

COMMUNICATION PLAN



2026-2031

This plan outlines the desired and to be pursued general VLIZ communication objectives and actions. The common thread running through this plan is to raise awareness of the “VLIZ brand” through content. The approach is based on the SMART principle: the proposed plan is specific, measurable, action-oriented, realistic and time-bound. It is intended to be a communication plan for all VLIZ employees and is supported by the Science Communication division (WCOMM).

PRELIMINARY PROCESS

The reason for this plan is the desired adjustment of VLIZ's **general communication**. After all, VLIZ has grown significantly in recent years and has seen an expansion of its mandate, all in a world that is constantly changing. The desired adjustment also looks ahead to the new VLIZ covenant 2027-2031 and the associated strategic plan.

In January 2025, the Science Communication division (WCOMM) drafted a **VLIZ Science Communication Vision Plan 2025-2031**, which forms the basis for this VLIZ Communication Plan. Based on the former document, an externally facilitated **VLIZ Communication Strategy Workshop** (12 May 2025) was held, which, with the close involvement of VLIZ director Ann Van Gysel, the VLIZ management and the WCOMM division, developed a framework for the institute's future communication. During this workshop, the participants formulated and synthesised proposals for a desired narrative and key communication objectives, and identified the intended target groups as well as possible thematic content pillars to guide future communication activities. The report of this workshop and the aforementioned draft Vision Plan together form the backbone of the underlying VLIZ Communication Plan and thus the basis for the content, branding and communication actions with which the institute intends to make an impact between 2026 and 2031. This exercise also forms the input for the self-evaluation, underpinning the new Covenant 2027-2031 with the Flemish government.

The aim is for this Communication Strategy to provide a framework for consistent, purpose-driven and impactful communications and branding. It should enable the alignment of internal and external messaging, helping VLIZ tell a consistent, compelling story, positioning itself as a unique and strong brand in Flanders and beyond and ensuring that communication efforts contribute efficiently to the institute's long-term, strategic goals.

Supported by strategic, well-executed communications, VLIZ can further gain visibility and brand recognition, trust, funding and partnerships, empowering the institute to achieve its overarching mission: strengthening science-based knowledge and sustainable use of our coasts, seas and the ocean.

To achieve this, the VLIZ identity and strengths are first determined, followed by the strategic goals and target groups, the core themes and priority topics, the concrete plan, including the available communication channels, resources and staff, and finally the evaluation and analysis tools.

VLIZ MISSION & STRENGTHS

A consistent, agreed-upon VLIZ identity, incl. its Unique Selling Points, read as follows:

VLIZ, the Flanders Marine Institute, is dedicated to strengthening science-based knowledge and sustainable use of our coasts, seas and ocean.

VLIZ is a multidisciplinary research institute that addresses societal needs and challenges through research, data stewardship, technological innovation and knowledge valorization.

To this purpose, VLIZ serves a broad range of stakeholders across the quadruple helix – science, policy, industry, and the public – at both national and international levels.

VLIZ's unique position across the full marine research value chain is instrumental in achieving these goals: from field observation and instrumentation to data analysis, infrastructure development, stakeholder engagement, and the translation of science into societal and industrial impact.

VLIZ is widely recognized for its expertise in ocean data management and research infrastructure, but its mission extends beyond research. VLIZ advances our understanding and knowledge of the ocean (vital for all life on Earth) and ensures that scientific insights support informed decision-making across society, contributing to the sustainable management of marine and coastal ecosystems.

STRATEGIC GOALS AND TARGET GROUPS

In line with its mission and vision, the institute wants to position itself more than ever in the market as an innovative and open centre of knowledge and expertise on ocean and seas. Given the very broad scope of its activities, **a targeted focus on strategic core themes and topics** is essential. This is in order to establish VLIZ's identity as a strong brand to the outside world. Emphasising too many different things leads to a lack of clarity and suboptimal branding. External communication should therefore concentrate on strategic priorities. By continuously highlighting these themes, the outside world will perceive VLIZ in this way. This focus is the essence of sound branding and corporate communication.

