



**Australian  
Clinical  
Trials  
Alliance**

# **Communications and marketing strategy: guidance for CTNs**

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## PURPOSE OF THIS DOCUMENT

This document will assist Clinical Trial Networks (CTNs) in establishing communications and marketing strategies or guidelines.

## THE ROLE OF ACTA IN DEVELOPING COMMUNICATIONS AND MARKETING STRATEGIES OR GUIDELINES

The Australian Clinical Trials Alliance (ACTA) is providing advice to assist CTNs in developing communications and marketing strategies or guidelines. The generic advice provided by ACTA should be considered and applied by each CTN considering their specific requirements as well as relevant laws and regulations.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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## USE OF THIS DOCUMENT

ACTA encourages the use of all materials that are available on its website ([www.clinicaltrialsalliance.org.au](http://www.clinicaltrialsalliance.org.au)) in the pursuit of improving the clinical trials enterprise. ACTA requests that the following acknowledgement is included in any CTN guidelines that are developed and documented using knowledge gained from this document:

“[Name of CTN] acknowledges the contribution of ACTA to the development of communication processes within our network (reference: *Communications and marketing strategy: guidance for CTNs*)”.

## DISCLAIMER

The information in this document is for general guidance only. ACTA does not make any representations or warranties (expressed or implied) as to the accuracy, currency or authenticity of the information provided.

## ABBREVIATIONS

<b>ACTA</b>	Australian Clinical Trials Alliance
<b>CTN</b>	Clinical Trial Network
<b>CMS</b>	Content Management System
<b>SEO</b>	Search Engine Optimisation
<b>KPI</b>	Key Performance Indicator
<b>PD</b>	Position Description
<b>NGO</b>	Non-Governmental Organisation
<b>NPO</b>	Non-Profit Organisation

## INTRODUCTION

Clinical Trial Networks (CTNs) are collaborative groups of practicing clinician researchers (often several hundred per network) that come together to identify important clinical questions and design large multi-centre clinical trials to answer them. This creates an opportunity to address the communication needs and expectations of diverse stakeholders that includes, but is not limited to, researchers, clinicians, funding bodies, consumers, policy makers and the media. An essential tool for coordinating the complex communication challenges confronting a CTN is a communications and marketing strategy.

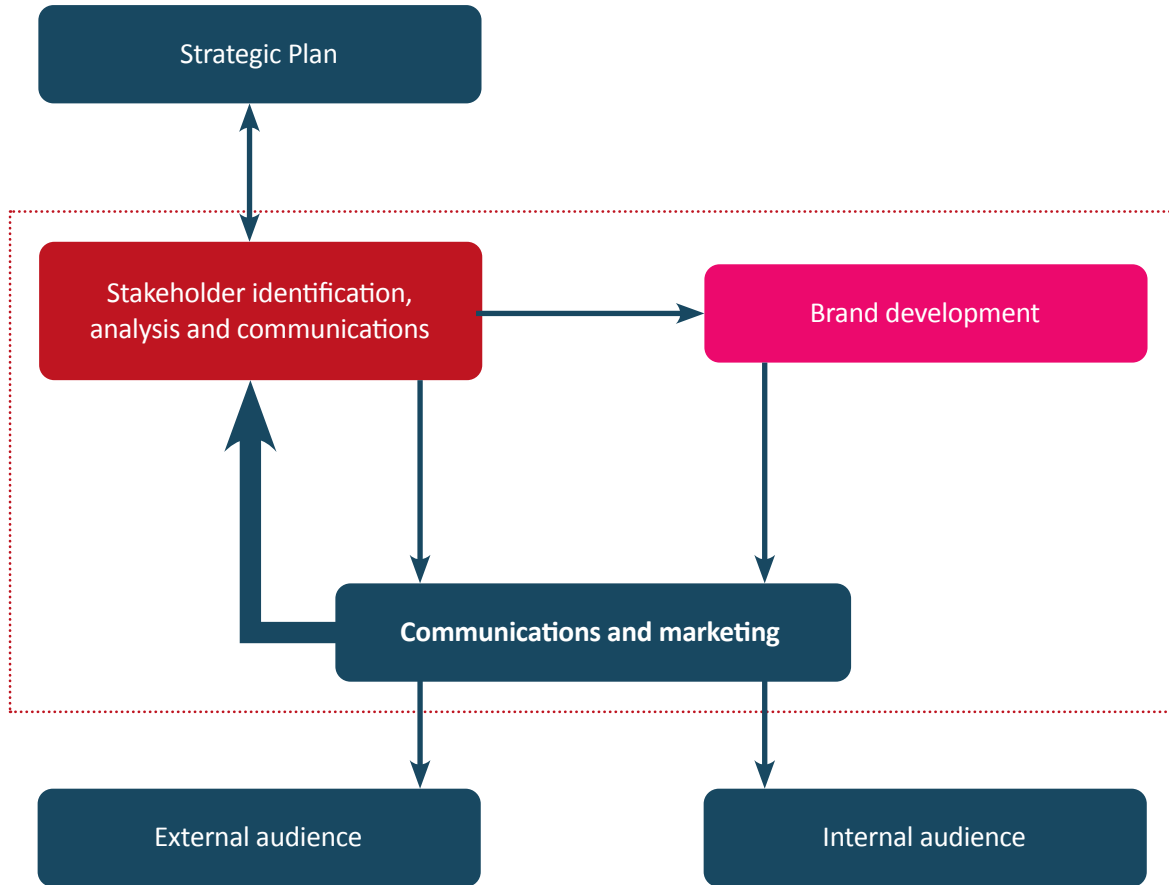
CTNs enhance the translation of clinical trial findings into clinical practice (<https://clinicaltrialsalliance.org.au/about-acta/clinical-trials-network>). Many of the CTN functions such as coordinating research prioritisation, grant applications, site selection, recruitment of clinical research participants, fundraising, dissemination of study results and implementation of study findings are intricately linked to a communications and marketing strategy.

