

How to Plan for and Utilize a Brief

At LASER PULSE, our approach toward integrating research into practice or policy rests on our [Embedded Research Translation](#) model, which necessitates early and active collaborations among researchers, practitioners, and other development stakeholders to ensure that research translation is embedded across all phases of the project, from identifying the research topic to disseminating the findings for broader impact and scale. Key to this integration is the development of a *translation product*, a tangible material based on research findings that is tailored for use by a specific audience.

Briefing documents on research are the most common approach to *translation products*. Where most briefings go wrong, though, is in creating a document with summaries and recommendations without a robust strategy toward reaching and changing those audiences.

[Other LASER PULSE tools](#) offer guidance on effectively developing the content and formatting

for a brief. This document features guidance on how to utilize these briefs effectively to achieve change.

Key Considerations for Your Brief

- Map the policy environment to understand who will use your brief
- Research key groups to understand what is most important to them and how to best influence them
- Engage stakeholders early on to build confidence, trust, and ownership in your work
- Tailor your brief’s content, language, and framing toward a specific audience
- Target the right people at the right time with the right message through the right channel
- Consider a variety of complementary dissemination activities

Note that while most guidance here is relevant to policy briefs and that policy briefs are highly prevalent and useful, for your project, you might consider employing a different kind of brief depending on the degree to which your project context and findings are policy relevant. Consider research briefs, evidence briefs, technical briefs, white papers, and other types when planning for your final deliverables.

Investigate Key Audiences

The general audience for policy briefs is the knowledgeable non-expert. Policymakers represent a critically important audience, but it also pays to complete a stakeholder

analysis to identify additional audiences. Consider mapping the policy environment to develop a broader list of stakeholders that have power to either create or influence policy in your area. Beyond stakeholder analysis, other tools include context mapping, outcome mapping, forcefield analysis, or power analysis. Even a general SWOT analysis can help you begin to explore the field around you. These tools will help to assess what the drivers are of policy change in a particular landscape.

Investigate these key audiences to identify those who may be particularly interested and influential. From the information you have, determine your primary, secondary, and (if applicable) tertiary audiences based on who stands to benefit from your work, who has an interest in it, who has the capacity to influence policy, and who could serve as a long-term agent of change.

Research individuals who may have an interest in taking action upon your findings to determine their interests, information needs, and preferred means of communication. You can find secondary information if sufficient, or conduct your own primary research through focus group discussions, key informant interviews, surveys, and more. Find what works for your project so you gain enough of an understanding about your audience to influence them. Assess the level of information policymakers may need, from general to specific or expert, as well as the volume of information that is most helpful – whether it is a bulleted list, a few pages, or a full report. Discover their level of conceptual understanding of your topic. Determine the types of statements they might respond to and types of information they consume.

Once you understand how knowledgeable your audience is about your research subject, how they prefer to receive communications, what their information needs are, and how receptive they are to either change or causing change, you will be prepared to engage with them.

Policy briefs are effective tools for creating interest in a project and its findings. However, the brief is not sufficient on its own to affect change in the policy sphere. To advocate effectively for policy change, it is necessary to engage stakeholders in ongoing dialog to promote ownership and action.

Build Strategic Partnerships

Ongoing engagement with policymakers and other key stakeholders may lead to the development of strategic partnerships. Use the information you have gained above to prioritize engagements with certain stakeholders and the degree to which you can formalize engagements into a partnership. Consider including these stakeholders in the research process by gathering input and recommendations on the research focus, as well as updating them as the project progresses. Use the policy brief process to involve stakeholders in making decisions connected to the project to help them feel ownership in the findings.

Develop Strategies for Engagement Toward Dissemination

TIMING

It is critical to get a policy brief into the hands of the right people at the right time. Writing and disseminating a brief soon after or even before the publication of research will build momentum and interest in new findings. It is also effective to publish when a topic or issue is in the news or otherwise has come into focus for policymakers. Assess upcoming events and

legislative cycles to see when engagements can be most useful. Consider communicating to mobilize public support that can influence policy.

CHANNELS

Mailing and/or emailing policy briefs is one usual strategy for distribution. Be sure to send the brief to a specific person who is directly involved in the issue at hand or has the ability to influence it. In addition, publish the brief on a website, write about the research and findings on a blog, and link to both on social media. Distribute briefs through professional social networking sites, and submit press releases to local media. Present findings at conferences and other professional events.

In-person communication can make the difference between someone discarding a brief or reading and acting upon it. Follow-up mailings with phone calls to ask whether stakeholders would like additional resources, reports, etc. Ask them to distribute the brief to other interested and involved colleagues.

Organize group meetings, workshops, and/or webinars where issues may be discussed in more depth. Be prepared for audiences to have a different interpretation of the findings. Also, keep in mind that interactions with various audiences will differ, communication may be inconsistent, and you will need to refresh their memory on previous discussions and interactions.