With regard to target groups, VLIZ must engage in broad communication with a varied audience of **marine professionals** (research, policy, companies), but also with a **non-professional audience**. This communication is both local (coast, province, Flanders, Belgium) and international (North Sea basin, EU, global, multilateral). It is partly based on a number of frameworks and guidelines within which VLIZ operates, anchored in agreements/policy plans at the Flemish and provincial administrative levels. Examples include the Flanders Science Communication Policy Plan 2022–2030 and the Cooperation Agreement between the Province of West Flanders and VLIZ 2022–2026. In addition to promoting the “VLIZ brand”, the exchange of knowledge (“content”) with various target groups is central to VLIZ's communication activities. This showcases its solid and professional scientific image. It also contributes to involving broad sections of the population in their attitude towards the ocean and seas (*Ocean Literacy*) and towards science in general. It positions VLIZ in issues such as climate change and biodiversity loss, fitting within broader frameworks such as the EU Mission “*Restore ocean and inland waters*” and the *UN Ocean Decade*. This can also lead to attracting young talent to VLIZ (“employer branding”) and to the Blue Economy (“Blue skills”).

The six strategic objectives of corporate communications and associated target groups

As determined and agreed during the strategic workshop on 12 May 2025, are:





1. Get to know VLIZ

OBJECTIVE: Improve visibility and build VLIZ's reputation as a trusted, objective, and impactful marine Research & Innovation partner.

KEY STAKEHOLDERS & MOTIVATIONS:

- Policymakers: want reliable/neutral partners supporting informed decision-making.
- Academic partners: seek excellence, credibility, and access to data/infrastructure.
- Industry: look for innovation partners with applied value and reputation.
- Media: need expert voices and trustworthy, engaging information.

HOW WE WANT THEM TO RESPOND:

- Recognize VLIZ as a credible and respected ocean knowledge institute.
- Seek us out for expertise, reputation, collaboration, or input.
- Refer to VLIZ in public, political, or professional discourse.

IMPLICATIONS FOR COMMUNICATIONS:

- Position VLIZ as a visible and authoritative institution.
- Promote our people, achievements, and impact with confidence.
- Use clear/consistent messaging on who we are, what we do, and why it matters.
- Tailor visibility campaigns to build trust with different audiences.



2. Get involved with VLIZ

OBJECTIVE: Encourage greater use of VLIZ tools, data, and services by researchers, industry, and the public. Strengthen the connection among the Flemish marine science community, VLIZ-members and VLIZ.

KEY STAKEHOLDERS & MOTIVATIONS:

- Researchers & universities: need high-quality infrastructure, training at sea, access to data, and collaborative opportunities.
- Industry actors: value practical tools and training, applied knowledge, and co-creation potential.
- General public/citizen scientists: motivated by relevance, accessibility, and inclusion.

HOW WE WANT THEM TO RESPOND:

- Use our data platforms, services, and expertise.
- Initiate collaborations or participate in community science.
- Feel welcome and motivated to reach out to VLIZ.

IMPLICATIONS FOR COMMUNICATIONS:

- Communicate clearly how to connect, collaborate, and contribute.
- Showcase value through case studies and applications.
- Feature accessible entry points for different groups.
- Use inclusive, friendly messaging to foster approachability.
- Present a “human face” to the institute with clear, real individuals that people can reach out to (including assistance to HR ‘employer branding’ and internal VLIZ communication).



3. Securing sustained funding and leveraging additional support

OBJECTIVE: Demonstrate the return on investment (ROI) and societal value of VLIZ’s work to secure long-term funding.

KEY STAKEHOLDERS & MOTIVATIONS:

- Public funders & ministries: want strategic impact, transparency, and demonstrable value for society.
- European & international funding bodies: seek excellence, relevance and impact, and innovation.
- Philanthropic organizations & private funders: motivated by alignment with societal/environmental goals.

HOW WE WANT THEM TO RESPOND:

- Fund or co-fund VLIZ research, infrastructure, or innovation.
- Include VLIZ in strategic investment programs and EU projects.
- Advocate for long-term sustained support to marine science and innovation.
- Encourage donations.

IMPLICATIONS FOR COMMUNICATIONS:

- Frame VLIZ as a future-facing, results-driven, trustworthy institution.
- Provide objective evidence of impact through metrics, showcase through stories, and testimonials.
- Use policy-relevant narratives and visuals to make the case for investment.



4. Prioritize science solutions

OBJECTIVE: Encourage science-based decision-making and position VLIZ as a resource for the scientific underpinning of societal solutions.

KEY STAKEHOLDERS & MOTIVATIONS:

- Policymakers & advisors: want reliable, applicable insights to support legislation and investments.
- Civic leaders/media: need trusted, neutral expert sources.
- General public: look for credible, digestible information.

