



Communicating with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Audiences

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Introduction

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander audiences comprise a wide range of people with different communication needs, information preferences, and expectations of government. These different needs are influenced by factors including location, levels of literacy, age, cultural considerations, and access to technologies.

When communicating with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples it is particularly important to consider their locality and whether they are accessing Government services and information from an urban, regional or remote setting.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples living in urban centres have access to mainstream services and information, whereas those living in regional or remote locations may have targeted services, programmes and dedicated government staff to deliver information to the community. Those living in remote communities may also have lower English proficiency with English being the second, third or fourth language spoken within the community.

When considering communication with regional and remote communities it is important to remember that every community has their own local protocols and this should dictate the communications approach you take.

All communications with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples should be respectful and culturally sensitive. There is no formula or set rule for interacting with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. When communicating with Indigenous audiences, government agencies should be aware that there may be barriers to effective communication and engagement because of past negative experiences with governments, cultural and traditional differences between and within groups, and a higher degree of transiency, particularly in regional and remote locations.

General considerations when communicating with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander audiences include:

- Use clear language – ensure jargon, acronyms or technical terms are minimised and fully explained.
- Be aware that words might have different meanings in different communities
- Use multiple channels to convey your message, which can include face-to-face, letters, television, brochures, posters, talking posters, print media, community radio, videos, websites and social media.
- Use Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voices to demonstrate relevant stories of success and encourage locals to share their stories through your communication channels.
- Use a mix of mainstream and Indigenous media channels for general information and Indigenous specific information.
- Use culturally specific elements for Indigenous-specific communications, such as language, talent, design and music elements.
- Be aware that there may be gender specific elements that need to be considered for cultural reasons.
- Consider that some Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities face lower literacy and numeracy skills.
- Be active providers of information as some Indigenous communities wait to receive government information rather than to seek it out.¹

¹ Qualitative research by Department of Finance 2014, p.67
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Considerations when communicating with Aboriginal and Torres Strait islander peoples in remote communities include:

- Use audio or verbal communication wherever possible
- Where possible use local stories and local voices to deliver information.
- If possible communicate in the first spoken language of the community, this may require a translator to be present during face-to-face conversations or for communication products to be translated into 'in-language' products for the community
- Keep in mind most indigenous languages are verbal languages and cannot be translated into written form
- Use Australian Government staff located in the region to gain local knowledge about the community, communication preferences, local communication channels and key influencers in the community
- If you are communicating with people in a number of remote communities, it will be important to tailor your communication to meet the needs of each community.

For more detailed advice on communication channel preferences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander audiences, see [Indigenous Audience Research](#) by the Department of Finance.

For more information about specific Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities contact your local [Regional Office](#) or local stakeholders as they will have more knowledge of local protocols.

Communicating face to face

When communicating face to face it is important to remember that the level of English understood varies from community to community and from individual to individual and therefore you may need to adjust your speaking style to enable full understanding. It's also important to note that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are an oral culture and there are many different Indigenous languages are still spoken in some communities and English may not be a person's first language. Before visiting a community, take the time to research local community protocols. If you're visiting remote communities and English is not the first language of the person you are speaking with:

- Engage an interpreter to assist with facilitating meetings, workshops or training sessions.
- Consider the choice of vocabulary, rate of delivery, clarity and logical ordering of ideas.
- Sensitively offer assistance with reading and writing if it is required – do not cause embarrassment or shame to the person by asking them whether or not they can read or write.
- Do not speak loudly or in a patronising manner

Cultural considerations

- Respect protocols and sensitivities around [Men's and Women's Business](#). Certain customs and practices are performed by men and women separately and sometimes privately but this will vary from community to community.
- Acknowledge that in certain cultures there is an established order in which people can speak or make a contribution; it is extremely important to remember this in facilitated workshops and consultation sessions where everyone's input is expected.
- Be aware that swear words may be a part of accepted conversation.
- Be careful with the use of humour, as it may be misunderstood.

- Pay attention to how you dress, particularly in the company of members of the opposite sex—dressing inappropriately can be interpreted as a sign of disrespect.
- Use formal addresses when interacting with older people and Elders—or ask them how they wish to be acknowledged.
- Always wait your turn to speak.
- It is important to be a good listener and not to talk over anyone.
- Avoid direct criticisms of specific individuals.
- Be honest and keep your word—distrust and cynicism towards non-Indigenous people and service providers is common. Make commitments only on matters where you know you can deliver and always follow through on agreements or decisions.
- Be clear about the purpose of your communication and or engagement—if the decision has been made and you’re just there to communicate it, then don’t call it ‘consultation’.
- If you do consult, make sure that the community’s views are reflected and that you provide feedback to the community about how their input has been used.
- Time should be considered in organising meetings and visitors should have a cultural consideration for meeting times.

