



Strategic communications in a nutshell

What it is, why it's important, how to build it at your department

Allie Hawley March, MPH (she/her)
Communications | MDH Community Health Division

2 November 2023
LPHA Fall Conference

About me: Anyone can ~~cook~~ communicate



Born, raised, always lived in St. Paul and its suburbs

Undergrad: English, gender studies; Gustavus Adolphus Coll.

MPH: Public health administration and policy; Univ. of Minn.

Where I've been: children's magazine, library acquisitions, project management, grant TA, amusement park

Minnesota Department of Health since 2011

During pandemic: SharePoint strategic planning, assistance

Today's agenda

- What is strategic communications, anyways?
- Audience first, audience last, audience forever
- Components of a strategic communications plan
- Equity and accessibility
- Working with your friendly neighborhood communicator
- Making the case for strategic communications
- Resources and questions

Reflection: Where are you now?
What are you proud of? Where are you stuck?



menti.com
7176 4850





What is strategic communications, anyways?

Strategic communications is...

**The right information to the right
people at the right time**

**Consistent, intentional,
purposeful**

**Focused on audience
needs and values**

Audiences must understand and care in order to act

What do you want them to do?

**What do they need to know,
to do that?**

What makes them care?

What strategic communications is / is not

Yes

- ✓ Driven by needs of **specific audience[s]** (the group[s] of people you're trying to reach)
- ✓ Focused on what an audience needs to **know**, why they might **care**, what you want them to **do**
- ✓ Leads with **framing** and **shared values**
- ✓ **Proactive** (sometimes reactive)

No

- ✗ Driven by need for a product, an organizational need, a grant requirement
- ✗ Brain dump of all relevant information for a project, program, or topic
- ✗ Leads with data, own goals of program/agency
- ✗ Mostly reactive

Why strategic communications is important

Build public
support

Fight dominant
narratives

Meet people
where
they're at

Cut through
the noise

Frame issues
ourselves

Connect with
communities



Audience first, audience last, audience forever

Why start with audiences?

Audiences must **understand** and **care** in order to **act**



Different audiences have different values and priorities



~~We're thinking~~
~~creatures supported~~
~~by feelings~~
We're feeling creatures who occasionally think



Some things we say or do might really challenge preconceived ideas or beliefs



Different audiences access different sources, use different words, trust different messengers



Case study: Know your audience

I don't want this.
There's red stuff on it.

It's paprika. It's for decoration.
I bet you can't even taste it.

No thank you.

It's red, your favorite color.

[immediately starts eating]



How it worked: Know your audience

- ❌ Led with facts important to me, not Caroline
- ❌ Used words Caroline didn't understand
- ❌ Highlighted values important to me, not Caroline
- ❌ Went against Caroline's previous experience
- ✅ Lena spoke to Caroline's values
- ✅ Lena is a trusted messenger



Components of a strategic communications plan for a program, project, or topic

Set
expectations,
conduct audit

Brainstorm
audiences,
big ideas

Process
updates?

Engage with
audiences,
partners

Set
objectives,
goals

Communications planning process

Evaluation

Campaign(s)

Create
products,
content

Sketch out
timeline,
major
products

Set expectations,
conduct audit

Communications planning process



Expectations

- Roles and responsibilities
 - Who is responsible, accountable, consulted, informed?
 - Collaboration is key
- What's in/out of scope?
- Meeting frequency, document storage, logistics



Audit

- For this project/program/topic, what do **we** or **others** do now, to whom, how, and how often?
- Who sees what? What do they think of it?
- Is this enough? Who or what is missing?

Set expectations,
conduct
audit



Brainstorm
audiences,
big ideas

Communications planning process

Brainstorming primary audiences

What groups of people do you want to reach for this program, project, or topic?

- What do you want them to do?
- What do they need to know to do that?
- Why would they care? What motivates them? What do they value?

Considerations

- Meet face-to-face
- Who do you struggle to reach?
- Can you group audiences to streamline work?
- Who do you need to prioritize (primary)?



