



## Communications Plan

Developing a communications plan can help you focus your message and reach your target audience.

To develop a plan for communication of any sort, you have to consider some basic questions:

- Why do you want to communicate with the community? (What's your purpose?)
- Whom do you want to communicate it to? (Who's your audience?)
- What do you want to communicate? (What's your message?)
- How do you want to communicate it? (What communication channels will you use?)
- Whom should you contact and what should you do in order to use those channels? (How will you actually distribute your message?)

### **Purpose:**

What you want to say depends on what you're trying to accomplish with your communication strategy. Your purpose could be one or a combination of the following:

- Becoming known, or better known, in the community
- Educating the public about the issue your organization addresses
- Recruiting program participants or beneficiaries
- Recruiting volunteers to help with your work
- Rallying supporters or the general public to action for your cause
- Announcing events
- Celebrating honors or victories
- Raising money to fund your work
- Countering the arguments, mistakes, or, occasionally, the lies or misrepresentations of those opposed to your work.
- Dealing with an organizational crisis that's public knowledge – a staff member who commits a crime, for example, or a lawsuit aimed at the organization.

### **Audience:**

Knowing who your audience is makes it possible to plan your communication logically. There are many different ways to think about your audience and the ways they could best be contacted. You can group people according to a number of characteristics such as demographics, geography, employment, health, behavior, and attitudes.

Another aspect of the audience to consider is whether you should direct your communication to those whose behavior, knowledge, or condition you hope to affect, or whether your communication needs to be indirect.

## Message

When creating your message, consider content, mood, language, and design.

- **Content:** Craft your message with your audience in mind; planning the content of your message is necessary to make it effective.
- **Mood:** Consider what emotions you want to appeal to. The mood of your message will do a good deal to determine how people react to it. In general, if the mood is too extreme – too negative, too frightening, trying to make your audience feel too guilty – people won't pay much attention to it. It may take some experience to learn how to strike the right balance. Keeping your tone positive will usually reach more people than evoking negative feelings such as fear or anger.
- **Language:** There are two aspects to language here: one is the actual language that your intended audience speaks; the other is the kind of language you use – formal or informal, simple or complex, referring to popular figures and ideas or to obscure ones. Plan to use plain, straightforward language that expresses what you want to say simply and clearly.

## Channels of Communication

What does your intended audience read, listen to, watch, or engage in? You have to reach them by placing your message where they'll see it. Channels of communication may include the following:

- Posters
- Fliers and brochures
- Newsletters
- Promotional materials (items such as caps, T-shirts, and mugs)
- Social Media - In addition to your organization's website, interactive sites like Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube are effective mediums for communication
- Letters to the Editor
- News stories, columns, and reports
- Presentations or presence at local events and local and national conferences, fairs, and other gatherings
- Community outreach
- TV - TV can both carry straightforward messages – ads and Public Service Announcements (PSAs) – and present news and entertainment programs that deal with your issue or profile your organization.

## Distributing Your Message

Establishing relationships with individual media representatives and media outlets is an important part of a communication plan, as is establishing relationships with influential individuals and institutions in the community and/or the population you're trying to reach. You have to make personal contacts, give the media and others reasons to want to help you, and follow through over time to sustain those relationships in order to keep communication channels open.

The individuals that can help you spread your message can vary from formal community leaders – elected officials, CEOs of important local businesses, clergy, etc. – to community activists and ordinary citizens. Institutions and organizations, such as colleges, hospitals, service clubs, faith communities, and other health and community organizations all have access to groups of community members who might need to hear your message.

## **Creating and Evaluating Your Plan**

Now the task is to put it all together into a plan that you can act on. By the time you reach this point, your plan will already be essentially done. You know what your purpose is and whom you need to reach to accomplish it, what your message should contain and look like, what you can afford, what problems you might face, what channels can best be used to reach your intended audience, and how to gain access to those channels. Now it's just a matter of putting the details together – actually composing and designing your message (perhaps more than one, in order to use lots of channels), making contact with the people who can help you get your message out, and getting everything in place to start your communication effort. And finally, you'll evaluate your effort so that you can continue to make it better. If you evaluate your communication plan in terms of both how well you carry it out and how well it works, you'll be able to make changes to improve it. It will keep getting more effective each time you implement it.