Use of silence

- Silence is a common communication style in many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.
- Silence does not mean Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people do not understand a topic or issue.
- Meanings of silence vary depending on the community—it can be used as a show of respect, contemplation, disagreement, a time to reflect and consider what has been said or waiting for community support.
- Allow time for people to think about ideas and have informal discussions.

Body language

- The way Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples read body language and protocols varies across communities.
- Always observe others when communicating and rely on local knowledge—particularly regarding eye contact, general body contact such as shaking hands and personal space.
- Be aware that there are distinct boundaries between males and females and practice appropriate behaviour at all times.

Communicating in print

English may not be the first language of many of the individuals in your target audience, particularly if you are communicating with those living in a remote community. Print may be a useful way to provide information to key stakeholders and influencers and those with a medium to high level of English proficiency. If you choose to communicate in print, consider the following:

- Use ‘everyday’ English in the text. (Noting that some in your audience may have difficulty understanding this level of written English as their vocabulary and use of grammar may be limited.)
- Don’t use big words when a small one will do.
 - Recommended Flesch reading ease level: 70 or greater
- Avoid acronyms; spell out the full names of policies and programmes.
- Write in the active voice
 - Recommended passive voice level: less than 30%
- Use short sentences and keep information as brief as possible

- Recommended Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level: 10 or less
- Avoid text-heavy documents. Utilise blank space and where relevant include:
 - Images of local people and places
 - Indigenous-specific graphic elements
- Use diagrams or images to explain complex policy or programme concepts.

Indigenous languages are oral languages, so while the use of interpreters to deliver audio and video content for remote Indigenous audiences is important, there is little point in translating other lengthy written materials into an Indigenous language.

Communicating online

Use of the internet for seeking out important information by Indigenous audiences varies depending on age, technical skill and location. Research has shown that those who are younger and middle-aged, living in regional and metro areas and are educated regard it as an important source of government information.²

In remote communities the preference for online communication can vary depending on Internet access. Online connections may be slow and data allowances may be limited in some remote communities. Large file size documents and images should be avoided where possible to minimise download times.

Websites with an Indigenous target audience, like all government websites, are required to be fully compliant with [accessibility standards](#).

All of the instructions under '[Communicating in print](#)' also apply to communicating through websites and via social media; however there are additional elements to consider when arranging content for social media.

Social media

Research has shown that social media is more likely to be used by young and middle aged Indigenous people living in metropolitan and regional locations.³

Social media is an important mechanism for engaging and creating partnerships with other stakeholders whose messages and goals are closely aligned with your priorities.

Encouraging user generated content and the sharing of stories across social media can be a successful strategy for engaging aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander audiences.

Social media language should be conversational. It's appropriate to use terms such as deadly, mob and so forth but don't overdo it. Use hashtags to identify locations and group names that people might search for.

Facebook is a preferred method for receiving information in remote and regional communities. The use of visuals and images from events are generally well received.⁴

Twitter is good for engaging with key Indigenous affairs stakeholders by sharing important announcements, good news stories and providing live updates during key events.

² Qualitative research by Department of Finance 2014, p.54

³ Qualitative research by Department of Finance 2014, p.57

⁴ Quantitative research by Department of Finance 2014, p.24

YouTube is ideal for generating positive discussion and the sharing of good news and real life stories. Videos are generally well received by Indigenous target audiences.

Communicating by television and or video

Of all the mass media channels, and where strong signal strength is available, television is the preferred medium for receiving government information ⁵ because:

- It allows a story to be told.
- It engages multiple senses such as oral and visual, making it a good proxy for face-to-face communication (followed by radio and then print).
- The relevance and subject matter is easily identified.
- Government advertisements on television are often passed on by word of mouth within the community.

In the case of remote and very remote areas, local Indigenous radio may be regarded as more important.

Communicating through radio

When communicating with audiences using radio, there are several considerations:

- Government advertisements on radio are often passed on by word of mouth within the community.
- Most people listen before 9.00am and after 5.00pm.
- There is a clear preference for stations which have local Indigenous content (Indigenous community radio).
- The most popular programmes are news, current affairs via talk-back, and music.
- Messages are more successful when content is targeted for the local community context including translating them into the local language where possible and using local voices to deliver messages.

Communicating through images

The use of images is very important in conveying messages to an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander audience. When including images in your publication, on your webpage or social media channel, be sure that:

- Permission was gained before the photo was taken especially of children or of any sacred sites.
- A photo consent form has been signed by each of those appearing in the image and can be produced if required.
- Permission has been gained from the appropriate authority for any image displaying culturally sensitive content.

Where possible ensure that images are culturally relevant and representative of the community or communities you are communicating with.

