



Maximizing your Communications

Start with a Plan

If your organization has never taken the time to create a formal overall communications plan, or your current plan is starting to look tired, now is a great time to get planning! Set aside at least a half-day, and work through the details of your organization's plan. An effective plan provides clarity for EVERYONE involved and helps to ensure that you're all on the same page when you communicate with the rest of the world.

A strategic communications plan will not only help you focus your resources on the most important tasks and set priorities, it will also help you to clarify your objectives and target audiences, sharpen your message and help you better understand the environment in which you will be delivering that message.

Below, you will find a typical overview outline of a strategic communications plan.

1. Where should I start? In an effort to have a good grasp of where your organization is you need to establish some background. Start with a **situation analysis**. Ask yourself what's happening in your organization? In your sector? In your industry? Be honest and take the time to analyze what has recently changed, and what lessons have been learned. What are your organization's vulnerabilities? Opportunities? Develop a **SWOT** to identify **strengths**, **weaknesses**, **opportunities** and **threats** that could that could impact the success or failure of your initiative r your organization.
2. Next, move onto defining your **goal** and **key objectives**. These should reflect your organization's mission statement. What is your organization's ultimate goal? How do you want your organization to be perceived? How do you want your issues / programs to be perceived? For each goal you have defined, you need to develop specific measurable and achievable objectives. What are your communications objectives? What do you want your target audience to do? What is your call to action? How will you measure success? What will your benchmarks be?
3. Now you need to examine your **target audience(s)**.
 - o **Primary Audience:** Who do you ultimately want to influence? What new audiences should you look to reach going forward? Where do your target audiences get their information? How can you best reach your target audiences? How do they pass information amongst themselves?
 - o **Secondary Audience:** Who supports your work? How do the media represent your issue? Are recipients of your service an audience? Are your staff, volunteers, donors and friends?

4. Do you have **research** available to you? When needed, do you have ready access to facts and figures that support your claims? Have you made that information available to others? Does your organization do research it can share? Do you need to commission research to show progress from year to year?
5. Have you developed **key messages**? You should have three to five succinct statements that will be used repeatedly. Can your staff, volunteers, donors, board members and funders repeat them easily? Do you need to adjust your key messages to be more relevant to new audiences you've targeted? Do your key messages have supporting stories, photos, videos or sound? Are those easily available to media contacts? Do you have a plan to keep those elements updated and fresh? Do you have a "hook?"
6. Now you need to identify your **strategies**. Media relations are only one kind of strategy, and might not be the most effective method to attain your goal and objectives. Strategies will depend on the situation and will support your objectives in communicating with your target audience(s) and motivate them to act.
7. Does your strategy warrant a **media strategy**? Which kind of coverage will get the word out about your organization's work? Will you focus on generating coverage related to calendar events and milestones? Will you establish media coverage goals by quarter? Do you have an online strategy that extends beyond your website? Is your website set up to help members of the media easily find what they need? Have you identified individuals that are ready to work with the media on short notice? Do additional people need media training? Are there organizations or groups with whom your organization should look to partner for increased exposure?
8. There are so many ways to reach an audience. In selecting and determining your best **tactics**, consider these important factors: budget and resources – both human and time. Common tactics in communicating include media events, Op Eds, media briefings, radio and TV interviews, web and internet strategies. Don't forget to include a wish list of materials to assist you to communicate the work of your organization.
9. Once your goals, objectives, target audience(s), strategies and tactics have been identified, quantify the results into a **timetable** that outlines what projects will be accomplished and when.
10. How will you **monitor** and **evaluate** your work? What should you track? How often? What thresholds differentiate between success and failure? Who should have access to the data? Build an evaluation process into the project timeline.

Now use your plan!! Refer to your communications plan on a regular basis. Use this communications plan as a template for future plans, either for a single purpose campaign or a long-term plan. Track your successes, challenges and your failures and learn from these experiences to adapt better in the future. Good luck!!