

LEVERAGE HUMAN-CENTERED DESIGN PRACTICES

Improve federal communications,
marketing and advertising campaigns

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Want to get to the bottom of a communications problem? **START BY COMMUNICATING.**

Effective communication from the federal government is critical to keeping Americans informed about the most important issues the country faces.

Whether communicating about national security, the economy, new laws, policy changes or government benefit programs like Medicaid, affordable housing or student loan forgiveness, federal agencies must be able to communicate with many audiences about a myriad of topics. To do this, agencies must not only know who their audience is, where their audience is and how they receive information, but also have a firm understanding of what type of language and messaging resonates. Effective communication **engages** audiences, builds trust and ultimately increases credibility. Therefore, it is critical that federal agencies understand and respond to the needs of their stakeholders.

While it can seem daunting to develop messages that effectively reach and engage many audiences—especially when multiple stakeholder groups are involved—it doesn't have to be. Human-centered design (HCD) principles can help federal agencies improve what, where, when and how they communicate.

Commonly used in design and management frameworks across industries, HCD focuses on the **people** who are impacted by a federal agency's programs, services or benefits. It observes problems within context and then uses those findings to brainstorm, conceptualize and implement solutions that can improve effectiveness, user satisfaction, trust and accessibility. Using HCD to solve marketing, advertising and communications challenges allows agencies to tackle the problem at hand from three different directions: **desirability, viability and feasibility**. As shown in Exhibit 1, this approach helps agencies discover and implement workable, cost-effective solutions that meet the specific needs of their audiences.

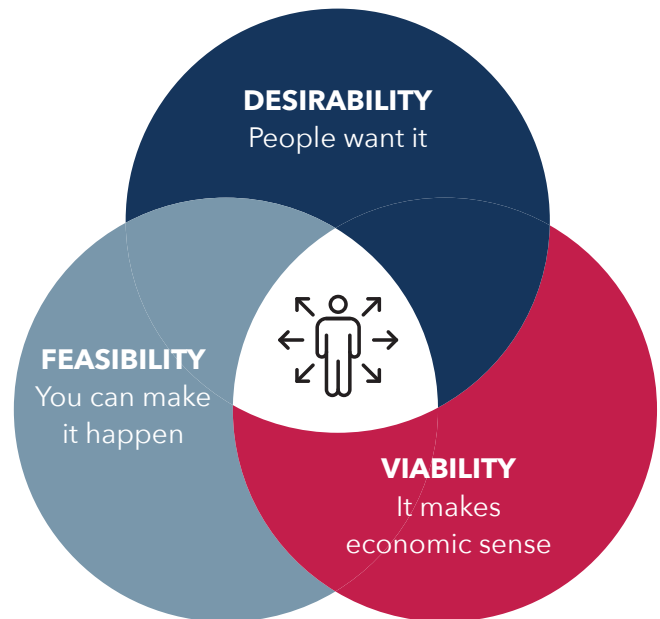


Exhibit 1. HCD Approach

HCD is a critical component of marketing, advertising and communications campaigns because it provides an understanding of the audience—who they are, where they get information and what type of messages will be most engaging—and informs tactics to best reach them. Using HCD methodologies to respond to, and solve, communications challenges allows federal organizations to create strategies and products that are tailored to the fundamental needs of audiences. But HCD also goes beyond traditional marketing, advertising and communications plans. Using unique approaches that focus primarily on the end-user throughout all stages of the development cycle, HCD allows federal agencies to provide specific audiences with tailored products to generate awareness of, and interest in, federal news, services, programs and benefits.

DIAMONDS IN THE ROUGH

Since 2004, HCD practitioners across the country have relied on some variation of the Design Council's framework, the Double Diamond, to solve problems across a wide range of industries, including the federal sector. Whether organizations are looking to make slight revisions to messaging, completely revamp an enterprise-wide communications strategy or accomplish something in between those two extremes, the Double Diamond model helps to refine the problem at hand and create innovative solutions.

As shown in Exhibit 2, the Double Diamond combines divergent and convergent thinking to help organizations explore issues. Through this approach, organizations benefit from creativity (divergent thinking) in the Discover and Develop phases while

still being able to focus on a well-defined solution (convergent thinking) in the Define and Deliver phases of the framework. This allows organizations to explore an issue without creative restrictions and then narrow those ideas down enough to act.

All too often, organizations face communications challenges by immediately thinking about how to rectify the problem. What will the tactics be? Who is going to lead the development of the communications plan? How are the advertising dollars being distributed across social media channels? When is the press release going out? While these are all fair questions that need to be answered, in most cases, they are **not** the starting point.

