



Network for
Business Sustainability



Guide to Translating Research

October 2020

You're doing research that matters. Hooray! How do you get it to people who can use it? This guide helps you do that, in 3 steps.

Through this guide, you will:

- 1 Identify what you want to share, to whom (the message and audience)
- 2 Identify ways to share (outlets and resources)
- 3 Fine tune the material (the pitch and full content)

1. IDENTIFY WHAT YOU'LL SHARE

Your findings are becoming clear¹. Who needs to know about them?

Let's identify:

- *your key message(s) or takehome(s) and*
- *the audience(s) for them.*



a. Who's your audience?

What groups or individuals would you like to see apply your research? Common audiences might include (i) the general public, (ii) specific business people, and/or (iii) policy actors such as government/NGOs.

Likely your research applies to multiple audiences including a primary audience. List them in the box.

Box 1: Your audiences

<p><i>Primary audience</i></p> <p><i>Secondary audience</i></p> <p><i>Secondary audience</i></p>
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¹ A note on timeline: Often research translation occurs after publication in a journal. But journals move slowly, and, sharing your findings along the way can lead to valuable input. You can share work in progress, if you identify it as such. At the very least, reach out to media outlets (weeks) before your work is published, so they have time to prepare.

b. What's your message?

What do you want to tell each audience? If you were in the proverbial elevator with a member of this group, what would you want to say or discuss?

At this point, keep your message short. Think in terms of a headline (10 words) and a paragraph (or a thesis sentence with bullets). Put yourself in your audience's shoes and think about any decisions they might have to make and how your work could inform their decisions. Get out of your head and into theirs.

In the box, fill in that content for each of your audiences.

We'll talk more about style later, but do a quick check to see if your content is user-friendly. Is it easy to read: jargon-free, with short sentences, simple language and active voice? Is there a call to action or other clear application to practice? At NBS, we often present that application in headlines as "How to Do X" or "Why to Do X."

Box 2: Messages for audiences

Primary audience

Headline:

Paragraph:

Secondary audience

Headline:

Paragraph:

Secondary audience

Headline:

Paragraph:

2. IDENTIFY WAYS TO SHARE YOUR RESEARCH

In the movie “Field of Dreams,” characters build a beautiful baseball field in the middle of nowhere, which rapidly attracts an audience. “If you build it, they will come,” the movie opines.

That's not true for research translation. You'll need to find outlets that will share your insights. Here we also talk about resources to support you in this process.

a. Identify outlets that will reach your desired audiences

You're likely not a media analyst, and that's OK.



Below we've provided a starter list of possible outlets below for different audiences. You can modify the list based on your knowledge. Consider both publications and presentations (conferences, workshops).

Once you've reviewed the list, add priority outlets to Box 3.

General public:

- *The Conversation* is a great resource for academics globally interested in reaching the public. Media outlets regularly pick up their pieces. See <https://theconversation.com/global/who-we-are>; <https://theconversation.com/become-an-author>.
- *Local media* may publish an opinion piece or article based on your work (see tips here: <https://www.theopedproject.org/oped-basics>).

Business audience:

- *Industry associations* have publications and events
- *Other practitioner-oriented newsletters and journals* abound, such as Harvard Business Review (advice [here](#)), California Management Review and Stanford Social Innovation Review.
- *Business sustainability outlets* often value academic voices. Certainly consider NBS (<https://www.nbs.net/contribute-an-article>). Other platforms include [GreenBiz](#), [Sustainable Brands](#), and many more.

Policymakers and NGOs:

- This isn't our focus at NBS, but an academic who does a lot of work with policymakers suggests volunteering on civic bodies. Local commissions often seek members, for example. Working directly with policymakers lets you understand their worldview, answer the questions they care about -- and maybe build trust to share your research

Some academics are also active on *social media and personal websites*; NBS doesn't have data on the effectiveness of such outreach.

Box 3: Outlets for audiences

Primary audience

Outlets

Secondary audience

Outlets

Secondary audience

Outlets

b. Assess your resources

Translation and outreach are likely not part of your job description or perhaps your skill set. Here are some others whom you may be able to enlist to help:

- *Your university's or business school's media relations staff.* These professionals can be invaluable: shaping content, brokering contacts, and advising on strategy. Connect with them early (more tips [here](#).)
- *Your research partners (outside academia).* If you've worked with businesspeople or other practitioners on the research, brainstorm with them on how to share the findings.
- *The publicity hound in the next office.* If there's someone in your professional sphere who has a channel to the outside world. Ask him or her for tips and contacts.
- *Students.* Who thinks a lot about how to present content online? The students who surround you. You can involve them in writing blog posts and helping you make videos as part of their formal student assistantship or as experience they would gain for applying to graduate schools.

3. FINE-TUNE THE MATERIAL

You are no longer speaking to a colleague. You're talking to someone from a different arena, with a different vocabulary and different priorities. You need to tailor your communication to them. Here we talk about how to do that in short form (a "pitch") vs. longer content.



a. Develop a pitch.