“the general public”

“the community”

Example: Brainstorming primary audiences for a statewide health assessment

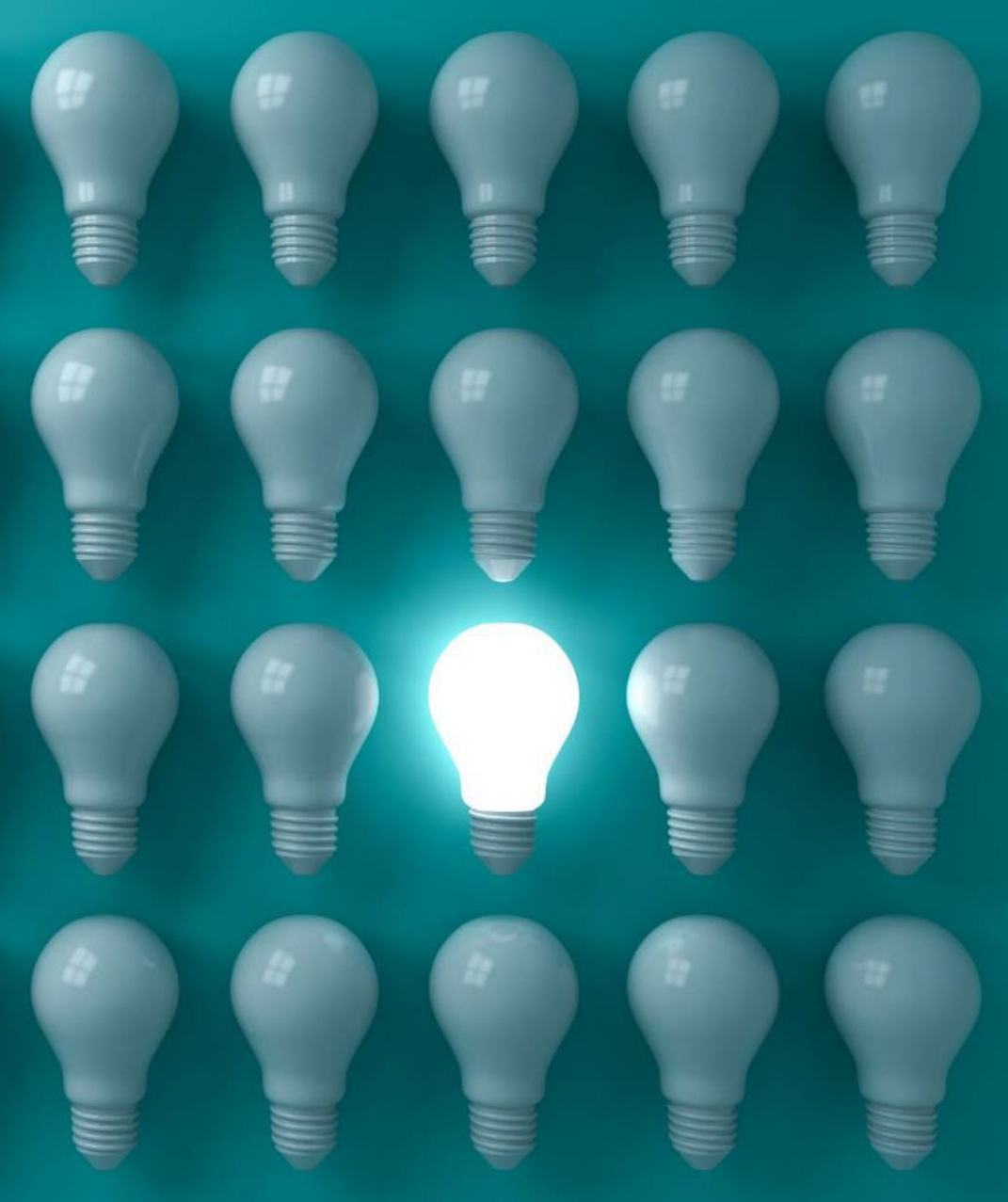
Audience	Want them to do	Need to know	Why they care
Partnership members	Help develop improvement framework (plan)	Systems and structures shape health in Minnesota	We're united; shows how partners are connected by similar issues Easy to find a lot of information at once
MDH leadership	Share in meetings and in public how systems and structures shape health	Different specific examples of systems and structures	They know the data shows this but can't cut through the noise They want to make a difference at the root cause/problem

Exercise: Audiences

Individual brainstorming (5-10 minutes)

1. Think of a specific program, project, or topic.
2. Who do you want to know about this?
List a few **groups of people**.
3. What do you want them to **do** about this?
4. What do they need to **know** to do that?
5. Why would they **want (care)** to do that?