HOW WE WANT THEM TO RESPOND:

- Integrate VLIZ research into decision-making.
- Rely on us as a trustworthy source.
- Advocate for marine science and innovation in political and societal discussions. public consultation processes

IMPLICATIONS FOR COMMUNICATIONS:

- Provide brief, visual, and accessible materials for decision-makers.
- Highlight success stories and real-world relevance.
- Maintain a tone of trustworthiness, clarity, and neutrality.



5. Value the ocean

OBJECTIVE: Deliver the science and knowledge to help raising awareness of the ocean's importance and support sustainability-conscious behavior and policy.

KEY STAKEHOLDERS & MOTIVATIONS:

- General public: want personal relevance, stories, and clarity.
- Educators & NGOs: seek materials and narratives that support awareness.
- Policymakers: require public understanding to drive marine policies.

HOW WE WANT THEM TO RESPOND:

- Understand how the ocean affects their personal lives and society.
- Care more about ocean sustainability and policy.
- Talk about the sea with others, modify their behaviors, and support marine protection.

IMPLICATIONS FOR COMMUNICATIONS:

- Make the ocean emotionally and practically relevant.
- Use storytelling, visuals, and local examples.
- Link marine science to daily life and societal well-being.



6. Dive into science

OBJECTIVE: “Wow” people, inspire, spark curiosity, encourage science learning and critical thinking, and promote careers in marine science.

KEY STAKEHOLDERS & MOTIVATIONS:

- Students & young people: seek inspiration, purpose, and opportunity.
- Educators & families: want educational value and engagement.
- Research, Innovation and outreach partners: need quality content and collaborators.

HOW WE WANT THEM TO RESPOND:

- Explore science through VLIZ programs, media, or school partnerships.
- Choose science education paths or careers to foster our next generation of science and engineering talent.
- Engage in youth events, workshops, or citizen science.

IMPLICATIONS FOR COMMUNICATIONS:

- Use exciting, aspirational messaging and formats.
- Humanize our researchers and tell their stories.
- Develop accessible entry points into science, especially for underserved groups and local communities.

CORE CONTENT THEMES & PRIORITY TOPICS

VLIZ' 6 strategic core communication goals above, are supported by 3 core content themes (see below):

A/ OCEAN AND CLIMATE CHANGE

This theme encompasses the role of the ocean in climate systems and how marine research and innovation contribute to climate mitigation, adaptation, and resilience of ocean ecosystems. It is part of the so-called Ocean-Climate-Biodiversity Nexus. The theme Ocean & Climate change is approached strategically, in order to:

- Emphasize scientific leadership in ocean-climate interactions
- Showcase tech-enabled monitoring (robotics, sensors, RV Simon Stevin, digital twinning)
- Communicate relevance for resilience in a context of public policies for addressing climate change (e.g. energy transition, security, coastal adaptation, climate adaptation...)
- Use visual, data-driven storytelling to illustrate change and solutions

PRIORITY CONTENT TOPICS (SCIENTIFIC ACTIVITIES):

1. Ocean Carbon budget monitoring (e.g. ICOS, GOC-budget)
2. Ocean solutions (e.g. mitigation, policy)
3. Polar- and cryosphere research (e.g. Greenland research)
4. Sea-level monitoring (e.g. SLSMF)
5. Coastal safety (e.g. DTO)
6. Past climate change (e.g. geological research)

B/ OCEAN AND HUMAN HEALTH

Focuses on the intertwined well-being of marine ecosystems and humans, addressing pollution, biodiversity, and the ocean's impact on physical and mental health. Strategically, the communication should highlight threats (pollution, loss of biodiversity, climate impact) alongside solutions – focus on what VLIZ is doing to help. It should showcase benefits of ocean health for public well-being, and position VLIZ as a trusted source of marine environmental health data. Finally, it should frame ocean health as both urgent and relatable and provide practical, actionable advice for people wanting to make sustainable changes.

PRIORITY CONTENT TOPICS:

1. Biodiversity monitoring (e.g. MOC, WoRMS, EMODnet, invasive species, animal tracking)
2. Health benefits of the coast (e.g. Blue Gym, sea spray aerosol research)
3. Pollution (e.g. underwater sound, marine litter, munition dumpsites)
4. Ocean observation and ecosystem modelling (e.g. DTO)
5. Ecosystem services and nature restoration for a sustainable development

C/ OCEAN LITERACY

Demonstrates how VLIZ creates societal, cultural, economic, and policy value and impact – ranging from heritage and identity to innovation and decision support. Communication efforts should reframe the ocean as an everyday concern with tangible impacts, and emphasize connections to identity, culture, and sustainability. VLIZ should position itself as a bridge between science, society, and policy, and use storytelling to show human impact and shared responsibility, and to demonstrate ‘Blue hope’ and ocean solutions.