ENGAGEMENT

Engaging with the public can be an effective strategy for policy advocacy. Organizing public events can be useful for obtaining public feedback on your research, implications, and recommendations. At such an event, you might use a policy brief to consult with stakeholders to ensure that public concerns and aspirations are consistently understood and considered. The brief also may be used to initiate collaboration with policymakers who will offer advice and recommendations on your project. These collaborations will give you greater access to pathways that influence policy change.

Create Content & Tailor Materials for Your Audience

Based on information obtained under *Investigate Key Audiences*, tailor your content to meet the needs of stakeholders actively engaged in your project. If you find your audience responds particularly well to briefing documents, use guidance within our [Policy Brief Template](#). When developing a policy brief, establish whether you are advocating for the development of or change to a specific policy, or objectively showcasing information about policy options.

For briefs that are less policy relevant, consider utilizing our [Project Summary Template](#) to briefly discuss the implications of your project findings. Note that sending briefing documents to the right audiences is only one part of influencing. You might have to combine briefs with meetings or presentations as part of a larger communication strategy to influence change.

Make sure your audience will respond well to the content in and presentation of the brief. Avoid jargon and present recommendations in accessible language. If possible, utilize language that your audience uses in their work. Distill your research findings into key messages that encourage your audience to act and understand what the action is that you want that audience to take. Only display essential information for a particular audience and avoid ancillary content.

Consider the extent to which graphs, charts, and images might be helpful in communicating your main points. These components, when combined with appropriate white space in a document, will guide your reader toward main sections and through key information.

Dissemination Activities

The dissemination stage of your policy brief does not begin after your findings have been completed. As noted above, strategies for engagement will target various points during the project cycle. Early findings and preliminary versions of briefs can be shared with policymakers before project's end toward updating them on the project, assessing their feedback, and creating ownership.

Before completing the brief, reassess the channels and engagement opportunities identified in your strategies to create a set of dissemination activities for implementation. After finalizing content, consider showing it to relevant project stakeholders for feedback before sending to wider audiences. Upon completion, send the brief to key stakeholders as part of a set of dissemination activities. It is helpful to rely not just on the brief itself, but to pair it with workshops, events, or meetings, to allow for additional context.

Evaluate the Impact of Engagement Strategies

After executing your strategy and disseminating your brief, assess the effectiveness of your strategy with key audiences and gather evidence to assess the most effective communication and engagement strategies used by the team. When feasible, work with an independent evaluator to evaluate the impact of the engagement strategies surrounding your brief. If you have project or communications goals and objectives, assess the extent to which they were accomplished.

Track stakeholder responses, and use website and social media analytics. Perform a cost-benefit analysis on your engagements. Assess whether or not policymakers understood or acted upon your message. Determine if stakeholders perceived your team as a credible and trustworthy. Look at project outcomes to see where communications played a role. If it did, assess how well it worked toward achieving that particular outcome.

Potential indicators include reach, usefulness of the brief, usage of the brief, changes in knowledge or attitudes, changes in policy or practice, partner or end-user satisfaction, and outcomes of partnership. Determine overall findings and trends in your engagements toward revising approaches in the future.

Remember that stakeholders, and policymakers in particular, build relationships based on trust and mutual understanding. Work to become a trusted source of information. Maintain current data and updated websites. Use evaluation findings to develop a research agenda that is relevant to the current policy context.

Learning

In addition, consider what ongoing professional learning may help the team to increase awareness of stakeholders' needs, access routes, and professional routines. Training on communication with policymakers is available at many institutions and those that involve policymakers themselves are particularly valuable.

Be sure to explore in-house resources that may support communication with policymakers. Within universities, centers, institutes, and departments feature existing infrastructure that may help. For example, Indiana University offers an online database of expert faculty, along with [research communication training](#) and support for working with news and media outlets, as well as liaising with state and federal government officials. Nonprofit or donor organizations have additional resources that can assist. Explore the capacity within your own organization to assist with communicating your policy brief.

Additional Reading

Brownson, Ross C., Colditz, Graham A., Proctor, Enola Knisley. *Dissemination and Implementation Research in Health: Translating Science to Practice*. Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 2018.

Building Public Trust Through a Responsive Parliament: A Quick Guide to Constituency Outreach. National Democratic Institute.

Grimshaw, Jeremy M., Eccles, Martin P., Lavis John N., Hill, Sophie J., & Squires, Janet E. "Knowledge Translation of Research Findings," *Implementation Science*, 7:50, 2012.

Making Research Findings Actionable: A quick reference to communicating health information for decision-making. MEASURE Evaluation, MS-09-39, December 2009.

The Knowledge Translation Toolkit: Bridging the Know-Do Gap: A Resource for Researchers. Bennett, Gavin and Jessani, Nasreen, Editors. Ottawa: International Development Research Centre. SAGE Publications, Incorporated, June 2011.

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