Pair/share or return to group and share (5-10 minutes)



Brainstorming big ideas

- What's **most important** to communicate?
- What's **less important** but we don't want to fall off the table?
- What's **challenging** to communicate that we need to work on?
- Who needs to know which big ideas?

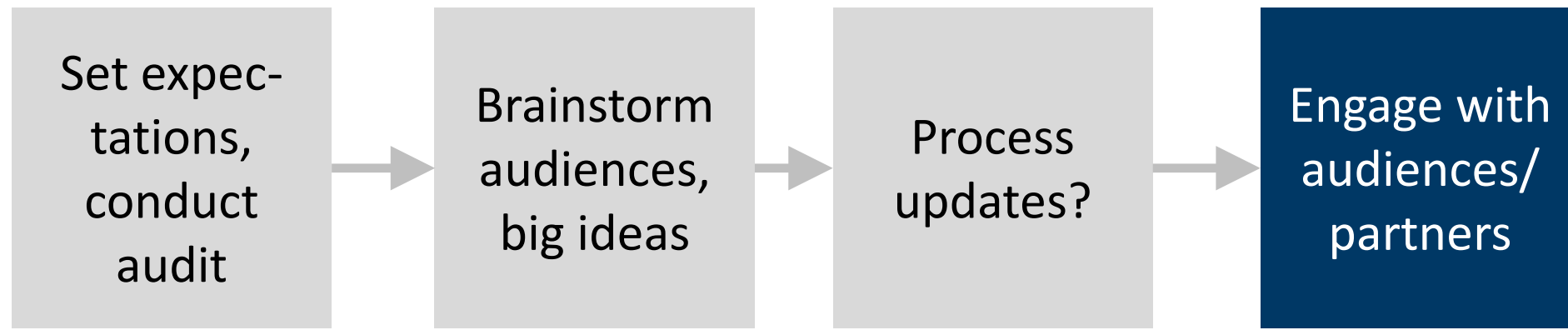


Communications planning process



Process updates

- Connect to audiences and needs
- Consider connecting to:
 - Events or holidays
 - Everyday activities
 - Relationships