# WHY COMMUNICATIONS AND MARKETING?

The purpose of a communications and marketing strategy is to strategically coordinate a CTN’s external and internal messages, promotion and media to positively impact on the CTN’s perceived value.<sup>1</sup>

The AEG Corporation<sup>2</sup> provides a simple definition of a communications and marketing strategy as, “the strategy used by a company or individual to reach their target market through various types of communication. It includes your *message* (what is to be said/asked), the *medium* (where it is to be said), and the *target* (to whom your message is reaching)”.

The intersection between communication, marketing and organisational strategy is shown in Figure 1.



**Figure 1:** Linkages between a Strategic Plan and marketing and communications

# ELEMENTS OF A COMMUNICATIONS AND MARKETING STRATEGY

## GOALS

The definition of specific goals should guide the implementation of a communications and marketing strategy. Goals relevant to a CTN could include:

- Raising awareness of a specific disease
- Raising awareness of the role of clinical trials in evidence-based practice or advancing healthcare
- Establishing the CTN as a ‘thought leader’ organisation
- Communicating information including CTN policies, procedures, mission, and strategy to enhance transparency and engagement
- Raising awareness of a particular clinical trial that may indirectly assist with patient recruitment
- Attracting new members, consumers or donors
- Attracting sponsorships.

## RESOURCES

The scope and maintenance of an effective marketing strategy will be determined by available resources. Various tools in paid and unpaid versions can assist with these activities. Suggested components of a marketing strategy and relevant activities to maintain its effectiveness are outlined below.

# CTN WEBSITES

## WHY CTNs NEED A WEBSITE?

There are a range of reasons that CTNs need a functioning website:

### ■ Being found on the internet

In 2020, 88% of Australians have access to the internet, and more people are gaining access every day. The internet has become the primary source of information for many. It is now an expectation that every organisation will have a functioning website and in turn, an organisation without a website may not be easily accessible to audiences.

### ■ Distributing information

When people browse through a website, they are searching for information. A high-quality website should distribute information that people are searching for. Information like reports, articles, studies, and resources need to be shared for people to access them. This information can also be accessed remotely from anywhere with an internet connection.

### ■ Brand differentiation

Each CTN has a unique brand and they need to differentiate and stand out from each other. A website is an excellent branding tool to highlight this uniqueness.

### ■ Patient recruitment

As mentioned previously, having a website helps your clinical trial organisation to be found on the internet which in-turn can lead to many positive outcomes, for example increased patient recruitment. A website can also host information that can educate patients and their carers about why they should consider supporting or being involved in clinical studies.

## How to build or rebuild a website

Building or rebuilding a website can feel like a daunting task, however, there are many options available depending on the requirements and purpose of the site. It is possible to build a website without prior experience by using an online website builder, alternatively an external web development company can also be used.

### Build it yourself solutions

There are many website builders available online. These are designed to be used by people who have no prior experience building websites and they are a great low budget option for building simple websites.

