



The communications planning process

People and organizations communicate with others for a variety of reasons - to inform, persuade, prevent misunderstandings, present a point of view or reduce barriers.

Communications happens when the message you send is received, understood and acted upon by your intended audience.

Communications planning is simply a process to help you reach that goal.

The communications plan has been described in a number of ways, including:

- a foundation on which to base decisions and create ideas
- a means of focusing on where you want to be and what needs to be done to get there
- a tool for discovering opportunities, optimizing challenges and initiating change, and
- a means of monitoring your communications efforts.

A communications plan is all of the above ... and more.

But communications planning is not a mysterious art. It is a straightforward, step-by-step process that will help you clearly and logically summarize what you want to say to your intended audience and map out how you will deliver that message.

Keep in mind, the same logical process used to launch a new consumer product on a national basis can also be used to inform parents about a bake sale to raise funds for their child's school trip.

Why Communicate?

Organizations need to communicate for one or all of the following reasons:

- **To inform** You may need to let interested parties know who you are, what you can do for them, what they can do to help you, or even just how to get in touch.
- **To build understanding or change behavior** You may want to encourage others to think, act or feel a certain way; to stop smoking, for example. This can involve appealing to feelings, self-interest, or a person's imagination.

- **To prevent misunderstandings** Even a small misunderstanding can create large problems for your organization. You can ensure good communication by putting yourself in your audience's position, paying attention to their needs and getting to know them.
 - **To present a point of view** Often, this is all you need to do to accomplish your goal.
 - **To lower barriers between groups and individuals** These barriers may range from information overload to suspicion and prejudice.
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Communications Planning - The Six Steps

Step 1 - Research And Analysis or Take Stock Of Your Current Situation

Start your communications planning with some research. Research can be as extensive as commissioning a public opinion poll or as simple as talking on an informal basis with your clients or staff. It also means asking the following questions about your current situation and what affects it:

- What are your organization's goals, strengths and weaknesses? Having a clear picture of what your organization wants to achieve will help you determine a good course of action for your communications.
- What resources do you already have? Information, people, money, time and public support are all valuable assets. Determining which assets you have and which ones you might need will help you decide on the scope of your communications program.
- Is there any current research that will help you? Do you need to do any research?
- Has this type of communications activity taken place before? If so, what was the result?
- What are your major communications opportunities? Perhaps the local newspaper is always interested in your organization's activities. Or maybe there's an annual meeting coming up where you can present your messages.
- What are your major communications impediments? Perhaps you don't have a lot of money to spend on communications so you will need to look for low-cost opportunities.

The analysis stage involves sifting through the research to look for information that will help you frame your communications plan. Analysis can help you:

- define your communications challenge
- identify friends (and opposition) and suggest their motivation
- help identify audiences, place them in order of importance and determine how they perceive your organization, and
- suggest what messages should be directed to your audience.

Step Two - Goals and Objectives

Defining your goals and objectives or what you are trying to achieve will help you focus on the who, why, when and how of your communications planning.

Goals are the overall changes you wish to cause.

Objectives are the short-term, measurable steps you take to reach your goal.

For Example:

- If your goal is to increase community support for your local community development initiative, your objectives might be to:
- increase your membership by 10%
- add two new organization directors
- increase funding from the business community
- encourage positive media coverage of your organization's activities
- inform the community of the benefits of community development, and
- achieve support for your activities from local civic leaders.

When deciding on your objectives, ask yourself:

- Are we seeking to provide new information?
- Are we calling the audience to action?
- Are we seeking to change behaviour?

Your objectives should form a clear statement of what it is you are trying to do. They should be specific, realistic and listed in order of importance. They should also be measurable. When you evaluate your communications plan, you will measure your results against your objectives.

Step Three - Target Audience

The next step in the planning process is to determine your target audiences by:

- listing the groups with whom you need to communicate, and
- analyzing each group.

When choosing the people or groups your organization needs to influence, it may be helpful to think about the many different ways you can describe them. For example, your target audience might be males aged 18 to 24. But, it could be more helpful to know that your target audience is males aged 18 to 24 who are car owners or football players or volunteer fire fighters or teachers.

The more clearly you can define your audience, the easier it will be to make choices about your messages and communications vehicles.