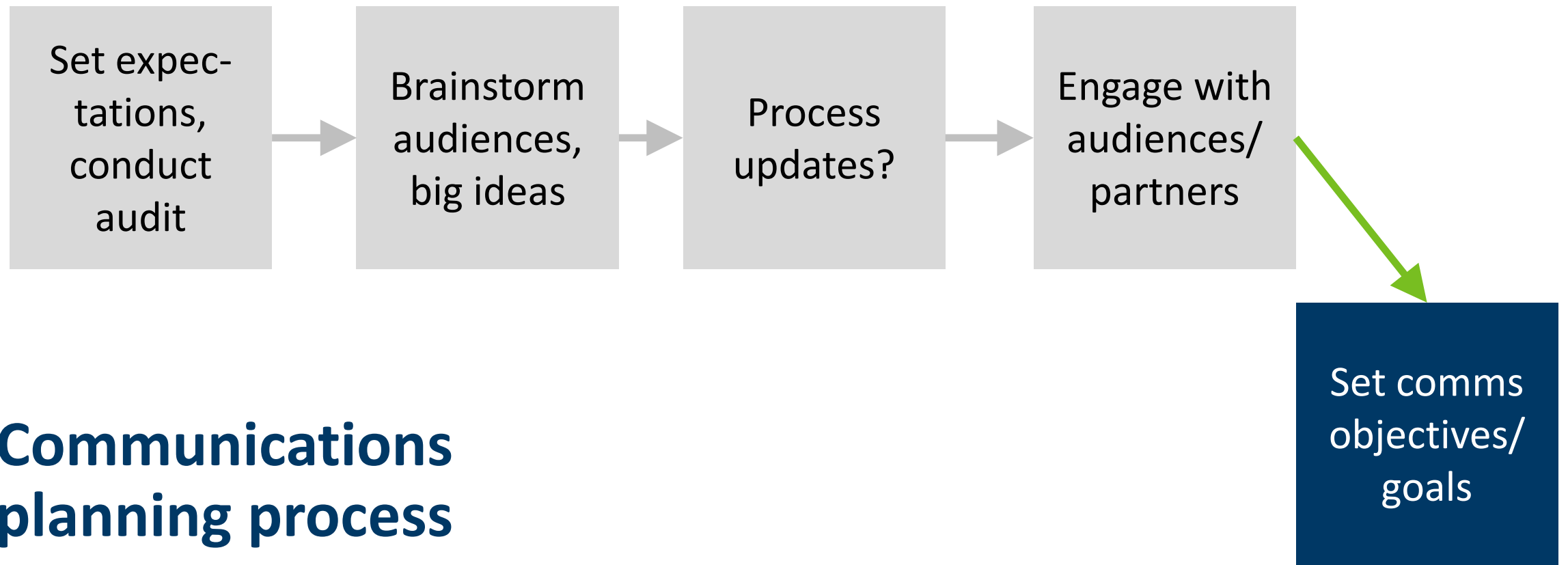


Communications planning process



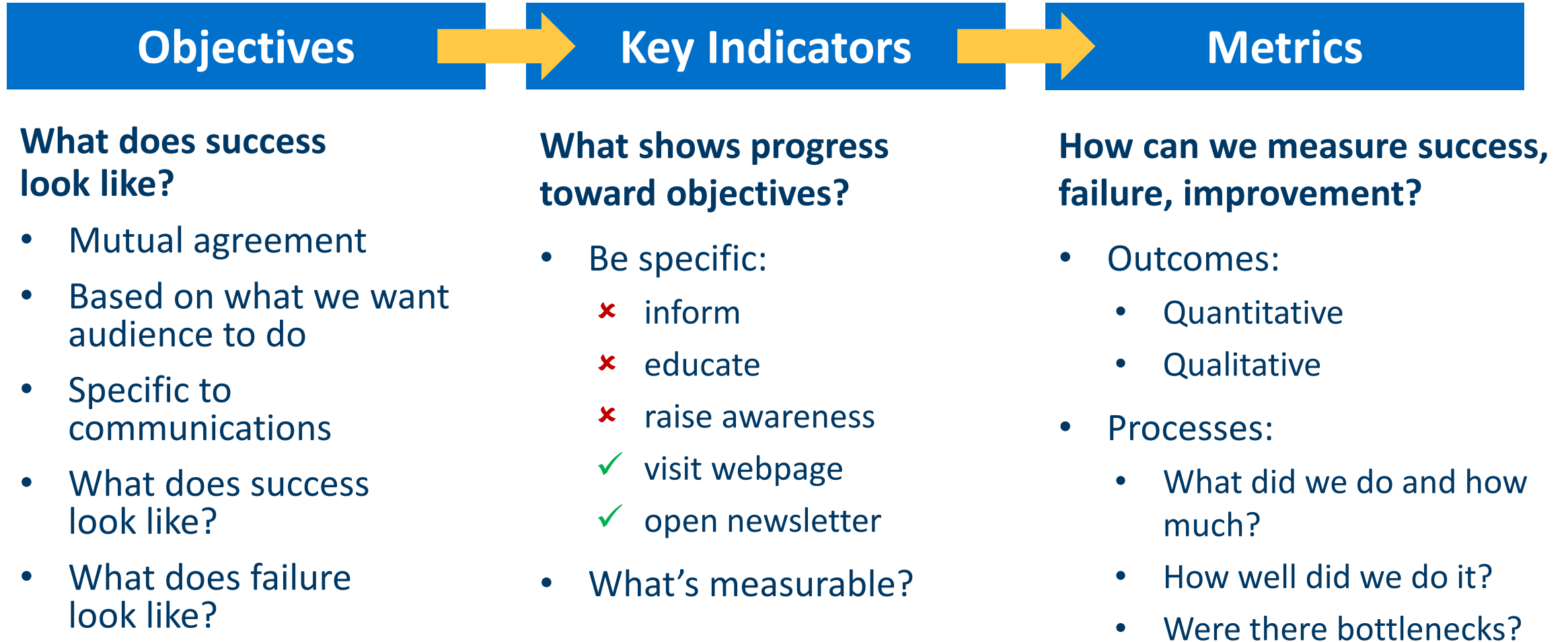
Engagement

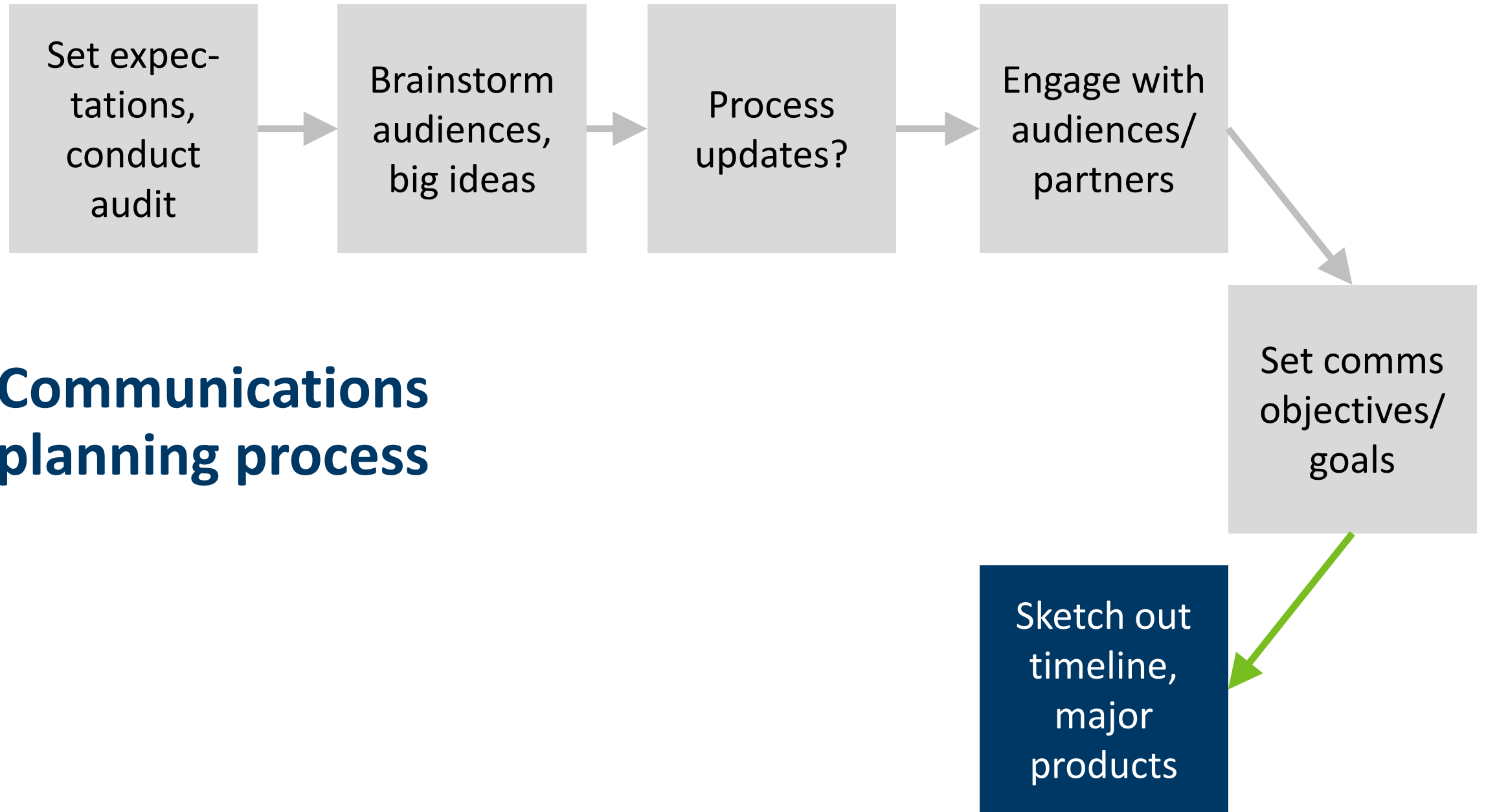
- Key informant interviews
- Ask partners and audiences:
 - What do they need?
 - How would they use it?
- Engagement tools like spectrum of public participation



