

BCE/2012/Paper 9

UPDATE ON COMMUNICATIONS & MEDIA FOR REVISED CONSULTATION PERIOD

Introduction

1. This paper provides an initial evaluation of the communications and media activity implemented by the BCE before and during the revised consultation period for the 2013 Review. It outlines the approach taken with regards to the consultation and how key learnings from previous consultations were applied. This paper is for information.
2. The paper will be supplemented in the New Year by more detailed post-consultation research (this is underway, but will only become available after this evaluation paper is submitted).

Key communications activities

3. BCE launched its revised proposals on October 16th 2012.

Advertising strategy for revised consultation

4. The advertising approach for the revised proposals consultation differed from that taken for the initial proposals consultation. As part of the need to reduce spending on communications radio adverts were not used, instead there was an additional burst of print media advertising. This approach was recommended in the initial proposals consultation evaluation.
5. The first burst began on Tuesday 16 October and continued until Sunday 21 October and the second burst began on 26 November and ended 2 December. They were quarter page adverts in all the main national daily and Sunday newspapers covering England.
6. The adverts were designed to bring people's attention to key messages, rather than to attempt to inform them of the details of the proposals themselves. The first advert alerted the public to the start of the consultation and the second emphasised that this would be the last chance for public to have their say.
7. It is anticipated that the press activity reached 65 to 70% of all adults in England.

Online strategy

8. The advertising campaign focused on directing people to the BCE website and the BCE enquiry line, as did all publications, the revised proposal reports, summaries, the review leaflet and press release.
9. During the consultation period, the BCE website acted as a one-stop-shop for the consultation process, making readily available all reports and maps, an online form

for submission of written representations. The monitoring activity revealed the following (note all figures are correct at time of writing, 7 December, with only the final weekend of the consultation remaining):

- a) Online representations submitted: **1,545**
- b) Visits to website since 16 October: **50,355**
- c) Pages viewed since 16 October: **215,122**

10. From the start of the 8-week period of the revised proposals consultation, a paid-for online service ensured that searches on key words associated with the consultation and the Commission would return the consultation website at the top (or near the top) of the results and/or appearing as a 'sponsored link' on the results page for the search. The service has been secured in relation to a number of words connected with boundary changes until the end of March 2013. An initial analysis shows that over 50% of traffic to the consultation website was via search engines.
11. The BCE also used its Twitter account to efficiently disseminate key messages to social media communities. Nearly 400 people are now 'following' the BCE through this medium, comprised mainly of a mix of members of the public, Members of Parliament, local government councillors, councils, journalists and interest groups. Messages about start of consultation and reminders about closing date were tweeted before and during the campaign.

Members of Parliament - distribution and liaison

12. The BCE made all the relevant reports and supplementary information available to every MP, from a base in the House of Commons, from noon to 3.00 pm on 15 October under embargo until 0001hrs 16 October.
13. In contrast to the publication of the initial proposals, which on the Monday saw the reports appear in full and in breach of the embargo on a political blog, for the revised proposals there was no wholesale break of the embargo. However, there were a number of "localised" breaks. At least two local news websites posted details of changes in the local area well before midnight, and at least one MP broke the embargo by posting details of the changes to their constituency on their Twitter account soon after they had received their own personal copy of the report.

Media - distribution and liaison

14. There was some national media interest leading up to the launch and on the day itself. Most of the national media enquiries were about the status of the review and the impact of the Lib Dems' withdrawal of support for the boundary changes.
15. The BCE used its media stakeholder list to disseminate its press release after the MPs had had the opportunity to collect their printed copies of the reports and maps. This contrasted with the approach for the initial proposals, when MPs and the media received their copies at the same time, with the result that at least one MP received news of the "abolition" of their constituency from a local journalist rather than having had the opportunity to read the detail at first hand.

16. The press were given access to the revised proposal vector/shape files under embargo before they were published on BCE's website. This enabled media to manipulate in maps the data from the revised proposals. This was another change from the approach taken to the initial proposals, when no shape files were released as part of the initial launch. This led to criticism of BCE on a number of prominent data blogs, which accused BCE of withholding information and failing to provide material expected to support a consultation in the digital age.
17. There were a small number of regional pre-recorded interviews with Granada and ITV, covering local issues in Manchester area, Devon and Cornwall, North East and South West.

Next Steps

Pre and post wave evaluation

18. The BCE commissioned market research to evaluate both broader political awareness and awareness of the BCE's review specifically.
19. Research was undertaken before and after the consultation period (and its associated promotional activity). The BCE will receive the post-consultation research for review in the latter half of January and will provide supplementary information to this communications update paper in the light of those results.

Conclusions

20. On the basis of an initial evaluation, BCE's communication approach for its final consultation can be deemed a success, particularly when one considers the resource constraints currently operating within Government. In particular BCE learnt successfully from the experience of the publication of the initial proposals (not least in its provision of shape files, and in the timing of distribution of material to MPs). Encouragingly, the focus of debate during the consultation exercise remained firmly on the "lines on the map" rather than on the methods that BCE had chosen to publicise and disseminate its proposals.