### Professional solutions

Engaging with an external website developer is often the best option when building or rebuilding a website. They will produce professional results which will often be superior to “build it yourself” solutions.

## Factors to consider when designing a website

### ■ Website content management system (CMS)

A website CMS is how a website is built, edited, and updated. There are many options for website content management systems and one of the most popular platforms is WordPress. WordPress is widely used by website developers because it is intuitive to use. This makes simple updates to a website, like uploading a blog article, quick and easy. A video explaining how a website content management system (CMS) could be useful for a CTN is available at: <https://youtu.be/ggBI8Di6CCU>

### ■ Goals of your website

Your website needs to have defined goals and objectives as this will make it easier to build. By defining these objectives, your website developer will be able to implement systems which allow you to track and monitor if these objectives are being achieved.

### ■ Search engine optimisation (SEO)

SEO is the process of maximising the number of visitors to a particular website by ensuring that the site appears high on the list of results returned by a search engine. SEO is an important consideration because it helps your website to be found by more people.

### ■ Analytics

Website analytics provide insights into how many people visit your website and how they interact with it. This information is important for informed decisions when adding future content or making changes to your website. Google Analytics is a free tool that allows you to monitor how people interact with your website. For many, this is considered the best platform for monitoring and recording analytics.

### ■ **User experience (Customer journey)**

Considering how different audiences are going to interact with your website is extremely important. Producing a website journey map is an excellent way to get into the mind of your website's end users. Consider the goal of your audience and how they are going to achieve this goal, in the most user-friendly way.

### ■ **Mobile and desktop optimisation**

Most people access websites through their smartphone or desktop computer. It is extremely important that your website works on both mobile devices and desktop computers.

## **Tools for website development**

### ■ **Google Analytics**

Google Analytics is a free tool by Google that allows tracking and monitoring how people use a website. This tool is the industry standard for monitoring website analytics.

### ■ **Google Search Console**

Google Search Console is a free tool by Google that allows monitoring and optimising how a website is appearing in Google Searches. This tool is a fundamental part of SEO and needs to be installed within the website.

### ■ **Google Lighthouse**

Google Lighthouse is a free tool by Google that measures the quality of web pages. The tool analyses and gives recommendations on how to improve performance, accessibility, best practices and SEO. This tool focuses on the technicalities of improving a website. This is a valuable tool for improving the quality of a website.

### ■ **Ubersuggest**

Ubersuggest is a free online tool, like Google Lighthouse, that analyses and audits a website. However, some users find Ubersuggest more user friendly. It also offers recommendations about how to improve website content.

## **SUMMARY**

CTNs should have a functioning website to help grow their brand. A successful website can be used to distribute information that audiences need or are searching for. For the best results, contracting a website developer will ensure the website is professional and optimised for both desktop and mobile devices.



# EMAIL MARKETING FOR CTNs

## WHAT IS EMAIL MARKETING?

In the broadest sense, email marketing is the act of sending emails to a group of people to encourage a particular behaviour. Email marketing is a direct marketing technique that is extremely effective, that is why it is so commonly used. A video explaining how email marketing could be used by CTNs is available at: <https://youtu.be/uIPk1X85N0I>

## WHY EMAIL MARKETING FOR CTNs?

### ■ Direct marketing and communication

Email marketing allows the message to be delivered individually to the reader rather than over mass media. Because of this, the reader places more value in the message and is more likely to take the time to read and consider the content. This in turn offers an excellent opportunity to communicate personally with audiences and stakeholders on a large scale.

### ■ Cost effective

Email marketing offers incredible monetary value because it is very inexpensive to run campaigns. Producing an email marketing campaign can be done for as little as \$15 per month when using an email newsletter subscription service.

### ■ Distributing information

As mentioned previously, email is very personable, so the audience is more likely to consume the information. This lends itself to distributing information on a large scale. Information can be shared via written text, video and even audio messages.

### ■ How to do email marketing?

The first step to successfully running email marketing is to collect email addresses of customers and stakeholders. This can be done in a few ways. Initially email addresses of audience groups can be manually added to a database to get started. An email signup form can also be installed on a CTN website to encourage website traffic to join a mailing list.

Ideally it is good to segment an email audience into as many small defined groups as possible, depending on their interests. This will allow the delivery of information which is more relevant, and in turn will increase the effectiveness of the message.

The final step is to plan and design the emails. The emails can use different formats depending on your goal.