Communications planning process

Goals and objectives for communications





Timeline and major products

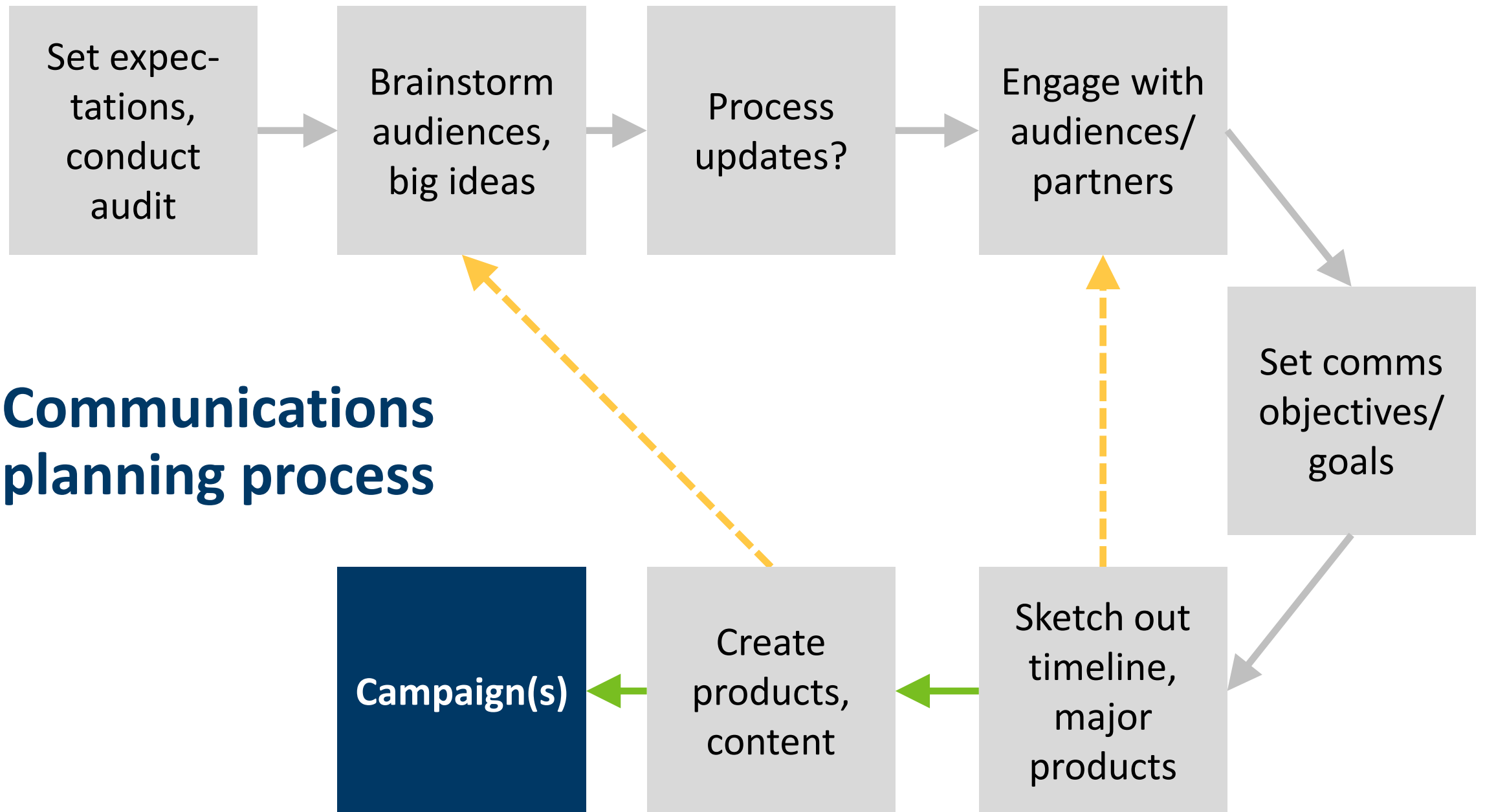
Where content lives

- Websites, dashboards
- Videos, photos, podcasts
- Fact sheets, reports
- Presentations

Considerations

- What do we have capacity for now? What can we sustain?
- Do we need to hire contractor(s)?
- Who does audience trust?
- How formal do we need to be?
- Do we need to align with event(s) or holiday(s)?