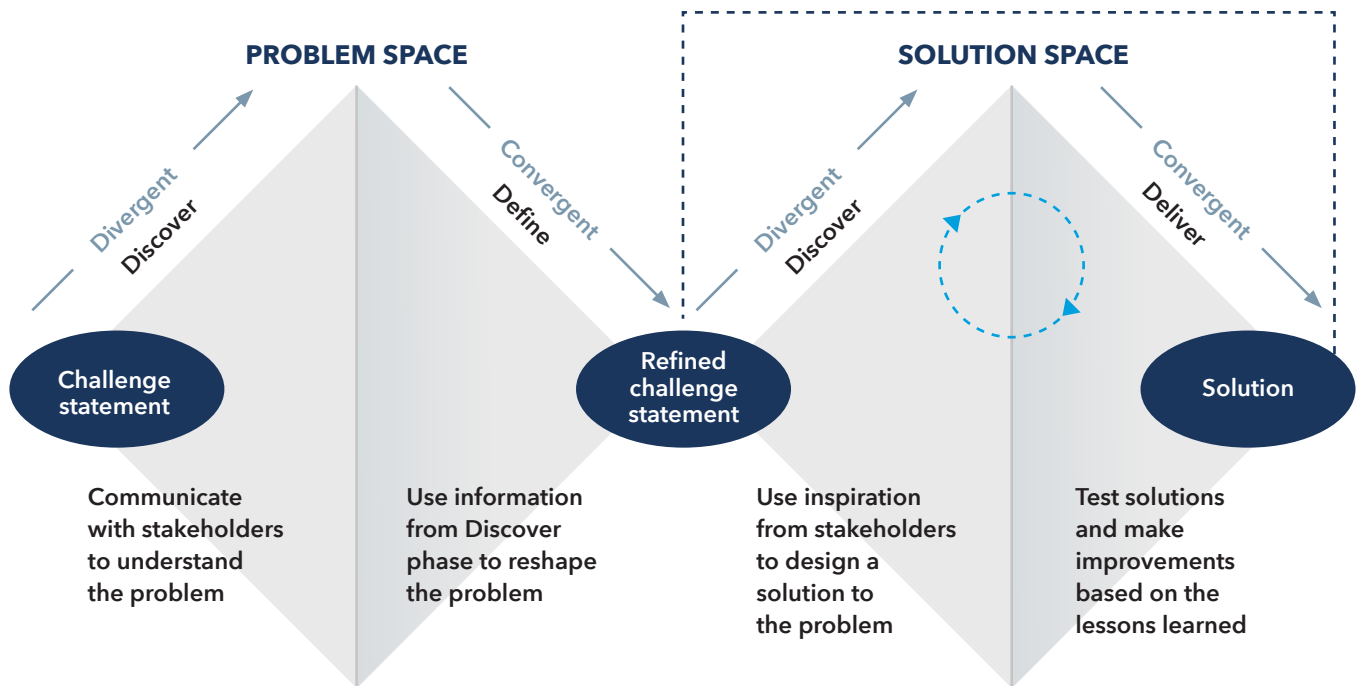


Exhibit 2. Double Diamond Framework



The Problem Space. The Double Diamond takes a different approach. It pushes pause on the solution phase of a challenge. Instead, it encourages organizations to start by talking to the people who are impacted, asking questions that lead to a full understanding of what the problem truly is. Communications challenges can often have details buried under the surface that are not seen right away. The best solutions occur when organizations avoid assumptions. Rather than assuming the problem is no deeper than what is on the surface, the Discover phase of the Double Diamond model gets to the root of a problem, providing the opportunity to effectively address it.

Imagine this hypothetical example: Agency A believes that their primary audience is not taking advantage of a program because they do not know that they are eligible for it. However, after talking to a representative sample of the focus audience population thorough HCD-guided interviews, Agency A learns that the real problem is not eligibility requirements, but a complicated application process. The agency now knows that the application process is too long and complex, causing users to become frustrated and leave their applications unfinished.

The Solution Space. Once the problem is defined, the second half of the Double Diamond comes into play. In the previous example, Agency A now understands the problem that needs to be solved, but what's the best way to do that? In the second half of the Double Diamond, federal agencies talk to stakeholders to generate ideas. HCD exercises encourage stakeholders—internal and external—to brainstorm a variety of solutions to the problem. During the brainstorm phase, there are no limits and all ideas are fair game. This approach allows federal agencies to think outside the box, exploring opportunities that may never have been considered before.

Of course, the solution needs to be feasible, but there are HCD exercises for that, too. Exercises such as ranking ideas on a matrix by relative importance and difficulty can help agencies determine what can reasonably be accomplished on near- and long-term timelines. Another way to address prioritization is to place all ideas on a bullseye chart, with the most important and realistic ones closer to the center. There are a variety of different methodologies to generate and prioritize solutions. Regardless of how it is done, the result is the same: a solution to test.

