



The #1 Tool for the #1 Mistake in Communications Planning

As you look down the road of communications planning, take heed: there’s a huge pothole ahead that can swallow your entire campaign. In more than two decades working with public interest organizations, I’ve seen far too many drive straight into this chasm before they even could apply the brakes. It’s called “the leap to tactics,” and see if you recognize the warning signs.



Your CEO says, “We need a video on TikTok!” Or a legislative director declares, “We need to hold a press conference!” Before anybody has asked questions such as, “What is our objective here?” or “Who can make this happen?” the discussion has already turned to tactics. And while this may feel proactive and invigorating, too often it leads to a waste of time and money.

Fortunately, there’s a free tool that can help public interest organizations avoid this pothole and put strategy considerations ahead of tactics where they rightfully belong. First developed by Spitfire Strategies in 2002, the [Smart Chart](#) has just been updated to version 4.0, and nearly twenty years after its debut, it remains the most effective tool for avoiding the most common mistake in communications planning. *(Please scroll down to read more.)*

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The #1 Tool for the #1 Mistake in Communications Planning (cont'd.)

The first iteration of the Smart Chart was created In 2002 when the David and Lucile Packard Foundation challenged Spitfire to write the definitive how-to guide for communications planning. After interviewing nearly 100 communications experts, Spitfire developed an online planning tool with enough built-in flexibility to work for both a wide range of issues as well as for organizations of all shapes and sizes. (Humble brag/full disclosure: when Spitfire’s President, Kristen Grimm, was shopping around for a name for this brand new tool, I suggested “Smart Chart.”)

As Spitfire collaborated with clients over the years and studied emerging social science, they continued to update the tool, unveiling versions 2.0 and 3.0. The Smart Chart was widely used by numerous social change campaigns both across the U.S. and around the globe, and it has been translated into multiple languages including Spanish, French, Urdu and Tagalog.

When the COVID-19 pandemic further exposed systemic inequities disproportionately impacting Black and Brown people, Spitfire overhauled the Smart Chart once again. Version 4.0, which was officially released in September, highlights equity and racial justice, evolves the thinking about framing, integrates even more brain science research, and features an improved online planning interface.

So the next time someone on your team says, “What we need right now is [insert tactic here]!” help them steer around that impending abyss and give the Smart Chart 4.0 a try. The time and money you save may be your own.

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free-range thinking is written by Andy Goodman and edited by Kirsten Farrell. To read back issues, download free publications, and to learn more about our work, please visit www.thegoodmancenter.com.

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