Communications planning process



Run the campaign: Getting the word out

Vehicles (use many)

- Email, newsletter
- Meetings, events
- Social media
- Partners, influencers

Considerations

- Tone, voice
- Language, translation
- Cross-cultural communication
- Digital accessibility
- Delivering same content multiple ways (strategically reusing)



“Know” hacks: Techniques for writing or creating



Bite, snack, meal

When different audiences need more or less info



Hope, agency, dignity

When we want to empower audiences



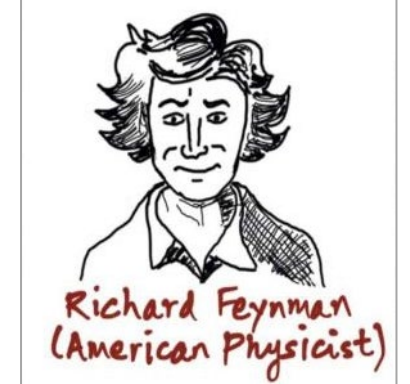
Inverted pyramid

When folks won't read the whole thing



Story-telling

When we want to walk in someone else's shoes



Feynman technique

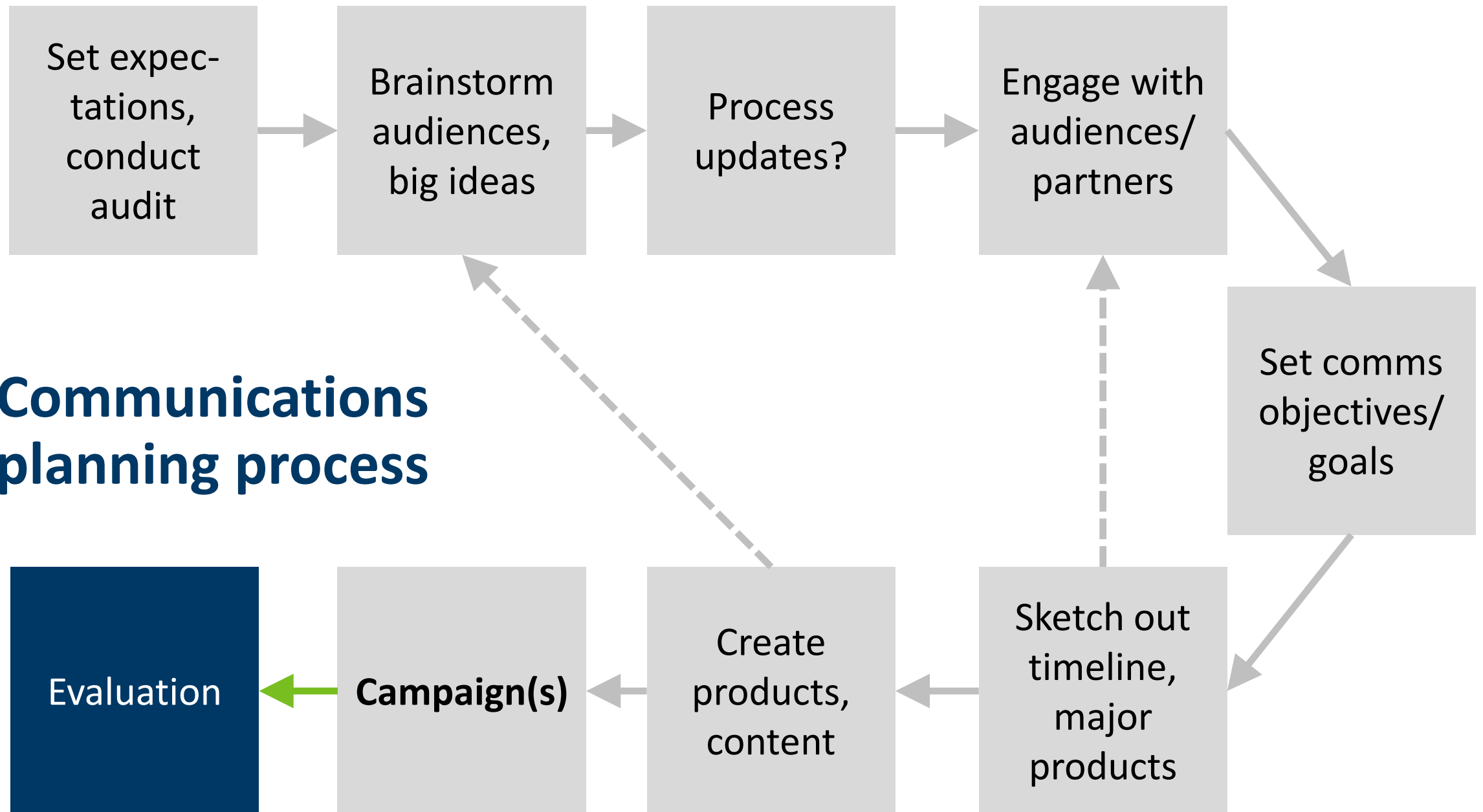
We need to simplify, or can't rely on jargon

