

Strategic Communication in a Transnational Project—The Interreg Alpine Space Project HEALPS2



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Abstract Communication activities play a pivotal role in the management of research projects, especially those involving several partners and stakeholders from different countries. The Interreg Alpine Space HEALPS2 project relies on a transnational and transversal approach to improve the framework conditions and tools for alpine health tourism, and therefore proposes a communication strategy based on specific objectives. These objectives guide the communication activities at an internal and external level, with the latter being declined for different targets and stakeholders. In this Chapter, the communication activities are described, starting from the general and specific objectives-oriented approach, to the local realization. The general strategy and the analysis are illustrated, then are demonstrated through a regional use case—the Parco Regionale Alpe Veglia-Alpe Devero and Parco Regionale Alta Valle Antrona.

Keywords Project communication management · Communication management practices · Project management

1 Introduction

The overall objective of HEALPS2 is to develop and improve framework conditions and tools for a better use of Alpine-specific natural health resources for the development of innovative tourism products and service chains [1]. The project links

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academia, different business sectors such as the health sector, tourism and local service providers, as well as innovation and transfer agencies and protected areas to jointly implement new business models that improve value creation across sectors in Alpine regions. This transnational and transversal approach is built on unique Alpine natural health resources such as Alpine Water or Air Ions and strengthens the Alpine territorial innovation capacity. There are three specific project objectives (SPOs) the project works towards, which are defined in the project outline:

- SPO1—Increase awareness: Initiate mutual learning on health tourism development and implementation strategies from different regions by the involvement of actors from the quadruple helix (see Chap. 6 [2]);
- SPO2—Change attitude: Enhancing access to and use of innovation knowledge in Alpine regions regarding evidence-based health tourism development and cross-sectorial value chains;
- SPO3—Influence behaviour: Facilitate a more innovation-driven tourism policy and business development in Alpine regions.

All communication activities developed in the project build on the three project specific objectives as described above. Communication is a crucial element within the process of project implementation, having a transversal impact on internal and external processes. Hence, communication activities touch upon a multitude of internal processes, project management-related activities, but also on targeting the right stakeholders and efficiently disseminate project's results [3, 4]. Thus, communication is thematically relevant and results-oriented. Moreover, strategic communication shall build trust and establish reputation for the project success and its adoption on the local and regional level, leading to the long-term viability on the grounds.

However, strategic communication may only be successfully implemented if internal processes are well structured and organized: internal and external communication are closely intertwined and play both a role for determining project results' impact. *Internal communication* helps to coordinate the partnership for having a common basis of understanding, ensures activities cohesion and adds to capacity building among different stakeholders. Internal communication activities are addressed by the Management Work Package (WP) and the respective related handbook prepared by the Lead Partner of the HEALPS2 project, the Paracelsus Medical University of Salzburg. *External communication* supports the achievement of planned outputs by informing and actively involving target groups. It supports the dissemination of outputs and results to the large public and target groups not directly involved. These activities are structured within the communication strategy and coordinated by the Lead of the Communication Work Package ALPARC, the Alpine Network of Protected Areas.

The reminder of this Chapter is organized as follows: Sect. 2 introduces the communication goals, channels, and stakeholders to be addressed. Section 3 presents a SWOT analysis to identify opportunities and obstacles for a successful communication, then it presents the deriving communication strategy; Sect. 4 details the communications activities conducted and regional and local level, leveraging on

the Ossola Protected Areas example. Finally, the Conclusions wrap-up the main outcomes of this Chapter.

2 Communication Goals and Channels

On the basis of the specific project objectives, the communication objectives increase knowledge, influence attitude and change behavior have been identified for the purpose of implementing the project outputs on the transnational level. For each of the three objectives, concrete measures and deliverables have been defined aiming at monitoring the working progress and the fulfilment of the different objectives.