The pitch builds on the message you developed in 1b. It's the way you introduce your material to a potential outlet or advocate. If the pitch is accepted, move on to writing a larger piece.

Below is a pitch template from journalists Curt Nickisch at *Harvard Business Review* and Bryan Keogh at *The Conversation*. (More advice from them [here](#))

To: [specific individual]

Identify a specific contact (e.g. via the website) rather than sending to a general inbox.

Subject: Short & sweet (10 words)

Catch attention with the subject line. Highlight the topic and its application to your target audience. E.g. "Proposed article: How employee activism can advance social movements".

Body: 3 paragraphs, 2-3 sentences each. Use bullet points.

In the body, explain who you are and what you offer, continuing to emphasize relevance and application. Be concrete, clear and engaging. Here's how a pitch might read for a [recent NBS article](#). (Note – I wrote this; don't blame the authors!)

Dear X,

I'm writing to propose an article that I think your audience will find valuable.

As social movements around race and other issues gain force, many employees want to see their corporate leadership actively engaged.

New research shows how employees can drive corporate change in their own companies and beyond. We studied an employee activist alliance, which connects employees in multiple companies around a single issue. Reinforcing each other's efforts, employees can shift an entire business ecosystem.

The research studies this approach in Minnesota in the 1990s, around LGBTQ+ issues. The proposed article would describe (1) why cross-company alliances are effective, (2) how to build such an alliance, and (3) how this approach is relevant today.

The guidance should be useful to employees interested in social change and movement activists who seek corporate allies.

In the box below, experiment with a pitch. This can be for a specific outlet, or for your university media person.

Box 4: Your pitch

To: [specific individual]

Subject: Short & sweet (10 words)

Body: 3 paragraphs, 2-3 sentences each. Use bullet points.

b. Write your content

The organizer of an industry conference wants you to participate in a panel. An online platform wants you to write a blog. **Great!**

Most outlets can provide you with guidance specific to their style, and they will also likely be willing to iterate and revise with you.

Here's some relatively generic advice!

Keep it short: With a blog, NBS aims for 1200 words; 700-1500 is our range.

Make the title concrete: Emphasize a few keywords that represent your article. Imagine how someone Googling might find your title. NBS often has titles that read "How to xxx" or "Why to xxx." For example, "How Employees Can Be Sustainability Activists," "Why Business Should Imagine Utopia."

"Hook" the reader: In the first paragraph, you want to draw the reader in. For example:

- Build on something in the *news*: e.g., "COVID-19 shows the importance of business resilience."
- Raise (and answer) a *fundamental question*, e.g.: "Starting or running a business? A cooperative model might help you do it better."
- *Personalize* the info with a story (about the research or you): "I remember a time when Anita Roddick, founder of The Body Shop, was going to save the planet."

Be clear: No jargon! Use short sentences, simple vocabulary, active voice. Use subheadings to break up information and bullets or numbered lists to make your points clear. Software like [Grammarly](#) and [Hemingway](#) can tell you how you're doing.

Emphasize relevance: You don't need to be [simplistic](#); the concepts and categories you identify in your research are valuable. But relate them to the reality of people reading the article. You can do this by:

- *Addressing your audience directly* and showing that you understand their dilemma. [For example](#): "If you are a sustainability manager, you are a trailblazer. Companies created these positions as sustainability became a strategic issue over the last few decades. But many sustainability managers have been left to shape their roles on their own."
- *Offering practical takehomes and guidance*. It's easy to mock "listicles," but people readily grasp specific points. The [same article](#) identifies three challenges and how to overcome them.
- *Enabling peer learning*. We learn from others: people value examples and models. Show how other companies have followed your recommendations – or failed to. You can write a case study or throw in short anecdotes. (Some examples [here](#).)

Credit your methods: Your contribution is important in part because of its rigor. Show that off! Tell people where your evidence comes from. Again, keep it straightforward. Here's [an example](#): "Researchers Jennifer Goodman, Angelina Korsunova, and Minna Halme (Aalto University) studied 13 successful Sustainability-Oriented Innovation processes in large companies in nine European countries. They conducted 80 interviews with company innovation project managers and involved stakeholders."

Be creative: This is not academic writing! Have fun! You can write the facts in a pretty straightforward way. Depending on your outlet, you can also be playful – presenting research and reflections as a [personal journey](#), for example. And don't feel confined by the default of the blog format. Videos, graphics, Q&As... Lots of opportunities for experimentation.

Box 5: Your content — to be completed when your pitch is accepted!

Title

Hook

Methods

Things to consider:

Clarity

Relevance

Fun

THE SYSTEM IS BROKEN - BUT WE PREVAIL (OR PERSIST)

Research translation is not for the faint of heart. You face many challenges, including getting institutional support for your time; universities rarely provide explicitly rewards for outreach. However, connecting with practitioners is still important and you're not alone. The Impact Scholar Community and other entities and individuals will continue to rally you on.



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