PRIORITY CONTENT TOPICS:

1. Blue economy (e.g. Blue Cluster projects, applied research, and innovation/ industry partnerships)
2. Marine regions and security (e.g. underwater soundscapes, marine spatial planning, defense applications)
3. Maritime history and underwater archaeology (e.g. tourism, migration)
4. Ocean literacy and Citizen science (e.g. public participation, education programs, Open Science)
5. Data and digital infrastructure (e.g. DTO, data sharing, digitalization, data literacy)

By grouping VLIZ's work under these clear, **high-level themes** that connect scientific activities to major societal challenges, one can build understanding, trust, and engagement across diverse audiences by linking research to real-world challenges and impact. Individual studies or examples may not resonate with all stakeholders, but broader societal challenges and themes – like ocean and human health or climate change – do. Themes offer a consistent narrative structure that make niche topics more accessible and relevant. These themes address societal challenges, resonate across departments, engage varied audiences and be flexible across content formats. They don't mirror VLIZ's internal research structure – they serve as storytelling anchors. VLIZ's unique strengths (data, infrastructure, expertise, etc.) are cross-cutting and will be continuously highlighted in all themes.

VLIZ's communications focus on long-term societal impact, not shifting political agendas. The aim is to reinforce VLIZ's mission, core mandates, identity, credibility, response capacity, and relevance over time.

KEY CHARACTERISTICS OF THE CORE CONTENT THEMES SHOULD RESPOND TO:

- Long-term relevance – Resilient to policy/strategic changes
- Coherent themes – Structured around enduring challenges
- USPs as red threads – Data, tools, tech, expertise and trust
- Audience-focused – Relevant to key stakeholders (e.g. public, policymakers)
- Impact-driven – Use science, technology, and wonder to inspire
- Resource-aware – Rotate topics and prioritize for maximum effect
- VLIZ' 6 strategic core communication goals above, are supported by 3 core content themes (see below):

CORE CONTENT THEMES & PRIORITY TOPICS

It is important that “content” (scientific or technical findings) and/or its dissemination (e.g. through conferences, events, publications, etc.) is a priority in any external corporate communication and, in other words, forms the basis for communication on the strategic core themes listed below.

CHARACTERISTICS

A



**OCEAN
AND CLIMATE
CHANGE**

Long-term relevance

Coherent themes

USPs as red threads

Audience-focused

Impact-driven

Resource-aware



C



**OCEAN
LITERACY**

B



**OCEAN AND
HUMAN
HEALTH**

HOW TO TARGET COMMUNICATION?

General approach

Corporate communication is both internal and external. **External communication** focuses on interaction with the media, academics, specialised networks, policymakers, companies, potential employees (employer branding), citizens, civil society organisations and funders, both nationally and internationally. It uses consistent **corporate branding** to promote the identity and brand of VLIZ and to help convey the values of the institute (scientific rigour, sustainability, integrity). It also includes the institution's **crisis communication**, in order to professionally safeguard the institution's image. At VLIZ, this external communication is the responsibility of the WCOMM department (Science Support division), which also bundles, reinforces and directs the many communication efforts of other VLIZ employees and entities.