In order to best achieve the three communication objectives, a stakeholder matrix [5] has been defined to identify key stakeholders and effectively target specific activities (Fig. 1):

The stakeholders constituting the targets to which address communication activities were divided in *Primary* (divided into internal and external) and *Secondary*. Project partners, subcontractors, financiers, Project Observers, and Alpine Space programme bodies, are included in the *Primary Internal stakeholders*, since they play a role within the project. Their needs and expectation can range from having the information to conduct an efficient cooperation (project partners), assessing intermediate and final project’s results (financiers, Project Observers, Alpine Space programme bodies).

Primary External stakeholders encompasses public authorities at all levels (local, regional and national): they require clear and comprehensive strategic and management approaches, as well as tools, to support health tourism innovation factors. In this regard, many communication activities can be deployed at different level, ranging from involving these stakeholders in the project (by inviting them at key events, such as the mid-term and final conferences, providing the opportunities for networking events, inviting to capacity building trainings) to providing detailed information of

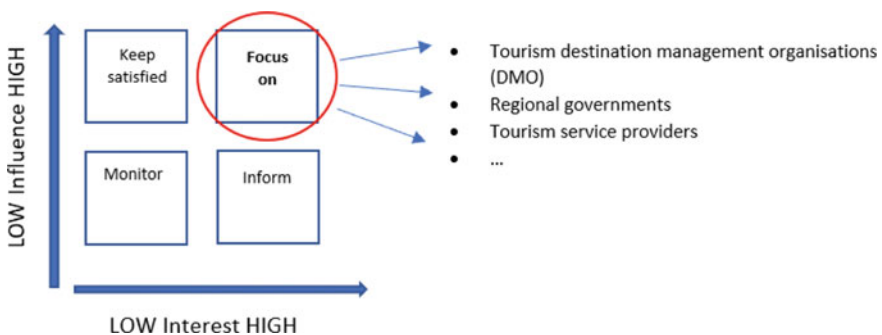


Fig. 1 The stakeholder matrix adopted for HEALPS 2

preliminary and final results. Sectorial agencies, Interest Groups (including non-governmental organizations) and international organization networks operating in the tourism sector fall in this category. Also, SMEs (hotels, cross-sectorial SMEs, etc.) and business support organizations relevant external stakeholders cover a pivotal role: they need to understand the project purposes and the value of its results to be properly engaged. Therefore, together with providing general and detailed information on any aspect of the project, these external stakeholders are also invited in mid-term and final conferences, as well as stakeholders' meetings. Finally, actors operating in the Education and Training sectors are also listed in this category.

The *Secondary stakeholders* includes local and regional media—in particular those of the areas in which HEALPS 2 pilot actions take place—and the General Public. For these stakeholders, transnational and local workshops and web-based communication are adopted to provide tangible information on HEALPS 2's ways to promote health tourism.

In a second step, operative communication guidelines have been defined to guarantee a coherent approach within the project consortium and adequately address the specific target groups. The basic communication package consisting of a project poster, flyer and roll-up provides for a common visual identity for all communication activities at different levels and adds to the visibility of the HEALPS2 results.

Moreover, several communication channels such as the project website, Facebook page and YouTube Channel are put in place to provide information and updates on a regular basis and foster every stakeholder involvement and results dissemination. The Facebook page is the main channel to inform on project progress, deliverables, outputs and crucial information related to the nature-based health tourism topic. YouTube is used for publishing videos produced in the course of the project such as official presentation clips but also testimonials and webinars organized by different project partners.

3 Communication Strategy for HEALPS2

The communication strategy for HEALPS 2 leverages on a SWOT analysis, which helps identifying the Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats relate to project communication.

3.1 SWOT Analysis for HEALPS 2

The SWOT analysis conducted for HEALPS 2 communication activities can be summarized as follows:

- **Strengths:** the research project leverages on a solid scientific approach, which can also make use of the findings and results of previous scientific research

projects, as underlined in Chap. 1 [6]. Also, it provides concrete, applicable, scalable and tested results—e.g.: the shared knowledge model [7], the HTAB digital tool for tourism destinations [8], repeatable innovation techniques [9]. Moreover, the project partners composing the research team allow to cover for a multidisciplinary approach, which is required in a health tourism context. Considering the partners' distribution in the whole Alpine Space, the communication activities are able to cover different perspective—including sectorial, territorial and cultural ones—, as well as having an impact both at national and regional/local levels. Finally, the inclusion of representatives and relevant stakeholders within the project's Observer Partners helps in spreading the results toward a wider community.