Let's take another look at the example of the application process. Before using the HCD methodology, Agency A might have focused their products and messages on eligibility. Instead, using the knowledge gained through interviews focusing on the **people** who are impacted, they decide to switch gears and invest resources into sharing tips about how to make the application process easier (e.g., "come prepared with these documents..."). To do this, they roll out an "Application Tips" campaign across social media.

HCD is **not** a linear process. In an ever-changing world, solutions may not be the "final" answer—and that's okay. For example, as the campaign runs, Agency A will be able to look at analytics from their social media campaign (e.g., impressions, engagement rates and comments) in addition to application data to see if the campaign is moving the needle. If needed, adjustments to the strategy can be made along the way. For example, once the "Application Tips" campaign launches, the agency might learn that there is another underlying issue (e.g., website glitches). If that happens, Agency A can go back to the start of the Double Diamond to define, develop and implement additional solutions to solve the technical issues associated with the application.



HCD INFORMS PRIORITY TOPIC AREAS

The Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA) leveraged HCD best practices to develop and distribute an online questionnaire to 4.7 million subscribers of a monthly newsletter. Through this questionnaire, VBA identified which channels veterans preferred to receive information from and what topics they felt like they needed more information on. Using this data, VBA continues to tailor its messaging to ensure veterans receive the right message, at the right time and through the platforms they prefer. As a result, click rates and open rates in VBA's newsletter consistently perform above industry standards.



PUTTING A FRAMEWORK INTO ACTION

As illustrated by the Double Diamond framework, HCD focuses on understanding and articulating audience needs early, providing open and effective communication of stakeholder requirements, developing customer-centric products and encouraging continuous customer engagement and feedback. However, the Double Diamond framework is just that: a framework.

To implement it successfully across communications campaigns, federal agencies must implement a customized research approach to plan, execute and moderate HCD exercises, workshops, focus groups, interviews, small group discussions and more. Exhibit 3 outlines the steps organizations can take to put an HCD framework into action.








PHASE	ACTIVITY
 Observe	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> » Perform an in-depth audience and environmental analysis, using human factors and ethnographic research to better understand stakeholder behaviors, requirements and pain points. » Evaluate messaging, audit existing tools, meet with key staff and stakeholders, define goals, segment audiences and establish metrics.
 Ideate	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> » Synthesize findings into requirements and formulate a way forward for the design process. » Select relevant style, format and navigation best practices.
 Prototype	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> » Develop prototypes that resonate with focus audiences. » Use designs to engage audiences through feedback sessions that inform which messages and tactics resonate best with audiences.
 Feedback	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> » Facilitate virtual and in-person HCD exercises, events and interviews to gather feedback and lessons learned. » Analyze notes and stakeholder input.
 Refine	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> » Hone the communications strategies, tactics and products based on feedback provided by stakeholders.
 Implement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> » Disseminate approved products and track performance metrics and statistics. » Provide recommendations for improvement, if needed.
 Report	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> » Aggregate results into a summary report that includes an analysis of findings, recommendations and a communications strategy for implementation based on research, pre- and post-message message testing and product prototyping.

Exhibit 3. Approach to plan, execute and moderate HCD exercises

Federal agencies will always get a steady supply of feedback from its customers—and that’s a good thing. Hearing the good, bad and the ugly directly from customers is the best way to continually improve. **HCD puts customers first.** Agencies that employ

HCD practices to understand, define, develop and implement communications solutions can increase trust among audiences **and** create solutions that are specifically tailored to their needs.

START USING HCD TO SOLVE YOUR COMMUNICATIONS CHALLENGES TODAY

Schedule a
FREE
30-MINUTE
ASSESSMENT

The action steps outlined in this report represent tangible actions that you can take within the next three to nine months to begin the process of transforming your communications efforts with HCD. Knowing where to start can be overwhelming, but you don't have to go it alone.

Schedule a free 30-minute HCD Assessment with Aptive's HCD and communications experts today to determine the most impactful immediate first step to improve your agency's communications, marketing and advertising campaigns.

ABOUT ARTEMIS ARC

Artemis ARC is a Service-Disabled Veteran-Owned Small Business that fuses traditional marketing techniques with technology and data science to motivate and influence target audiences. Our creative strategists, technologists and futurists challenge the conventional approaches to outreach to simulate change and modernize the customer experience.

Learn more at [artemisarc.com](https://www.artemisarc.com)

ABOUT APTIVE

Aptive provides industry-leading consulting services to the federal government. Led by CEO Rachele Cooper, a Navy Veteran and aerospace engineer, we have expertise in business transformation, digital solutions, health services and marketing/communications. We support some of the most innovative and inspiring programs across the government, helping to improve performance, connect with people and navigate change. Headquartered in Alexandria, Virginia, our hundreds of employees across the country are committed to shaping the future as we have for the last decade.

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