A newsletter style email could use more imagery, graphics and big headings. Whilst a more personal email campaign could be written with plain text. It is worth experimenting with different email formats to see which produces the best results.

## TYPES OF EMAIL MARKETING CAMPAIGNS

There are several types of email marketing campaigns. They each offer unique advantages for different situations depending on where the reader is in their unique journey. Often, using a combination of these strategies brings the best results.

### ■ Drip campaigns

Drip campaigns are a set of predetermined emails which are delivered to new audience members when they join a mailing list for the first time. These emails are often spaced out over time, so the reader is not overwhelmed with too many emails. Drip campaigns are excellent for introducing the reader to information about a CTN and the services they offer. Drip campaigns are also extremely low cost because they only have to be designed once and then they can be delivered automatically.

### ■ Newsletter campaigns

Newsletters campaigns are the most common email marketing tools and involve sending out emails on a regular basis. This is great for keeping an audience engaged with a brand and informing them about new opportunities. This type of campaign is more time consuming because new emails need to be written and designed each time.

# DATA DASHBOARDS FOR CTNs

## WHAT ARE DATA DASHBOARDS?

Data dashboards are online tools that visually display and track key data metrics. Each dashboard is customised to show key data that reflects the health of each part of the organisation. Data dashboards work by linking to the online accounts of your CTN, so almost any online platform can be connected to a data dashboard. A video explaining how digital dashboards could be used by CTNs is available at: <https://youtu.be/SI1-6czzma4>