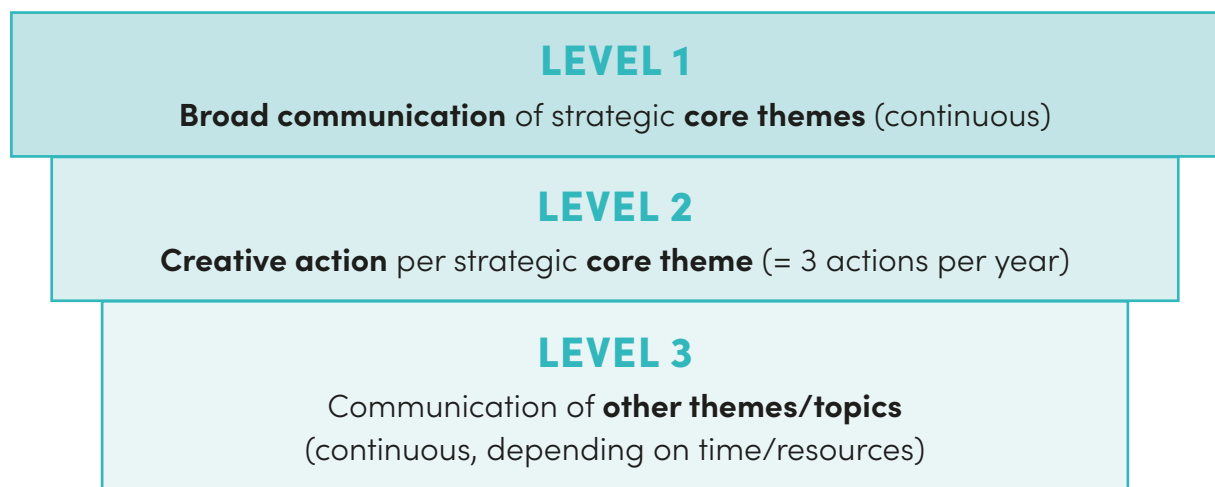
Internal corporate communication is aimed at management, governing bodies and employees, and provides a dynamic flow of information within the organisation. Its purpose is to strengthen cooperation, the sharing of ideas and information, and the corporate culture and values within VLIZ. Internal communication at VLIZ is closely linked to HR policy and falls under the Central Support Services department. It encompasses numerous initiatives such as internal mailings to inform staff about administrative and personnel-related matters, staff meetings and VLIZ seminars, breakfast@bib, research talks, correspondence from the A-team (about sports, team building, brunches, etc.). VLIZ's own systems used for information exchange (e.g. Confluence, portfolio management) can also be considered as tools for internal communication.

Content development, planning and phasing

VLIZ's revamped external corporate communication operates on three levels. The two highest levels focus on the **three strategic core themes** ("Climate", "Ocean & Human Health", "Value for Society"). These main lines emphasise the **five core topics** identified for each theme, which are communicated widely. In addition, each year, for each of the three core themes, **one creative, eye-catching core communication action** is developed around a specific core topic. These can vary from targeted social media campaigns, events with a specific focus (e.g. 10 years of Simon Stevin, Science Day, science café, study days, international conferences and missions, new/relevant international policy frameworks) up to media actions. This focus and spread of topics is one of the key elements in raising VLIZ's profile even further, both locally (Flanders) and internationally (North Sea, EU, global).

Locally, VLIZ positions itself in the market as a unique point of contact for marine-related knowledge and insight. This is done in collaboration with players from the quadruple helix. Internationally, we need to maximise VLIZ’s strengths and USPs in order to create visibility and position ourselves alongside other marine scientific institutions. Increasing attention should also be paid to highlighting VLIZ’s contributions to relevant dossiers (e.g. EU Mission Ocean, EU Ocean Pact, UNOD, etc.), participation in network organisations (POGO, EMB, etc.), European/global working groups (e.g. IPCC, GOSR, IHO, IOC Group of Experts, etc.), and visits by foreign delegations and/or participation in high-level missions (“science diplomacy”, conferences, etc.). In all this, VLIZ’s “crown jewels” (e.g. WoRMS, Marine Regions, SLSMF, etc.) play a key role, alongside international efforts in research (underwater noise, animal tracking, long-term measurement series, etc.), policy, digital twin developments/data modelling, marine robotics, ocean literacy, etc. They play a strategic role in integrating the institute, with its research and innovation capacity, into the Flemish government’s internationalisation policy. Providing communication support is essential in this regard.

Areas other than the three strategic core themes will inevitably receive less attention, unless communication from VLIZ WCOMM is guaranteed within the framework of project funding.



Based on the core themes (“content”) and target groups outlined above, a **plan** is drawn up and translated into an annual work plan. Where possible, this **annual work plan** specifies as concretely as possible which actions will take place when and how often. In addition, a permanent presence will be provided in order to respond quickly and effectively to the agenda and to ensure that interaction with VLIZ staff runs as smoothly as possible.

IN GENERAL TERMS, THE ANNUAL WORK PLAN AIMS TO ACHIEVE:

- the above-mentioned **annual creative actions** per core theme (3 per year)
- permanent **presence on social media** (at least daily on average)
- target number of **articles in Testerep magazine** and/or on the **VLIZ website**
- strong **presence in the press**, either reactively or through proactive press actions
- **active involvement in the most important key moments** (events, VIP visits) for each of the three strategic core themes.
- monitoring and optimising **corporate branding**
- the broadest possible **international image**

In addition, informal networking is used for each of the core topics to ensure that everyone is and remains as well informed as possible about the topic in question. Regular contact between colleagues enables proactive and targeted efforts to achieve an optimal flow of information and corporate communication, with an emphasis on the strategic core themes and objectives.

