What is horizon scanning?

Horizon Scanning is a core skill in the Modern Communications Operating Model (MCOM)

Traditional horizon scanning typically involves very long term scenario planning and is often used by energy companies in anticipating future trends in the oil market, for example - climate change and the impacts it might have. However, the long term nature of such scanning provides little insight for communications.

GCS definition of communications horizon scanning:

A systematic examination of information to identify potential threats, risks, emerging issues and opportunities, from the immediate up to 12 months away, allowing for better preparedness and the incorporation of mitigation and exploitation into communications and policy decision making processes.

"Immediate horizon scanning" relates to early warning systems which are often most used in social media analytics - due to the fast pace of content sharing.

Example sources of data/intelligence in the short/medium term

- Scrutiny committees and Parliamentary plans: Parliamentary calendar and Departmental Parliamentary Branches
- Future external events: Foresight News
- Planned announcements, events and external activities by the department and its network via ALB Grids & calls
- Departmental policy, strategy and comms colleagues on upcoming policy and campaign announcements
- Scientists/specialists in department and its network: Risk reports
- Futurology horizon scanning reports: Cranfield or other academic institutions
- Planned activity by other Government Departments: OGD Grids
- Planned Downing Street announcements: Number 10 Grid
- Published scientific and social research papers: Departmental knowledge hub

- Latest Govt-related news/plans: WiredGov
- Social analytics: paid-for or free tools
- Published official statistics: Office of National Statistics / DWP / polls by BBC
- Customer call and search trends: Call Centre, Web and Correspondence/FOI Units
- Stakeholder mapping and monthly analysis of latest views of top stakeholders
- Topic related insight from customers: own or joint customer surveys
- General insight from a public base on specific campaigns: YouGov
- Reputation: Government Communications Reputation Tracker 'RepTrak'

With plenty of sources, there is a risk of information overload and of course the information needs to be distilled down into something useable for the audience receiving it.

Core skills needed for horizon scanning

Basic level

Data gathering from internal and external sources

Administration and management of the data flow

Maintaining robust processes and keeping data up to date

Producing dashboards, tracking platforms and web data, and publishing reports

Setting search terms and phrases

Strong administration skills

Practitioner

Data interrogation and selection of key items

Strong media skills to make judgement calls on issues that may have potential media-related consequences

Graphical representation of data in various forms to tell the story

Gap analysis to ensure the full picture is captured with liaison across the Department

Good presentation skills to highlight upcoming items of interest

Advanced/expert

Judgement on which issues have potential to impact on communications planning, delivery and reception

Making recommendations on planning and decision making, working with colleagues across the group and across GCS

Skills that cut across all levels and other skills /specialisms within MCOM

- Evaluation skills and use of evidence to make a case
- Understanding of how the role's agenda fits with the wider government narrative
- Leadership skills and ability to exemplify the leadership statement
- Digital capabilities (awareness of tools & channels, familiarity with different approaches, online information sources, partner identification and evaluation)

Four tips from colleagues who have introduced horizon scanning in their communications directorates.

1. **Timing:** think about Horizon Scanning in the early planning stages of communications so you can set up tracking from the right sources and identify any gaps. Then review monthly and share with key internal contacts.

2. **Be clever:** tap into data from various sources and then filter them down. Recognise that the combination of things happening at the same time or to the same audience can change what you do next.

3. **Benchmark:** use the data where possible to set benchmarks so once you start evaluating, you're already watching the right data sources – think about the whole process.

4. **Reporting:** think about how you'll report it to your internal audiences – ministers may require a more concise summary, while the wider communications team, policy and private offices, may require more detail.

Some organisations map their information month by month in grid format, typically in excel, and then look at the combination of items taking place in each month. Some organisations go further and consider the audiences that each item impacts upon, mapping the information against audience segments.

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