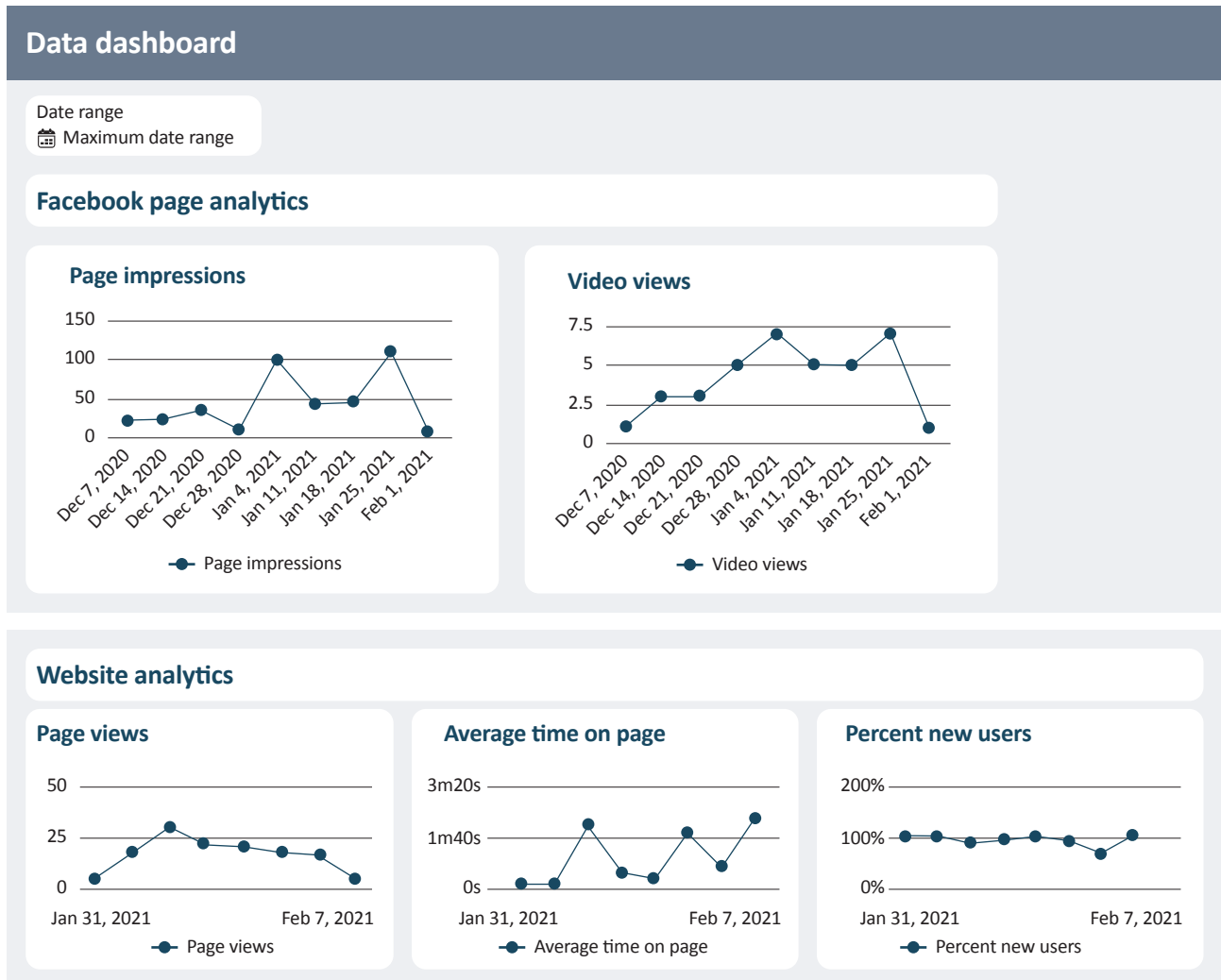


Figure 2: Examples of data dashboards

## PURPOSE OF DATA DASHBOARDS

### ■ Communication of data

Communicating and presenting data can be challenging. Data dashboards simplify data and present it in an engaging and more meaningful visual manner. Importantly, this allows the results to be communicated and understood by everyone in a team regardless of their prior knowledge.

### ■ Accountability

Data dashboards track and present the health of digital engagement and systems, allowing actions to be held accountable. This is important because it will allow the justification of spending money on various products and services if there is an increase in engagement results.

### ■ System optimisation

The first step in optimising a system is recording and tracking key performance indicators (KPIs). Data dashboards achieve this by recording and tracking these KPIs.

## HOW TO SET UP A DATA DASHBOARD

### 1. Choose a data dashboard platform

There are plenty of data dashboard platforms available online and most of them offer similar features and are competitively priced. Find a platform that suits the CTNs needs and offers excellent customer support.

### 2. Decide on the systems to track

Data dashboards can connect to many online platforms, therefore allowing them to track different systems. Common systems to monitor are social media channels, email marketing, any paid online advertising, SEO, and website interactions.

### 3. Identify the key metrics within each system

Decisions need to be made about which metrics will be used to assess the effectiveness of the system. The simpler the metrics, the easier the data will be to understand. Two to five key metrics per system is a good amount, this gives enough information without being overwhelming.

### 4. Compiling and designing your data dashboard

Each dashboard should be as visually appealing as possible to make the information easy to understand.

# SOCIAL MEDIA FOR CTNs

## WHY SOCIAL MEDIA?

### ■ Awareness

On average, people in Asia/Oceania spend 2 hours and 16 minutes on social media each day. This is a phenomenal amount of time and creates an excellent opportunity to reach and engage with these people. Being on social media lets more people find an organisation and increases awareness.

### ■ Distributing information

When people are using social media, they are consuming large amounts of information across articles, videos, audio files and graphic media. Clinical trials collect and produce large amounts of extremely important information, social media is an excellent channel to disseminate this information to the public.

## WHICH SOCIAL MEDIA CHANNELS ARE RECOMMENDED FOR CTNs?

### ■ Appropriate social media channels

CTNs tend to follow a business model and their use of social media needs to reflect that. It is important that you stick to using appropriate social media channels. In Australia, popular and professional social media channels include Twitter, Facebook and LinkedIn.

### ■ Diverse social media channels

CTNs need to reach a diverse audience when recruiting for trials and research. It is also important that CTNs are on social media channels that reach diverse cultural groups. Channels like WeChat, WhatsApp and QQ are all extremely popular internationally. Using these channels will help to reach international audiences in Australia.

A video explaining how social media could be used by CTNs is available at: <https://youtu.be/7bOK6I50yOU>

## BASIC RULES OF SOCIAL MEDIA FOR CTNs

### ■ Complete your profile

Taking the time to properly fill out and complete a profile on social media is very important. Make sure that all information is accurate and represents the brand to the highest level. Consistency across social media channels is good for a coordinated online presence.

### ■ Resonate with your audience

When posting on social media it is important to resonate and identify with the intended audience. Take the time to get into the mindset of the audience and understand their needs and desires. This will help social media posts resonate better with the target audience.

### ■ Quality over quantity of posts

Posting on social media can be a time-consuming activity however, it can be very rewarding with the right content. Taking the time to produce high quality social media posts will get better results and engagement than unplanned or rushed content. Remember that every social media post represents the CTN and its brand.