Within that planning, WCOMM will start collecting and keeping track of the most important key moments for each strategic core topic (“News gathering”), followed by timely elaboration and dissemination of the content to the specific target groups. The flow of incoming news, proactively collected content, relevant contacts, approval process, planning and evaluation is transparently tracked in a central location (Confluence), as a living document. This structured approach helps avoid gaps or redundancies in communication efforts. It also promotes consistent messaging and provides clarity on VLIZ identity/mission and activities for both internal contributors and external audiences.

COMMUNICATION CHANNELS AND ACTIVITIES

The central objectives and target groups (see above) give rise to actions that are reflected in the annual work plans. These actions make use of a range of communication methods and/or channels, as summarised in the table below.

← STRATEGIC GOALS

← WHAT TO DO?

		TARGET GROUPS	ACTIONS	CHANNELS/METHODS
Get to know VLIZ	Corporate branding	Policy Academia Industry/innovators Media VLIZ structures	Manage/produce the major VLIZ-news channels (Testerep magazine, social media, news VLIZ-website, Annual Report) Act as the central VLIZ media contact/spokesperson Produce additional HQ branding products (factsheets, visuals, leaflets,...) Further develop/monitor social media impact Produce & manage visuals (footage, infographics, animations, photos,...) Advise/coach VLIZ staff in communication activities (writing, media,...) Update website in line with VLIZ strategy Promote VLIZ publications & events Safeguard corporate identity Tailor visibility campaigns Promote VLIZ staff & achievements Provide assistance to employer branding	Branding products Website Social media Testerep magazine Mailings Training courses Employer branding (bottleneck profiles)
Get involved with VLIZ	Stimulate interaction	Academia Industry/innovators Public Citizen scientists	Organise & promote public events (DvdW, GSTD,...) Showcase applications & case studies Provide calls to actions Stimulate co-creation potential Provide training (e.g. SeaWatch-B, GSTD)	Events Website Social media Testerep magazine Training courses
Secure funding	Showcase impact	Funders	Showcase impact through stories, metrics & testimonials (e.g. Annual Report) Promote VLIZ publications & activities	Annual report Website Social media Testerep magazine Mailings (targeted)
Prioritize science solutions	Position as trust-worthy source	Policy Media Public	Provide brief, visual & accessible materials (national/international) Communicate MoUs, VIP-visits, etc. Highlight success stories & real-world relevance Promote policy-relevant publications (Compendium, PIBs,...) Support communication of international policy frameworks (UNOD & EU Mission Ocean)	Portfolio of factsheets, visuals, leaflets Website Social media Testerep magazine Mailings (targeted)
Value the ocean	Raise awareness	Public Youngsters Policy Media	Tailor visibility campaigns (media, public, youth) Organise/promote public events (DvdW, GSTD, Kustgidsendag,...) Share VLIZ research with the public (lectures, visits, infodesk, exhibitions, teacher training,...) Maintain/make use of Digital Experience Lab	Events Campaigns (media, youth) Visuals VLIZ-PPT Website Social media Testerep magazine
Dive into science	Spark curiosity	Youngsters Academia Industry/innovators Media Visitor centers	Tailor visibility campaigns (media, youth, artists) Organise/support public events (DvdW, GSTD, Kustgidsendag, VMSD, WCMB2026,...) Share VLIZ research with the public (lectures, visits, infodesk, exhibitions, teacher training,...) Engage in youth events & citizen science Advocate for more Ocean Literacy (nationally, internationally)	Events Campaigns (media, youth) Visuals VLIZ-PPT Website Social media Testerep magazine

The **VLIZ-website** continues to play a central role in institutional communication, both in Dutch and English. It is a source of information for each of the target groups. The site was recently (2023) completely revamped, partly on the basis of an earlier evaluation of the VLIZ branding by an external communication agency. The focus was on a drastic reduction in the volume of text, a focus on what VLIZ does for whom (target group-oriented), a style refresh and a simplification of the “tone of voice”. The website also allows specific departments/individuals to upload content themselves (“empowerment”). Overall coordination, the homepage and news pages remain the responsibility of WCOMM. The VLIZ website will not be revamped, but the strategic core themes and topics will be made more visible.