If you are aware a person is deceased it is preferable to avoid use of the image. Where it is necessary to use an image of a deceased person appropriate permission should be sought from the family and local community.

⁵ Qualitative research by Department of Finance 2014, p. 38
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Acknowledging that in some Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures there are sensitivities about referring to deceased people, it is recommended that publications, websites etc carry the following disclaimer in a prominent position:

“Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are advised that this publication (website/film etc) may contain the names and images (and voices if there’s audio) of deceased people.”

Some definitions and accepted terminology

An awareness of cultural difference and use of accurate language are essential components of showing respect and communicating with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, organisations and communities. The following are just some of the terms used widely when communicating with or about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Being aware of, and understanding these terms will help in communicating with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

Aboriginal people(s)

‘Aboriginal’ is an adjective and widely used to describe ‘Aboriginal people’. ‘Aboriginal peoples’ is a collective name for the original people of Australia and their descendants and is preferable. This term emphasises the diversity of languages, communities, cultural practices and spiritual beliefs.

Torres Strait Islander people(s)

The term ‘Aboriginal’ is not inclusive of Torres Strait Islander people, and reference to both ‘Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people’ should therefore be made where necessary. A Torres Strait Islander person is a descendant from the Torres Strait Islands, which are located to the north of mainland Australia in Queensland.

First People(s)/First Australians

‘First Peoples’ and ‘First Australians’ are collective names for the original people of Australia and their descendants, and are used to emphasise that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples lived on this continent prior to European settlement.

Indigenous people(s)

The term ‘Indigenous’ is generally used when referring to both First Peoples of Australia—Aboriginal peoples and Torres Strait Islander peoples. ‘Indigenous’ is commonly used as short hand to include both. However, because ‘Indigenous’ is not specific, some Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples prefer the phrase to be used in full so that it refers to all of the Indigenous people of Australia.

Elder

An Elder is an identified and respected member of an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community. Elders generally hold key community knowledge and are expected to provide advice and support to community members. Age alone does not necessarily distinguish an Elder. Many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples acknowledge Elders as ‘aunty’ or ‘uncle’ as a sign of respect, even if they are not related.

Traditional owner

A ‘traditional owner’ is an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander person or people directly descended from the original inhabitants of a culturally defined area of country. They have a cultural association with their country deriving from the traditions, observances, customs, beliefs or history of the original Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander inhabitants of the area.

Mob

'Mob' is a term identifying a group of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander people associated with a particular place or country. 'Mob' is more generally used by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Therefore, it may not be appropriate for non-Aboriginal people to use this term unless this is known to be acceptable to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

Country

'Country' is a term used to describe a culturally defined area of land associated with a particular culturally distinct group of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

Nation

'Nation' refers to a culturally distinct group of people associated with a particular culturally defined area of land or country. Each nation has boundaries that cannot be changed, and language is tied to that nation and its country. 'Nation' should be used to refer to a culturally distinct Aboriginal group and its associated country, noting that the boundaries of some nations cross over state borders.

Men's and Women's Business

In Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture there are customs and practices that are performed by men and women separately. This gender-specific practice is often referred to as Men's and Women's Business. These practices have very strict rules. Men's and Women's Business includes matters relating to health, wellbeing, religious ceremony and maintenance of significant geographic sites and differs from community to community. Topics discussed during Men and Women's Business can differ between communities.


Sorry Business


'Sorry Business' is the period of mourning or ceremony following the death of an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander person. This is usually a solemn time with little spoken conversation and usual daily community activities may be stopped or postponed. In some communities the name of a deceased person, and even others who share the same name, is not to be spoken for a certain period of time—ask for guidance on this matter.

Recommended usage of terminology and issues for consideration

- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples often use different terms to refer to themselves depending on where they are from. It is not appropriate to assume that you can use these terms without their consent.
- It is always best to ask Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples how they would like you to refer to them.
- Do not use the words *Aboriginals*, *Aborigine* or *Aborigines* as people may associate this terminology to periods of colonisation and assimilation – instead, use *Aboriginal* or *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander*.
- Always use a capital for *Aboriginal*, *Torres Strait Islander*, *Indigenous* and *Elder*. Do not use 'Aboriginal' as a noun; it should only be used as an adjective (ie. The Government's new strategy will support increased business for Aboriginal peoples).
- Acronyms such as *ATSI*, *TI*, *TSI* or abbreviations such as 'Abos' should never be used, as they are offensive to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.
- Outdated terms such as *full-blood*, *half-caste* and *quarter-caste* are extremely offensive and should never be used when referring to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

Further reading

[Media consumption and communication preferences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander audiences – Quantitative research report](#) [ 1.56 MB]

[Media consumption and communication preferences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander audiences – Qualitative research report](#) [ 1.16 MB]