### ■ Have a plan

Simplify posting by creating a social media schedule. This can help to link content with important dates or events for the CTN, the sector, or the community in general.

## TOOLS FOR SOCIAL MEDIA

### ■ Canva

Canva is a free online design and photo editing tool that many people find to be very user friendly. This can be helpful for creating graphics for social media content.

### ■ Google keyword planner

Google keyword planner is a free tool that tells how many people are searching for specific keywords. It can be useful for discovering trends and popular queries related to clinical trials.

Strategies a CTN may consider to harness their social media activities include:

- Using the communications resources of a parent organisation (e.g. develop a CTN website as a microsite, include CTN updates in a parent entity newsletter)
- Using the communication resources of consumer organisations (e.g. patient advocacy or fundraising groups)
- Harnessing the communication potential of the membership including direct communication with peers (verbal or email), social media 'shares and likes'
- Establishing committees to design the communications strategy, create marketing content, write research publications, or manage events.
- Hire specific CTN employees or outsource providers to undertake communications roles. A suggested PD for a Communications and Marketing Officer for a CTN is included in this document (see Table 3 on page 17).

# STAKEHOLDER/AUDIENCE IDENTIFICATION, ANALYSIS AND COMMUNICATIONS

## STAKEHOLDER/AUDIENCE IDENTIFICATION

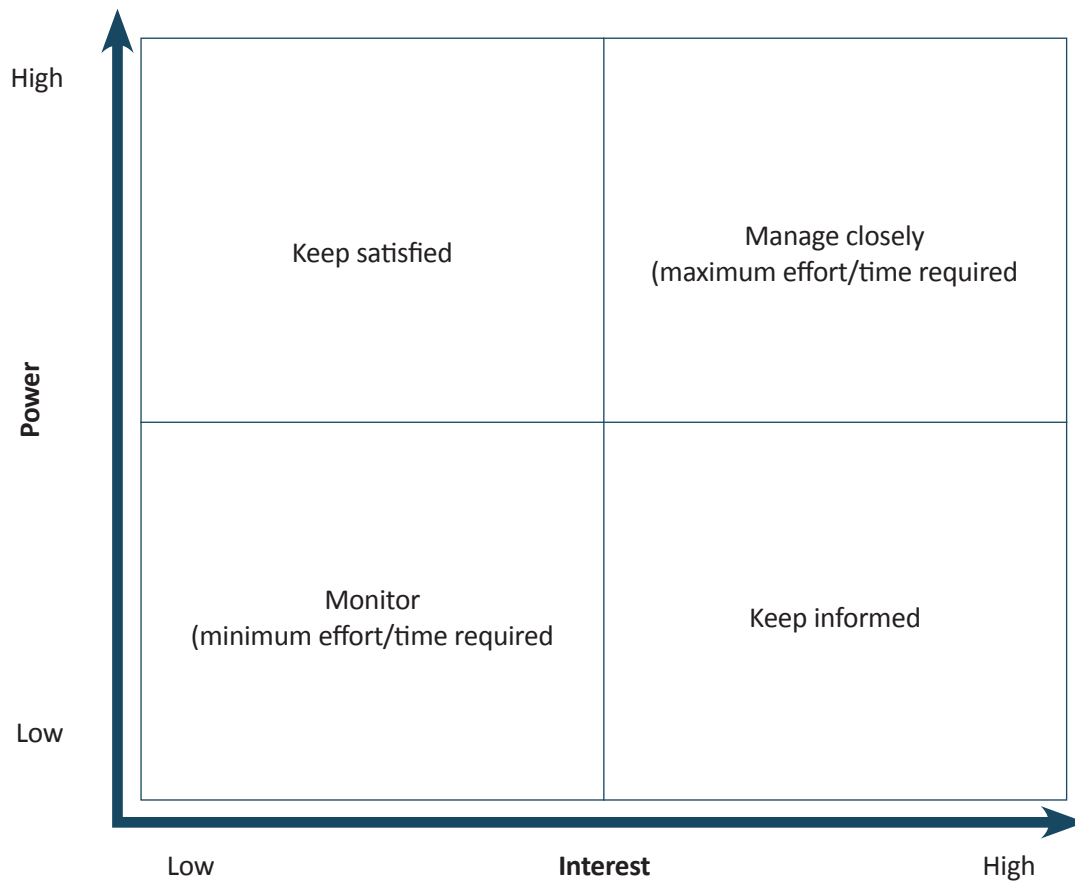
Identifying a CTNs stakeholders/audiences, and their preferred communication channels, can assist in prioritising resources and focus for a communication marketing strategy. Stakeholder identification is an iterative process that should continue throughout the life of the CTN, as well as throughout the life cycle of all clinical research projects that the CTN undertakes.