VLIZ has a well-developed **social media policy**, and makes intensive use of LinkedIn (9,388 followers), X (VLIZ: 1,738, Jan Mees: 5,834, WoRMS: 6,511), Bluesky (1082), Facebook (VLIZ: 4057, RVSS: 1870), Instagram (2104), and to a lesser extent YouTube (740) (data from August 2025). These social media will continue to play a crucial role in the future in promoting VLIZ and its strategic priorities. In addition, it is essential to involve as many colleagues as possible in institutional communication efforts (employee advocacy), within the framework of a social media policy. Various channels are used, depending on the target audience, and adjusted as social trends shift. LinkedIn and Bluesky/X focus on an international audience of marine professionals (science, policy, business) and will be further strengthened. For a broad audience, the emphasis is on Instagram, which is used, among other things, to attract “young talent” (employer branding).

The digital **VLIZ Annual Report** is intended for administrators and competent authorities, but is not seen as a primary tool for broader communication. This does not prevent content from being recycled in a broader communication flow. WCOMM is responsible for writing the texts and finalising the layout. Other departments are responsible for collecting the actual data (KPIs, management indicators) and converting it into figures.

A standard **PPT presentation about VLIZ** (mission, objectives, activities, results, etc.) is available and can be expanded or shortened as desired and necessary in order to reinforce the VLIZ message in a harmonious and efficient manner.

Testerep magazine is VLIZ’s online newsletter. The digital magazine has a growing number of subscribers (4,300 in June 2025) and is aimed at a broad group of Flemish people interested in marine knowledge. The newsletter is published monthly in Dutch and can be consulted permanently via a website. After the integration of De Grote Rede into Testerep magazine, this online newsletter will become the most important communication channel for a broad Dutch-speaking target group. Where relevant, articles and messages will be disseminated via other VLIZ channels (website, LinkedIn, X, press) to an international English-speaking audience.

Depending on specific objectives, **additional branding products**, **fact sheets/ brochures or visuals** (photos, videos, animations, infographics, etc.) can be developed. Targeted **campaigns** are also possible.

As far as events are concerned, four **regular events** will be retained from the VLIZ's basic WCOMM funding. **Science Day** (1,750 visitors in 2024) is the annual highlight for a wide audience. The **VLIZ Marine Science Day** (VMSD: 520 registered participants in 2025) is aimed at a scientific, mainly young audience of Early Career Ocean Professionals (ECOPs). Here, WCOMM will mainly focus on communication support. The Big Seashell Survey (>1000 participants) is an established one-day event aimed at citizen scientists. And the **Coastal Guides Day** (approx. 140 participants in 2024) has been re-evaluated by VLIZ WCOMM and the Province of West Flanders as a very useful and efficient "stayer", with a wide reach and multiplier effect among coastal guides. The Province is prepared to take on the lion's share of the tasks; the effort required from WCOMM will be reduced to a minimum.

In addition, research is being conducted into how the impact can be increased within the institution. Coaching staff in communication-oriented activities (e.g. media training, writing courses, AI training, etc.) is part of this. It also remains important to explain certain aspects of the communication policy and branding at VLIZ seminars and press events, and to put this on the agenda of the Executive Committee meetings as a standing item. Finally, the plan aims to encourage VLIZ ambassadorship ("employer advocacy") among individual employees in line with "**employer branding**".

The VLIZ **Wikipedia** pages are updated regularly.

VLIZ WCOMM has been responsible for the institution's **press relations** and spokesperson duties for many years. With an average of one press release sent out per month, an average of one press clipping or appearance every other day, and a much sought-after contact for journalists of all kinds, press relations are a very important tool in VLIZ's branding and corporate communication. Therefore, within the time available, the necessary attention will be paid to press reach and impact. WCOMM will intensively involve the media and press relations, in particular to put VLIZ's core themes and topics in the spotlight as much as possible. In order to be prepared for possible press interventions in sensitive areas, VLIZ spokespersons will receive appropriate training in "crisis communication".

Finally, a **mailing list** will be compiled with a core group of "privileged witnesses" (funders, competent administrations & cabinets, key figures of strategic partners, etc.) who will be notified at least annually about the VLIZ's central news channels.

RESOURCES AND TOOLS

Available resources

STAFF

In a rapidly growing institute such as VLIZ, communication is increasingly spread across the entire organisation. Each employee fulfils an ambassadorial role and/or is actively involved in developing specific communication products or campaigns. This important effort is an essential part of VLIZ's central corporate communication. It is and remains a prerequisite that the homogeneity and professionalism of the communication is monitored centrally, using the correct house style, key messages and visualisation tools. For any press action, interaction with the VLIZ spokesperson(s) is required as early as possible.

