



Linking Research to Practice

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Research is about both generation and dissemination of findings. In spite of this, dissemination of research findings has often been an afterthought in busy research agendas. When the funding of a research program is considered, insufficient time and money are set aside to link research to practice. And, if efforts have in truth been made to incorporate dissemination into the earliest stages of planning, experience reveals that matching the design of research to the characteristics of intended users is not easy. No matter what, research findings will simply not be used if the latter are ignored. And so, willy-nilly, research institutions have come to agree that they must find ways to relate research findings to practical applications in planning, policy making, program administration, and delivery of services. There is evidence that they are becoming better at this: some pay attention to the production of research findings in a wide range of formats in recognition of the variety of users. Notwithstanding, whilst important initiatives undoubtedly exist, research findings still do not inform practice to the extent that they should. For each research agenda, this calls for a dissemination policy, a dissemination plan, and a dissemination strategy. Dissemination tactics will then come into play.

Articulating a dissemination policy. A dissemination policy is the expression of a research institution's mission and values to its members of staff and to the public. It establishes a common vision and the values and measures that will be engaged to achieve accessibility to information content. A dissemination policy can be an effective and economical instrument that links research to practice: rarely do research institutions explain how efforts at dissemination will be tied to utilization.

Drawing a dissemination plan. The most successful dissemination processes are usually designed before the start of a research agenda. Dissemination should produce a response—utilization of the research findings—on the part of users. In drawing a dissemination plan, researchers should consider at least the following major elements:

- **Impact and outcomes:** What is the desired impact of dissemination?¹ What outcomes does the dissemination plan aim to accomplish? In what ways will users benefit?
- **Users:** Which users are most affected by the research? Which would be most interested in learning of the research findings? What are their scope and characteristics?
- **Information content:** Does the information content match the expressed informational needs of the users? Does the comprehension level required to understand the information content match the characteristics of the users? Is the information content reviewed through a quality control mechanism to ensure accuracy and relevance?
- **Medium:** What is the most effective dissemination method to reach each group of users? What resources does each group typically access? What capabilities does each group have?
- **Execution:** When should each aspect of the dissemination plan occur? Who should be responsible for dissemination activities?

¹ The desired impact of dissemination is, simply, utilization. The basic reason to acquire and then disseminate new research-based information is to ensure that it is appropriately considered for use in making decisions, driving changes, or taking action designed to improve outcomes. The critical element of utilization is that the research finding must be thoroughly digested: the users must assimilate it in their understanding and experience.

- **Obstacles:** What potential obstacles may interfere with access to or utilization of the research findings by each group of users? What actions could be developed to overcome these obstacles?
- **Accomplishment:** How will accomplishment be described and measured? If data is to be gathered, who will gather it?

Characteristics of an Effective Dissemination Plan

1.	The plan orientates itself to the needs of the users. It relies on appropriate form, language, and information content levels.
2.	The plan incorporates various dissemination methods such as written, graphical, electronic, and verbal media. The methods include research summary documents; press releases; media coverage; flyers, posters, and brochures; letters of thanks to study participants; newsletters to study participants; events and conferences; and seminars. Each method calls for its own format and means of dissemination and includes both proactive and reactive channels—that is, it includes information content that users have identified as important and information content that users may not know to request but are likely to need. The dissemination methods are more likely to succeed when their packaging and information content has been influenced by appropriate inputs from the users.
3.	The plan draws on existing resources, relationships, and networks to the maximum extent possible. It also builds the new resources, relationships, and networks needed by users.
4.	The plan includes effective quality control mechanisms to ensure that the information content is accurate, relevant, and representative.
5.	The plan establishes linkages to resources that may be required to implement the information content, e.g., technical assistance.

Dissemination processes based on mechanical, one-way flow of written information have not been successful in encouraging adoption and implementation of research findings.

Developing a dissemination strategy. A dissemination plan outlines basic elements that must be implemented. A dissemination strategy can be understood in terms of how a research institution will address particular issues to ensure that dissemination leads to utilization. The most successful dissemination strategies will be broad-based and formulated in such a way that the unexpected does not cause the dissemination plan to fail. The major issues related to a dissemination strategy include:

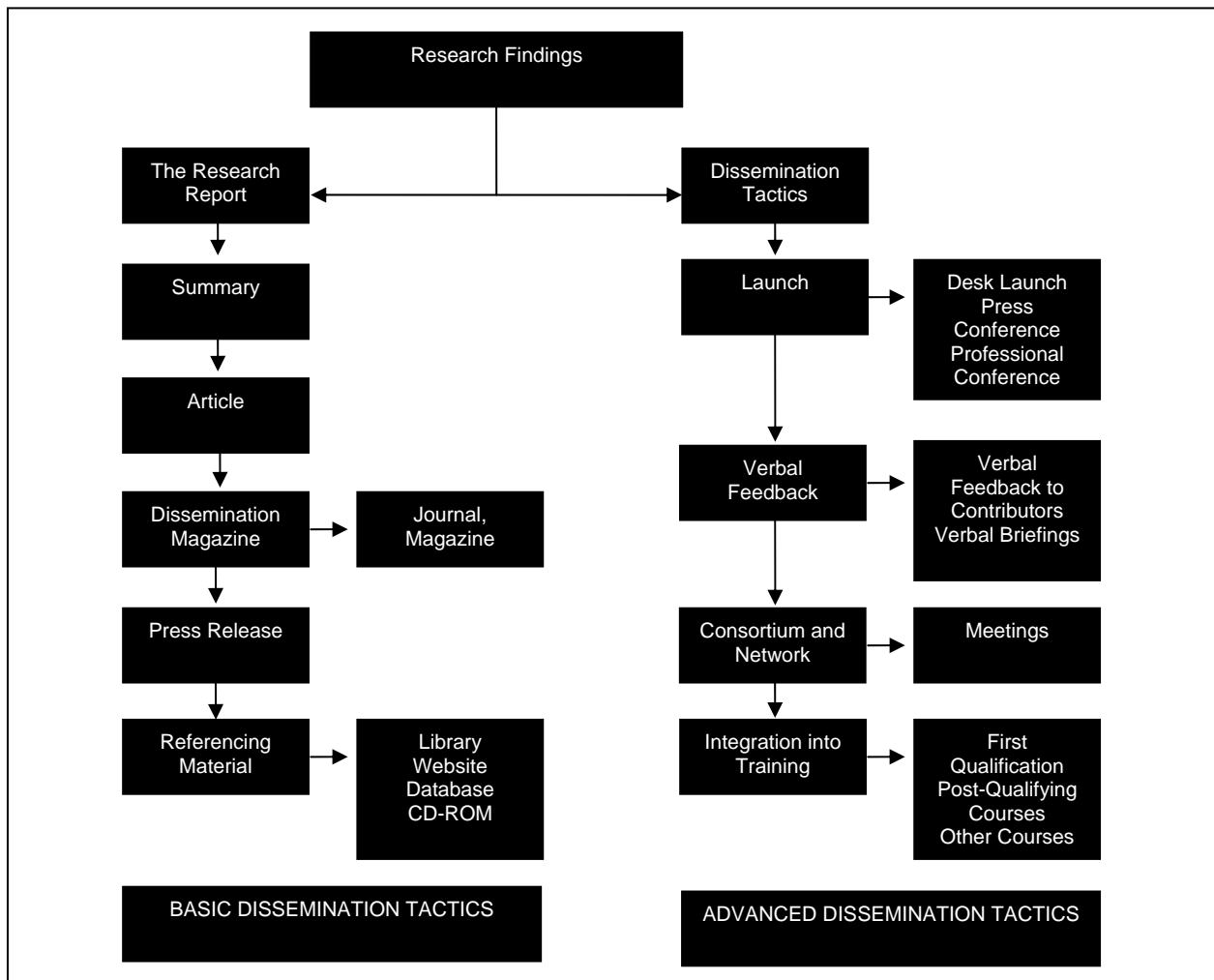
- **Users:** Is the readiness of the users to change limited? Are there needs for widely divergent formats and levels of information content? Is the number of trusted information sources limited?
- **Source:** Is the credibility of experience limited? Is the level of perceived competence low? Is the motive suspect?
- **Information content:** Is confidence in the quality of research and its methodology low? Is the credibility of outcomes limited? Is the utility and relevance of the information content unclear?

Are there cost implications to access to information content? Is the format of the information content non-user friendly?

- **Context:** Are there competing research findings? Does the general economic climate or circumstances favor adoption of research findings? Can the research findings find practical application in the field?
- **Medium:** Is the information content clear and attractive? Is the dissemination method flexible and reliable? Is the dissemination method cost-effective? Are the timeframes required to access the information content lengthy?

Applying dissemination tactics. Strategy is the overall effect one wishes to create; tactics are the method by which one wishes to achieve that effect. Dissemination tactics can be basic or advanced depending on the scale and complexity of the dissemination plan.

Possible Dissemination Tactics



Source: Adapted from Barnardo's. 2000. *What Works? Making Connections: Linking Research and Practice*.