities written into each person's job (e.g. 'To actively promote the work of the organisation in the international development community through information dissemination and building up the organisation's constituency'). Then introduce requirements of each travelling member of staff (e.g. to bring back five business cards or contact details of people they have met who would like to receive information materials on a regular basis), so that new contacts can be added to the central database/mailing list. Another target could be to produce x number of information outputs for the newsletter/organisational website each quarter).
- Provide incentives for staff to promote the use of their information by other people, as well as their own use of others' information. IBM provide financial rewards for those who can show that the information that they generate is taken up by others within the organisation, as well as those who visibly make use of information generated elsewhere in the company.

Put appropriate systems into your organisation

- Make sure there is a focal point (this can be a department or person) for responding to demand for information (There's no point raising the profile of your materials if you cannot satisfy the demand that results). You should budget for increased production of information.
- Monitor information requests by subject, type of enquirer – practitioner, policymaker, extension worker, use (e.g. is the user wanting to use the information for training, teaching students, research etc.), and country of origin. The kind of information you monitor depends on what you want to know and the purpose of your monitoring. For example required to account for funds to the donor, to determine levels of demand from different users, or for feedback to identify gaps in the information you are providing.
- Analyse this monitoring data every quarter/half year as required and **communicate** your findings to those within the organisation that should be acting on it (e.g. programmes where demand for information is high but no materials exist to satisfy demand).
- Keep a database or mailing list with the names and addresses of anyone who has asked for information, and let them know of new materials that are available regularly. This could be done by an email update (e.g. ELDIS, ID21 etc.) sent to those with an appropriate address, or with any newsletters that are produced (e.g. in a 'new information updates' column on the back page), or sent out with regular correspondence (e.g. notification of new training courses, workshops etc.).
- Introduce an Acquisitions Policy for adding names to your central database/mailing list. The policy should identify how often the list is edited (e.g. every two years) and the procedures for doing so. One way to edit the list is to send out a questionnaire with the newsletter/information that is regularly sent to all names asking them if they would like to continue receiving free materials. You could include questions around levels of satisfaction with the materials for your own internal evaluation as part of this questionnaire. If they don't respond within a certain time (e.g. 2 weeks of receiving the questionnaire) state that they will be removed from the mailing list. You can always leave on the people that you are actively trying to influence – i.e. your advocacy targets - even if they don't respond.

References

1 *Assessing Knowledge Demand for the World Bank's Transport and Rural Infrastructure Services Partnership (TRISP) project has a website that shares its findings and recommendations, as well as provides details of workshops held, literature search results, and an incentivised questionnaire to find out what kinds of information other users need, can access, and cannot find.*

2 Dissemination pathways for RNR Research, *Chris Garforth for Renewable Natural Resources Research Strategy (RNRRS), DFID/NRI, 2001?*

3 *TRISP Knowledge Demand Assessment Zimbabwe workshop 2002*

4 *Research and Policy in development: overview of theoretical models, Research and Policy in Development Programme (RAPID), ODI*