The main responsibility for implementing the institution's external corporate communication policy lies with the Science Communication division (WCOMM). The Central Support Services (COD, including HR) are responsible for internal VLIZ communication. In order to implement VLIZ's external communication policy, the WCOMM division **has 3 FTEs on the permanent payroll**. These are a division head/spokesperson and two "corporate communication/project management" staff members.

In addition, maximum effort will be made to acquire **external project funding**, particularly focused on innovation in communication ('Science communication', 'Ocean Literacy', 'Public Engagement', 'Citizen Science'). These project staff will be involved as much as possible in 'basic VLIZ communication'.

From 2027 onwards, this will result in a **permanent** Communication **staff** of **3 FTEs**:

- (1) division head/spokesperson (1 FTE);
- (2) corporate communication/project management staff member (1 FTE);
- (3) corporate communication/project management staff member (1 FTE);

The collaboration between the head of division/spokesperson and project managers/experts in "branding/corporate communication" offers the best guarantees for a streamlined and substantively strong communication policy.

OPERATING BUDGET

The implementation of this Communication Plan requires a sufficiently high operating budget to enable the organisation of events, the production of publications, the purchase/creation of visuals (photos, videos, animations, VLIZ background for Teams/ZOOM online meetings, etc.), and the outsourcing of various tasks to third parties. In terms of visualisation, VLIZ has a lot of its own underwater (divers, robots) and aerial (drones) images. In addition, there will continue to be a need for new visual material, created externally. VLIZ has always chosen not to employ professional graphic designers, videographers and other designers. This means that sufficient operating resources must also be available in the future to outsource and successfully complete these types of tasks through assignments to third parties. It is also advisable to offer training courses to VLIZ colleagues in useful, accessible applications that deliver high-quality results (e.g. DALL-E, ChatGPT, Canva, etc.).

Collaborations, partnerships and training

Collaboration, partnerships and networking are crucially important to VLIZ as a whole. But networking and sharing experiences with experts are also essential within the field of communication. Both permanent staff and WCOMM team members who are paid on a project basis will continue to participate in networking events on strategic communication, science journalism, citizen participation and related domains. In addition to sharing experience, acquiring external project funding is also a driving force in this regard.

WCOMM will actively seek out or respond to **training** opportunities (e.g. crisis communication, media training, writing/speaking for a broad audience, ChatGPT and other AI in communication, etc.) in order to continuously hone its communication skills in a rapidly changing communication landscape.

EVALUATION, MONITORING AND ANALYSIS

To maximize effectiveness, VLIZ's communication efforts should remain agile and collaborative – continuously evaluating how well messages resonate, and adapt communications as societal needs, scientific insights, and institutional capacities evolve.

In order to evaluate the impact of the communication conducted around the strategic core themes (cf. “SMART” principles), both quantitatively and qualitatively, we propose the following analysis tools and techniques:

- Annual work plans will clearly indicate for each of the strategic core themes how many actions are planned for that year and at what frequency. The **follow-up of the actions, as set out in the annual work plan**, constitutes a first element of monitoring and evaluation. In other words, everything that has been promised has actually been implemented. This approach provides an initial transparent, quantitative and targeted evaluation.
- Secondly, the aim is to evaluate whether or not the set impact targets have been achieved on the basis of standardised methods. This will involve exploring which **methods for digital impact measurement** (e.g. web analytics, social media monitoring tools, etc.) are usable, affordable and achievable (“SMART”). The IT department will examine which tools are already being used to screen digital reach (website impact; social media reach). Investments will only be made in this area if the ratio between the investment (in terms of personnel and finances) and the usefulness of the measurements as a management tool is favourable.
- Specific and **ad hoc evaluation of events or publications**, e.g. by means of a survey, will only take place in exceptional cases and for a specific purpose (e.g. reader survey for Testerep magazine).
- Periodic internal evaluation of communication actions (e.g. after an event). This is particularly relevant in the early stages in order to refine plans on the basis of concrete feedback.

If, after evaluation, it appears that the communication plan requires changes in order to achieve the set goals, the feedback will be thoroughly analysed and the evaluation results will be used to make adjustments.

IN CONCLUSION

By staying true to its mission and values while embracing a purpose-driven, audience-focused communication strategy, VLIZ can further cement its role as a leading voice in marine science and a catalyst for positive change, strengthening science-based knowledge and the sustainable use of our coasts, seas and the ocean.