When analyzing each group, consider:

- What do they already know about your organization?
 - How are they likely to react to your message and why?
 - What are some factors influencing the audience that receives your message - for example: literacy levels or multicultural differences?
 - Are there any difficulties you might have in communicating with each group?
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Possible Target Audiences

Mass Communications Representatives

- Newspaper editors and publishers, key reporters
- Radio and TV station managers, news directors, key reporters/announcers

Government Officials and Elected Representatives

- Mayor and local government officials
- Police officials
- Local MP and MPP
- Political party officials

Civic Leaders

- Officials of chambers of commerce or boards of trade
- Farm organizations
- Community service organizations
- Officers of service clubs
- Veterans' associations
- Community action groups
- Minority group leaders
- Youth group leaders

Business People

- Industrial and commercial business owners
- Officials of merchants' associations
- Employment agency management
- Contractors and construction company officials
- Union leaders

Professional People

- Clergy
- Doctors
- Dentists
- Pharmacists
- Veterinarians
- Lawyers
- Bankers
- Professional engineers

Educators

- Members of school boards
 - School superintendents
 - Principals
 - Teachers
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Step Four - Key Messages

Taking into consideration your objectives and target audiences, it is now time to identify the essential idea or set of ideas you want to communicate. Ask yourself - What does the audience already know about this issue? What does the audience need to know? What do we want to tell the audience?

Now, develop the message or messages you want your target audience to hear and to believe. Write down each message in a simple, specific statement.

Keep in mind, to motivate people, you must show them that you will help meet their needs. A clear description of the benefits to your audiences will help ensure that your message is received, understood and acted upon.

Step 5 - Communication Strategy

Tactics

There are many communications vehicles available from which to choose. A number of them are listed on the last page of this Factsheet.

Having done your communications analysis, you will be able to narrow your choices to the communications vehicles that:

- fit with the resources you already have

- are the most effective communications vehicles to reach your target audiences and influence them with your message(s), and
- help you achieve your goals and deliver the outcomes you want.

Timing is another very important consideration when choosing your communications vehicles. You don't want your messages competing unnecessarily with other events. Finally, there is the budget. Don't let a limited budget discourage you. There are many inexpensive communication vehicles.

Your communications plan may need a theme to tie it together. The theme line should be a short, punchy version of your main message and should be the link between all your activities and materials. Foodland Ontario's There's No Taste Like Home slogan is a good example of capturing a message (that Ontarians should buy Ontario-grown food) in one catchy phrase.

Implementation

Make a list of all the activities that will take place:

- before the launch of your communications campaign; for example, preparing a mailing list, writing a news release
- at the time of the launch; for example, distribution of the news release, and
- as a follow-up; for example, responding to media inquiries resulting from the news release.

If you develop a long-term plan, be sure to build in some check points to monitor progress and aid adjustments.

Step Six - Evaluation

How will you know if you are successful? Will the audiences receive the messages you intend them to receive, or will they get an entirely different message?

By evaluating your communications plan, you can learn how your plan worked with various audiences, which activities had the most impact, and which parts of the plan failed.

There are a variety of formal measurement techniques for measuring the results against your objectives, such as: readership surveys, attitude audits, focus group sessions. You can do your own evaluation on a less formal basis by assessing media coverage and talking to your clients.

The evaluation of your first plan should form the foundation of your next communications plan.

Communication Vehicles

Paid Advertising

- print - newspapers, magazines; good for conveying details
- radio - effective if carefully targeted
- television - effective in reaching broad target audiences, expensive
- outdoor - good for mobile audiences
- transit ads - good for urban audiences
- mall displays - good consumer targeting

Print Materials

- brochures/pamphlets/publications - good communications tools if they are targeted to those who need the information and are open to the message
- posters - highly visible for a long time, can suggest a special occasion
- newsletters - a good communications tool when targeted carefully
- annual report - important corporate information

Media relations (an indirect communication)

- regular contact with journalists
- mailing lists - must be well maintained
- one-on-one interviews with the media
- meeting with editorial boards
- news releases - print
- electronic releases - video, audio
- news conferences
- talk shows
- information kits - background information
- letters to the editor
- issue spokesperson - having someone available to speak about an issue or announcement
- feature articles
- web site postings

Public Service Announcement (PSAs)

- cable television and radio often accept community PSAs

Community Relations

- direct mail - direct, expensive
- public speaking - very effective personal contact, needs time commitment
- AV presentations - provide a dramatic message
- personal contacts - effective, time consuming

- public meetings - bring people together, can provide competition or opposition with a platform
- site tours - provide in-depth information, can eliminate suspicions
- educational opportunities - visit classrooms, meet with teachers
- sponsorship opportunities

Government Relations

- regular contact with key officials
- add government officials/offices to your mailing list
- briefings/briefing documents

Organization/Corporate Communications

- spokesperson
- speeches
- special events
- displays
- trade shows or special client-group meetings
- annual and other reports
- annual meetings

Internal Communications

- meetings
- newsletters
- employee annual report
- information in pay envelopes
- letters sent to employees' homes
- bulletin board messages
- electronic mail messages
- employee special events