- **Weaknesses:** the multidisciplinary approach may pose as a weakness, in that partners with different backgrounds and complexity may find challenging to understand findings and needs of other partners. Also, the different perspectives on health tourism need to be recomposed into the evidence and nature-based health tourism notion, basis of this project. Summarizing, the main weakness identified consists in “bringing everyone on the same page” before communication activities start.
- **Opportunities:** tourism stakeholders actively search for innovation and new markets; in particular, with the emergence of different forms of slow and sustainable tourism [10], stakeholders may be interested in the approach proposed by HEALPS 2. Also, the emerging health consciousness in the general public and the political willingness from investing in health (both at national and European levels) bode well for the core messages proposed by HEALPS 2.
- **Threats:** local-level stakeholders need to be engaged bearing in mind that they may not have all the knowledge necessary to apply the changes proposed by the project's results. Therefore, messages need to be carefully tailored. Also, as over-tourism is a crucial factor for the natural ecosystem of Alpine Space, it is essential to stress the countermeasures deployed by HEALPS 2. Considering the general Covid-19 pandemic crisis, which might result in a large recession in the following years [11], it is essential to stress that investing in health tourism today may help local-level stakeholders to capitalize in the future.

With these coordinates in mind, the rest of this Section delves into the communication approach for the transnational level of the project.

3.2 Communication at the Transnational Level

Following the definition of internal processes for communication actions, the links to international and transnational institutions need to be established in order to favor respective synergies, enlarging the network on Alpine Health Tourism and strengthening the cooperation with institutional and political actors to improve the framework conditions for the positioning of Alpine Health Tourism.

The EU-Strategy for the Alpine Region (EUSALP) and the Alpine Convention are both multinational initiatives striving for sustainable development in the Alps and are therefore important addressees at the strategic policy level. A particular focus has been placed on achieving an active exchange with the Action Group 2 and Action Group 6 of the EUSALP. Moreover, two project partners are active observers of the Alpine Convention and assure the information flows for contracting parties. Further exchange and cross fertilizing are foreseen with similar Alpine Space projects, working in the fields of ICT based innovation and regional development. Examples for this communication are the ASP projects BifocALPS, DesAlps or AlpBioEco. During project lifetime other synergies to EU projects shall be detected and nourished.

Moreover, at policy level, addressing representatives of the EU Commission in particular from DG Regio is considered to help elevating the approach at the transnational strategic level. Moreover, ArgeAlp and cross border cooperation such as Euregios are addressed in the project lifetime e.g. at the HEALPS2 mid-term conference to increase the visibility of project results.

For the aim of providing a long-term knowledge base for the newly created network on Alpine Health Tourism, Innovation Salzburg and Paracelsus Medical University run the platform Healing Power of the Alps. This platform aims at supporting destination managers and interested regions in developing nature-based health tourism offers and informing interested stakeholders on latest scientific findings and developments in that sector.

In the next section, a thorough overview on the communication activities at the local and regional level are shown by referring to the example of the Ossola Protected Areas, project partner and pilot region in the HEALPS2 project.

4 Communication at Regional Level

The Ossola Protected Areas are two regional parks in Piedmont (North-Western Italy): Parco Regionale Alpe Veglia-Alpe Devero and Parco Regionale Alta Valle Antrona. For these two parks, the Ossola Protected Areas Management Authority identified new possible health tourism products using techniques of stakeholder involvement, such as webinars to illustrate innovations and options for new tourism value chains, and online workshops and events to meet, brainstorm and co-create a shared tourism development path. Ossola focused on the widespread psychological distress resulting from city life, whose figures further increased due to the pandemic [12]. The product that was then developed and tested through pilot events is the *adventure therapy weekend*. Adventure therapy is an outdoor-based approach aimed at increasing one's psychological wellbeing, by undertaking subjectively challenging activities in nature together with a group of people and then reflecting on each one's emotions and coping behaviors, to gain awareness and become able to use them in everyday life.