Table 1 shows an example list of potential stakeholders/audiences for a CTN however this list will vary depending on the individual CTN and their individual setup.

After identifying stakeholders/audiences, it is important to analyse the power, influence, and interests that each of these individuals can have on a CTN and its brand. A useful tool to analyse stakeholders/audiences is shown in Figure 3. A detailed stakeholder communications plan (introduced in Table 2) can then be developed based on this detailed analysis.

**Table 1:** Example CTN stakeholders/audiences (adapted from Pandi-Perumal, et al.<sup>3</sup>).

External stakeholders/audiences	Internal stakeholders/audiences
Board of Directors	Project team
Universities	Principal Investigators
Community groups	Clinical Research Coordinators
Consultants	Clinical Research Associates
Consumers	Functional Managers
Government agencies	Medical Directors
Healthcare stakeholders	Operations Manager
Industry partners	Other Clinicians involved in the project
Legislators/policy makers	Portfolio Manager/Program Manager
Media	Project Manager
Non-Governmental Organisations (NGO)	Project Management Office
Non-Profit Organisations (NPO)	Subject matter experts
Other businesses	Consultants
Research partners	
Scientific community	
Sponsors	
Subject matter experts	
Vendors/suppliers	



**Figure 3:** Stakeholder/Power Interest Grid

**Table 2:** Stakeholder/audience communication plan

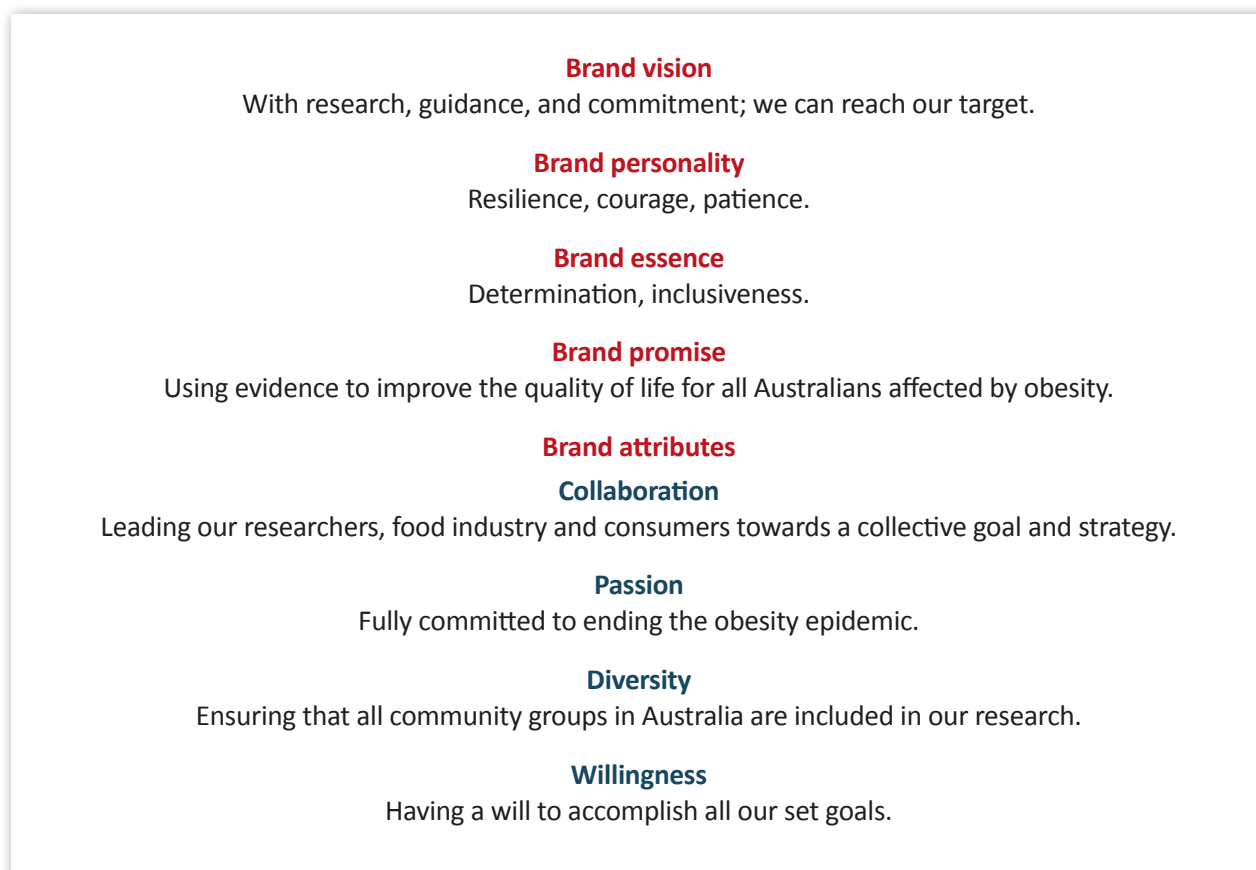
Stakeholder/audience	Purpose of engagement	Mechanism of engagement	Frequency	Responsibility
Example CTN members	To inform and progress programs of work	Annual Scientific Meeting	Annually	Executive Officer
		Scientific Committee Meetings	3–4 per year	Executive Officer
		Specialist Group Meetings	Ongoing	Executive Officer
	To harness input into the network activities	Workshops, surveys	As required	Executive Officer, Delegated communications portfolio lead or Communications Officer
	To communicate plans and program outputs	CTN website and social media	Ongoing	Delegated communications portfolio lead or Communications Officer
	To facilitate the sharing of ideas and expertise across the Network	Network website Network events	Ongoing	Delegated communications portfolio lead or Communications Officer
	To identify opportunities for the network to improve its member support activities	Member survey	Annual	Delegated communications portfolio lead or Communications Officer
To engage existing members and potential new members	CTN website and social media Events		Delegated communications portfolio lead or Communications Officer	
Sponsor				
General public/potential clinical trial participants				
Community Advisory Group				
Healthcare providers				
Media				



