Messaging Matters Panel: Leslie Krohn (Argonne National Laboratory), Karen King (FRIB, Michigan State University), Branden Brough (Molecular Foundry)

Leslie Krohn, Argonne National Laboratory

Krohn started developing her strategy by conducting a landscape analysis. While Argonne had an overall positive sentiment in media and social media (82%), they didn't inspire the passion other labs did. Looking at their products, she determined that they focused too much on the science rather than the impact or relevance.

In response, Krohn designed a messaging framework. To ensure a diverse set of perspectives, she interviewed 40-50 staff members about Argonne's strengths. She found some common themes: local, national, and international impact; convener role; big and complex scale; discoveries; partnerships; Chicago location; and history.

She then developed a brand architecture and message maps. The architecture included a brand promise (unique core), pillars (major themes), and proof points. Argonne's brand promise is accelerating science and technology that drive U.S. prosperity and security. Its three pillars are pivotal discovery, pioneering leadership and science at scale. Its impact is unlocking new science and technological frontiers that secure America's energy future and deliver economic growth.

Krohn provided some examples of press releases before and after the messaging effort. "Nanodiamonds are forever" became "Argonne's Pivotal Nanodiamond Discovery Revolutionizes Industrial Lubricants." She said that they emphasize the same words in their text over and over again, like 'collaborating', 'partnering', and 'discovery'.

Karen King, FRIB

King explained that although FRIB will not be completed until 2021, MSU has been building it for the past 10 years. A large user community is already in place and ready for science at FRIB. In addition, they have huge local and regional support. Public open houses in 2016 and 2018 attracted more than 4,000 visitors despite torrential rain and long lines.

Looking back at the Open Houses, they found that volunteers were enthusiastic and knowledgeable about their project areas, but not as effectively and consistently communicating the message about "why DOE's Office of Science?" or the importance of federal funding. They're currently working to better communicate those messages.

Branden Brough, Molecular Foundry

The Molecular Foundry focuses on imagining and understanding the properties of extremely small materials. Brough said when he joined the facility, they didn't have a communications plan. Scientists focused on the "how" of tactics rather than considering the audience or messages.

When he came in, he analyzed their audiences: Congress, DOE, the public, and prospective users. With Congress, they emphasize messages about how user facilities democratize science and fuel competitiveness through white papers and fact sheets. To DOE, they emphasize their impact through science highlights (summaries of academic papers). For the public, they talk about applications and the role of government-funded research through tours and face-to-face conversations. For prospective users, they discuss their world-class expertise and equipment by collaborating with academic publishers and inviting speakers for seminars.

Questions and Answers

When asked about using words like “groundbreaking,” Krohn said that they figure out what is really defensible or not. Brough said that getting the scientists to be specific is very helpful. In terms of creating messaging across a diverse institution, Krohn said that much of it came from finding common themes across what people said. People tended to be negative about branding, so she talked about messaging and asked people to focus on strengths. To build trust, panelists emphasized needing to tailor the message to the audience and emphasize impact. While it’s good to acknowledge partners, you also want to avoid institutional “pile up” in the text.