4.1 Objectives and Target Groups

The communication of the Ossola Protected Areas Managing Authority as a partner of the HEALPS2 project helped to reach the project regional strategic communication objectives through both the project official channels and partner channels. To communicate the activities carried out within the project, Ossola started identifying the priority target groups and by setting specific goals for each one. The priority target groups are the following ones:

- Local stakeholders: the Ossola Protected Areas Management Authority focused particularly on mountain guides, local businesses especially in the tourism and agricultural sectors and public authorities such as municipalities.
- Public authorities and associations at the regional, national, EU levels: this target group comprises a variety of higher level public authorities like the tourist and environment departments of the Piedmont Region, the Italian relevant ministries, the supranational EU strategy EUSALP, CIPRA international, the Alpine Convention and the European Commission.
- Other protected areas: national and regional parks in Italy and Europe, other protected areas. These were reached also through relations with the Alpine Association of Protected Areas ALPARC and with the European Federation of Parks Europarc.
- Tourists: this group includes both the tourists who already know and visit Ossola and those who are potentially interested but have never been in the area or don't even recognize it as a suitable destination. The focus on health and wellbeing has led the Ossola Protected Areas to widen the scope of communication beyond their traditional tourists (families and people who love mountains and outdoor sports), also to people who would consider a mountain destination provided it has a health tourism offer.

The SPO1 *Increase Awareness* was applied to four specific subjects:

- (1) HEALPS2 Project and Ossola Protected Areas Management Authority. Making local stakeholders and authorities at regional, national and EU level aware of the existence of the project and of Ossola's role within HEALPS2 served as a first branding step.
- (2) Nature-based health tourism potential and best practices. Showing what resources could be leveraged and what advantages health tourism would bring was essential in order to lead local businesses and administrators to consider the creation of new, health-related tourism value chains as a valuable option.
- (3) Health benefits of nature. These are the reasons behind the choice to make a tourism product starting from some elements of the Alpine environment, e.g. a waterfall or a forest. They may also become a motivation for health-conscious people to spend more time in nature, including when they travel.
- (4) Ossola nature-based health resources. Ossola is home to a variety of Alpine environments and is rich in natural resources for health and wellbeing. However, both practitioners and tourists aren't used to considering them as such. Raising

awareness about Ossola's many health natural resources helps positioning the whole Protected Area as a health-friendly tourism destination.

The SPO2 *Change Attitude* focused on:

- (1) Arousing interest, curiosity, willingness to visit Ossola as a tourism destination focusing on health and wellbeing: Ossola communication was not limited to informing people about the health tourism natural resources the Protect Areas offer, but it also aimed at making such an offer desirable for the potential customers.
- (2) Building the brand image of HEALPS2 Project and of the Ossola Protected Areas Management Authority. The communication carried out by Ossola as a project partner both contributed to building its own image as an health tourism actor and as an institution, and to highlighting the milestones the project reached.

The SPO3 *Influence Behavior* aimed at:

- (1) Getting local businesses to work together as a network to co-design new tourism value chains for Ossola.
- (2) Leading people to participate in the "adventure therapy weekend" pilot events, as part of the test of the viability and market acceptance of this idea.

4.2 *Local Communication Activities*

To reach the project and Ossola Protected Areas Management Authority branding goals, including awareness and attitude building, the partner used both the project and its own media. The project channels were used to communicate the partner's actions within HEALPS2 to an international audience, while also highlighting the project achievements. On the other hand, the main project events and results were highlighted through Ossola's corporate communication channels (website, newsletter, social media, press relations) and by sharing the project experience when participating in conferences, workshops and other events. To involve local stakeholders and start participatory processes aimed at co-designing a new tourism offer, it was necessary to raise awareness about the nature-based health resources Ossola offers and how they can be sustainably used to create a new tourist offer aimed at personal wellbeing. Communication on the Ossola Protected Areas channels and stakeholder meetings were essential to reach these goals.

