

# Strengthening communication impact for harm reduction services

Four key insights from the communications work  
of the BOOST Project

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## Introduction

Thematic papers within the [BOOST Project](#) aim to explore critical challenges and opportunities for improving health and social services for people who use drugs across Europe. This paper focuses on how strategic communication and dissemination have supported that goal—specifically, how targeted messaging, diverse channels, and collaborative visibility efforts can amplify the impact of harm reduction initiatives.

Within BOOST, communication has not been treated as a separate task but as an integral part of advocacy, learning, and capacity building. The Communication and Dissemination Plan - developed in the framework of the project - provided a clear framework to guide the project's outreach: defining target audiences, aligning messages with BOOST's objectives, and ensuring that the project's findings reached the people and institutions who could use them.

Drawing from the experience of implementing this plan, this thematic paper explores the opportunities, challenges, and lessons learned in building BOOST's communication ecosystem. It highlights how the project's online platforms, social media presence, and partner networks worked together to enhance visibility, while also identifying areas for improvement.

This paper distills four key insights from these efforts, offering practical takeaways for communicators, project partners, and harm reduction advocates seeking to increase the visibility and influence of their work through effective communication.

## Inside BOOST: Communicating harm reduction effectively

From the start, BOOST recognised communication as a strategic function — not only to share information, but also to strengthen community connections, showcase work, and support advocacy efforts. The Communication and Dissemination Plan outlined a multi-channel strategy designed to reach a wide range of stakeholders, from policymakers and researchers to community organisations and people who use drugs.

The approach combined **digital visibility**, **partner amplification**, and **targeted knowledge translation**:

- The **BOOST website** served as the main online hub and repository of project materials, updates, and publications.
- **Social media channels** (particularly LinkedIn) extended the project's presence, leveraging partner networks and thematic hashtags such as #EU4HBOOST and #harmreduction.
- **Thematic papers** and news provided opportunities for deeper engagement and storytelling.
- **Conferences, press releases, and webinars** linked BOOST's communication with policy dialogue and scientific exchange.

This combination created a coherent and recognisable project identity — supported by a unified branding package that included the BOOST logo, templates, and consistent visual language across outputs.

While the communication strategy succeeded in making BOOST visible in key European networks, the implementation also revealed challenges: maintaining consistent partner engagement, tracking measurable outcomes, and ensuring accessibility across languages and formats. These experiences offer valuable insights for future projects aiming to blend communication, advocacy, and community participation.

## Four key insight learnings

### 1. A multi-channel approach increased visibility — but required continuous adaptation

The diversity of BOOST's audiences — from policymakers and harm reduction professionals to grassroots organisations and communities — demanded a flexible, multi-platform approach. The project's communication ecosystem linked website updates, newsletters, and social media content with partner websites and mailing lists.

Initially, each partner organisation promoted BOOST content through its own social media accounts. This decentralised model allowed messages to reach diverse audiences but quickly revealed limitations: uneven visibility, varying tone of voice, and additional workload for partners with limited communication capacity.



Example Post from BOOST LinkedIn Account

In response, the consortium created a [dedicated BOOST LinkedIn account](#), serving as the central hub for project updates and engagement. This shift not only lightened the burden on partners but also enabled the project to **develop a more unified, recognisable voice**. Partners could still amplify content by sharing or tagging posts, while the central team ensured consistency, timely posting, and targeted outreach to policymakers, practitioners, and networks.

This evolution demonstrated the value of flexibility in communication planning — adapting tools and structures mid-project to balance reach, efficiency, and coherence.

## 2. Storytelling and visual identity helped humanise harm reduction

BOOST's branding approach — including a unified logo, templates, and a clear visual style — helped build recognition and cohesion across outputs. The project placed deliberate emphasis on creating a **modern and fresh design language** — one that was not only professional but also **aspiring, inclusive, and visually engaging**. This contemporary look and feel made BOOST's materials stand out in a crowded communication environment and **increased the likelihood of audience engagement and easy navigation** across platforms.

What made the project’s communication resonate most, however, was the **storytelling**: [interviews](#), [videos](#) and [news items](#) that connected policy goals with personal and community experiences. This included direct quotes from interviewees, as well as accompanying [illustrations](#) to convey key messages. By highlighting people-centred approaches, BOOST made technical issues — such as HIV and hepatitis testing integration — accessible and relatable.



Example of Comic Strip to Promote Hepatitis C Awareness

Beyond this, it is worth highlighting the power of words. For that reason, the consortium developed [a living document on language](#), which includes preferred terminology and contextual guidance on what to say and what not to say — ensuring that communication across the project reflects the diversity of communities in a dignified and respectful way.

This demonstrated that effective communication for harm reduction is not only about information transfer, but about **storytelling with empathy and clarity**, supported by design that inspires attention and trust. Investing in consistent

visuals, a fresh aesthetic, and authentic voices strengthened the project's credibility and connection with its audiences.