# BRAND DEVELOPMENT

Brand identity is both the visible elements of a brand, including colour, design and a brand's logo; and the less tangible components such as voice, tone, personality, and values that support delivery and adherence to the CTN mission. It is how a CTN presents itself to the public and distinguishes itself in the mind of its stakeholders/audiences, while staying true to its mission. Put simply, brand identity is what a CTN, its stakeholders/audience, and prospective stakeholders/audiences see and feel about a brand.

Various tools exist to help define and maintain an organisation's brand. Figure 4 represents an exercise to determine the invisible elements of a brand.



**Figure 4:** Brand description for a fictional Australian obesity research network

Physical tools that can support adherence to a CTN brand include:

- **Logo:** An identifiable and meaningful image or text that will be used to visually represent your brand.
- **Tag line:** A short sentence or phrase that succinctly captures what a CTN does or wants to be known for.
- **Style guide:** A document that provides guidance on the CTN brand which often includes rules or guidelines on logo use, colour palette, fonts, photography style, language and tone. A style guide ensures there is brand consistency across all channels which helps with brand recognisability, as well as maintaining a professional and stable brand representation.

## DEDICATED COMMUNICATION AND MARKETING RESOURCES

If appropriate, your CTN may decide to recruit dedicated communications and marketing team members to bring new experience/skills and lead promotional activities. It is acknowledged that this may not always be possible for CTNs however, for those that are considering recruitment, Robinson, et al.<sup>4</sup> made the following recommendations regarding the composition of a communications and marketing team for clinical trials:

- The team should consist of a variety of members including scientific, communications and community engagement experts.
- A Communications Officer is recommended. The potential roles and responsibilities of this role are described in Table 3.
- The CTN team may also benefit from other technical support staff including information technology and business analysts.
- The involvement of a senior leader of the CTN team is highly recommended. This could be a Network Executive Officer or any other senior network leader.
- The composition of the team should be adaptable and could include external communication experts when needed.

**Table 3:** Example roles and responsibilities of a Communications Officer

Support in the production and review of CTN member newsletter and consumer magazine
Maintain and update a CTN website
Support with the distribution of routine email marketing to members
Support with maintaining and updating a ClinTrials App
Support in writing, preparation, and distribution of fundraising e-communications
Support in maintaining and updating fundraising websites and platforms
Maintain and update CTN website fundraising pages
Support in the development of updates for social media (e.g. Twitter, Facebook and LinkedIn)
Work with external suppliers to prepare event collateral and materials.

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# Australian Clinical Trials Alliance

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