Web. News on the Ossola Protected Areas official website and newsletter informed local stakeholders and followers about project activities, events and results; Facebook helped increase their awareness of the potential of nature-based health tourism, while Facebook and Instagram posts highlighted Ossola's nature-based health resources. The tourists were engaged through social media. Since, in Italy, spas are often seen as the only expression of a tourism aimed at being well, communication had to start by widening this concept to include also other natural resources and experiences that may turn a trip into a source of physical and mental health. The Facebook and

Instagram posts about the health effects of mountain activities, often mirroring the project “resource of the month” communication, were a first step in this direction. Then, the Ossola Protected Areas communicated the region as a destination focusing on wellbeing at several different levels with posts on Facebook and Instagram. To do so, they suggested ways to enjoy the health benefits of Ossola’s health resources while highlighting the relevant tourist offer already in place: trails, itineraries, facilities, events, farms and local food producers. Also, this was a way to strengthen the relationship with local players and start building on possible synergies (Fig. 2).

During the three years of the project about 100 Facebook posts and more than 50 Instagram posts were published, and 9 newsletters containing articles about project activities.

Press and local workshops. Press releases allowed communication of news about project activities to a wider circle of stakeholders, at the local and regional level. The local players who had already started a closer relationship with the park (by adhering to the European Charter of Sustainable Tourism in Protected Areas) were reached through one-to-one contacts and through the invitation to local workshops and to transnational project events. The choice to focus on this subset of stakeholders as privileged partners comes from the idea that sharing the values of sustainability is crucial for the tourism innovation process in a protected area.

Results. The communication activities described above reached their goals. Up to 13 local stakeholders took part in the online workshops organized by the Ossola Protected Areas Management Authority, 110 people were involved in the four webinars; 25 local businesses took part in the day-long event organized on February 4th

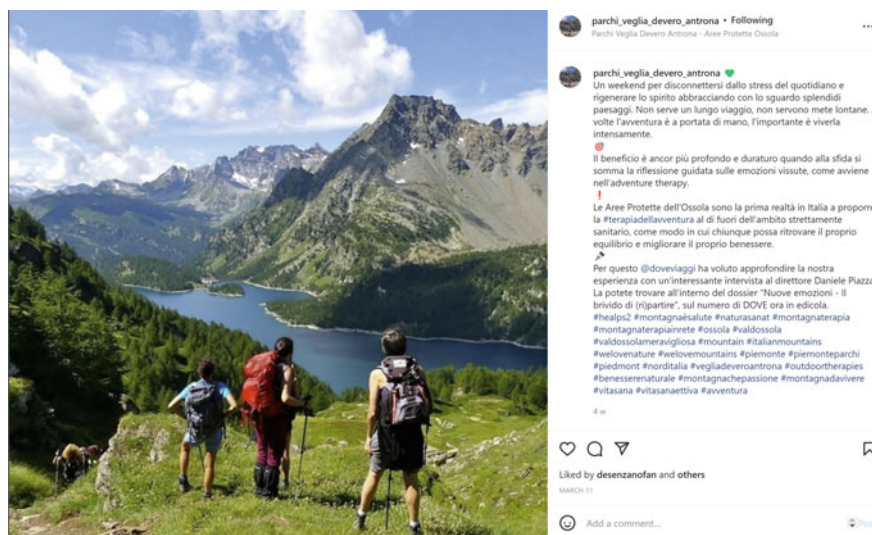


Fig. 2 An Instagram post to promote the adventure therapy weekend tourism product

2022 and showed interest in coming together to build new tourism products focusing on wellbeing.

Hundreds of international stakeholders, protected areas and public bodies learnt about Ossola's activities in the project thanks to the participation of Ossola Protected Areas representatives as speakers in international online and in-presence events.

5 Conclusions

This Chapter drafts the strategic communication activities for the HEALPS 2 project. Starting from the identification of Specific Objectives, the Chapters delves into a the communication goals and stakeholders. A SWOT analysis helps surveying those project's aspects that can be leveraged to deliver efficient communication, and supports in recognizing criticalities that may require to be specifically address. Also, the Chapter dedicates considerable attention to local and regional development of communication activities, proposing the example from Ossola Protected Areas, delving into the detail and discussion of the communication activities conducted at a local level.

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