### 3. Partner engagement is essential for authentic and broad communication

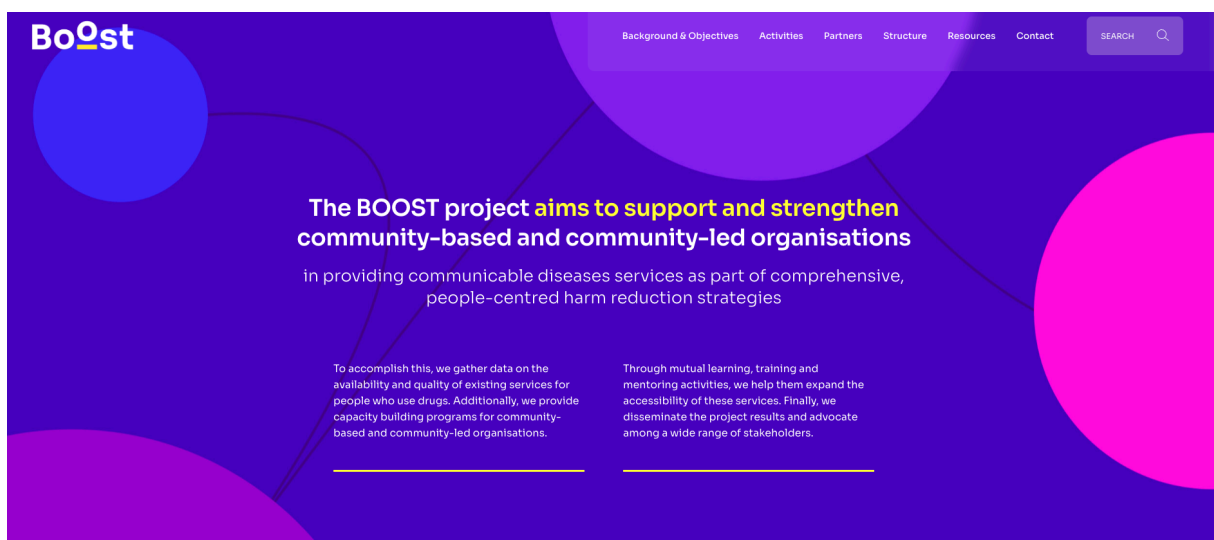
BOOST's communication success depended on active collaboration among partners. Each organisation contributed not just to content dissemination but to shaping narratives that reflected local realities and community perspectives. This diversity of voices ensured authenticity and grounded the project's messages in lived experience.

At the same time, coordinating communication across multiple networks and regions required clear planning, shared timelines, and transparent feedback loops. Regular coordination meetings and shared content calendars helped maintain alignment and prevent duplication.

The experience highlighted that **partner engagement in communication must go beyond amplification**. When partners contribute stories, images, and context from their own settings, the project's communication becomes more inclusive, dynamic, and relevant to its audiences — strengthening both ownership and impact.

### 4. Monitoring and adaptation are key to sustaining communication impact

BOOST's communication team continuously adapted content to align with project milestones and audience needs. However, systematic monitoring of reach and engagement — for instance, through analytics or social media insights — was limited. This made it difficult to fully assess which channels or formats had the most impact.



Home page of the BOOST Website

One lesson learned from the BOOST experience is that monitoring tools, such as tracking website traffic, post engagement and partner amplification, need to be embedded early. This can provide valuable evidence of impact and guide future adjustments.

Another learning relates to language and accessibility. While English served as the main project language, BOOST recognised the importance of translation for reaching non-English-speaking audiences. Expanding this approach in future projects could enhance inclusivity and ensure that materials reach communities on the ground.

## Summary

Effective communication in harm reduction requires clarity, collaboration, and creativity. Within BOOST, communication and dissemination played a pivotal role in connecting partners, amplifying advocacy, and ensuring that project outcomes reached a wide range of stakeholders — from policymakers to community organisations.

The project's experience highlights that impactful communication combines **strategic coordination, appealing and accessible design**, and **authentic, community-driven storytelling**. It also underscores the importance of continuous adaptation — refining channels, messages, and methods based on feedback and available capacity.

Key lessons from BOOST's communication efforts include the value of:

- Treating communication as a **strategic and integral project function**, not a separate output;
- Building a **cohesive yet flexible brand identity** that is modern, inclusive, and recognisable;
- Actively involving partners in **content creation and storytelling**, not only dissemination;
- Embedding **monitoring tools and feedback loops** to assess reach and engagement;
- Combining diverse channels to reach different audiences while maintaining message coherence.

- Respecting terminology and language when referring to the diverse communities of people who use drugs

In doing so, BOOST demonstrated that communication can be more than a reporting requirement — it can be a driving force for connection, learning, and long-term visibility in harm reduction.