“Care” hack: The power of framing

- **What** we have to say is important; so is **how** we say it
- Words and images can improve or deter understanding and buy-in
- Examples of frames:
Values Examples Metaphors Messengers
- Lead with solutions, not problems

Source: Nat Kendall-Taylor, FrameWorks Institute, *Talking Health* (2022)

Communications planning process



Set
expectations,
conduct audit

Brainstorm
audiences,
big ideas

Process
updates?

Engage with
audiences,
partners

Set
objectives,
goals

Sketch out
timeline,
major
products

Create
products,
content

Campaign(s)

Evaluation

Communications planning process



Equity and accessibility





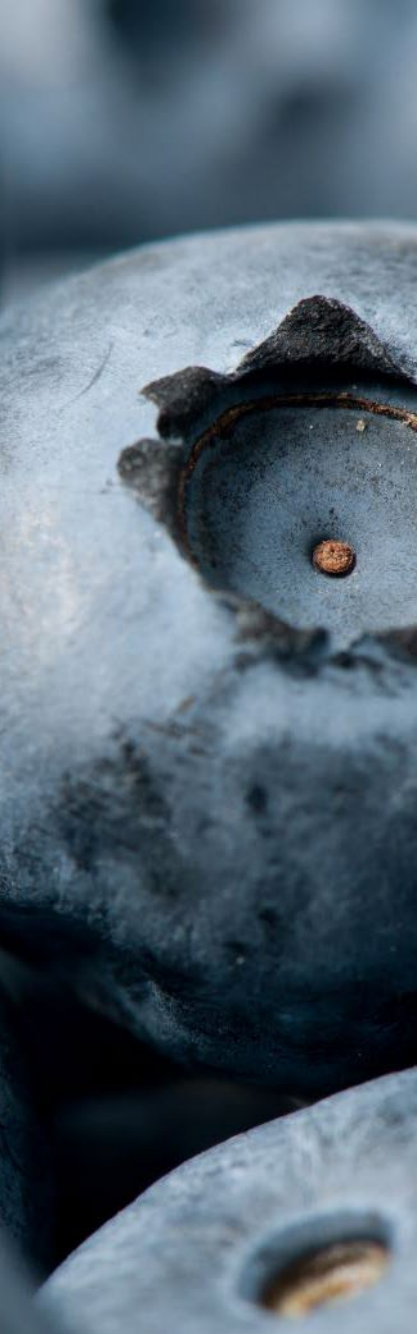
Equity and accessibility: From the start

Equity and accessibility are like
the blueberries in a muffin.

You have to bake them in.

Consider equity and accessibility
from the start.

Source: Cordelia McGee-Tubb, accessibility specialist



Baking in equity and accessibility

- Understand your audiences' values and beliefs
- Involve community partners early and often
- Consider how your audiences communicate
- Budget resources for translation, video, printing (as needed)
- Use plain language
- Make sure staff can easily find and use accessibility and equity resources
- Revisit, reassess, keep doing better



Working with communications

Making the case for strategic communications

A photograph of a turtle and a rabbit on a red background with two vertical white stripes. The turtle is in the upper left, and the rabbit is in the lower right, both facing away from the camera.

Working with your friendly neighborhood communicator

- **Do: Start early, invite often**
Don't: Wait until the end
- **Do: Make connections**
Don't: Stay in siloes
- **Do: Edit and suggest**
Don't: Assume our word is law
- **Do: Help protect their time**



Making the case for strategic communications

- Helps build public support
- Good return on investment
- Strengthens work of other programs and projects
- Invites groups into your work, and continues to invite them in

Reflection: Where are you now?



menti.com
7176 4850



Reflection:
**What 1-2 specific actions can you take, -
when you get back, to get unstuck?**



Questions?



Allie Hawley March, MPH (she/her)
MDH Community Health Division
allie.hawleymarch@state.mn.us