



The Strategy Behind the Story

Putting the Pieces in Place for an Effective Communications Plan

You have a new initiative, and you want to gain support from stakeholders far and wide. Sending a press release, writing a blog, posting to your online social networks, and placing an article in a newsletter might get you started. But to be successful, you need a strategy to ensure that your messages are clear and used consistently to engage your stakeholders, provide strong results, and sustain your effort past the first few months. A solid communications plan will make your strategies and messages clear to everyone on your team, from internal staff to external partners, to keep everyone on track and communicating in sync. The following will help you to create and implement a communications plan that reaps real rewards.

First Things First: Understanding the Difference Between Internal and External Planning

When you begin thinking about your communications planning, first you need to clarify in your mind your internal communications versus your external communications. These are two equally important facets to your planning process.

An **internal communications** plan is for those who have been involved in planning your initiative. This includes staff and board members who have been conceptualizing and developing the effort, planning team members, advisory council members, community members who have participated in planning meetings, and other involved stakeholders. Internal communications strategies for those most closely involved in current planning efforts keep the planning team members apprised of what everyone is doing and will differ from strategies to connect with broader stakeholders.

These broader stakeholders are part of your **external communications** plan, a plan created for those who do not yet know about your efforts, such as policy makers, the media, and community members. These might include the people who will benefit from your initiative, businesses, schools, policy makers, other funders who have not yet committed funds, community providers who have not yet been involved, and so on. It also includes those who might be opposed to your efforts.

Putting the Pieces Together: Creating a Communications Plan

A strategic communications plan should include the following:

- 1. Measurable goals and strategies** – Include clear and measurable goals and strategies, and make these as specific as possible. Avoid generic goals such as “Raise awareness.” Rather, include a specific goal such as “See a 35 percent increase in the number of community members who call their local policy maker in support of Initiative A, compared to the number who called in support of Initiative A two years prior.” In addition, ensure that your goals are realistic and can be accomplished with the human and financial resources available.
- 2. Target audiences** – Determine who most needs to hear the messages you are communicating. Consider the following:



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The Strategy Behind the Story, continued

- a. Are messages for those within your organization (internal—staff, board members) or outside (external—community members, policy makers)? Then determine who the audience members are within each category (internal and external). Keep in mind that “the general public” is not a specific audience.
 - b. Determine what your key messages are, and ask yourself what you want your audience to do as a result of hearing your message. Do you want your audience to have a better understanding of a topic? Vote in a certain way? Donate funds? Volunteer? Call a policy maker and ask for support on an issue? The actions you desire will help focus your messages.
 - c. Be as specific as possible about what you want to accomplish with each audience. Your communication will differ with a state policy maker depending on whether you are trying to create a policy change or get a line item in the state budget. Creating policy change may require more testimonials from stakeholders; a line item may require showing a financial return on investment and long-term savings.
 - d. Consider outlining your audiences in two groups: those who support your effort and those who are against it. It will be important to include messages that continue to build support from those who already are on your side, messages that inoculate your audiences from being swayed to shift support, and messages that help audience members who are against your effort now to understand how their support will in fact help them.
 - e. Delineate the different audience sectors (public, private, nonprofit, etc.) as well as the different levels (e.g., local, regional, state). Acknowledge early on in message development that a private business owner may have a different reason to support your effort (e.g., increased revenue) than a nonprofit member (e.g., building local community). Local and state supporters also have different reasons for supporting an effort (a great place to raise a family versus a profitable state in which to conduct your business).
 - f. Consider how you will use the media, since they are both an audience and a vehicle for your message. Be clear on the role of each specific type of media (for example, radio versus newspapers). In addition, recognize the audience for each media and how they may differ. For example, the audience you reach with an online social media campaign may respond to different aspects of your message than those who read it in the newspaper on Sunday morning.
- 3. A “message frame”** – Your communications plan should describe how the message should be framed. That is, clearly define how your initiative will fit into your audience’s perception of a situation (“Initiative A will help improve local education and give local residents better economic opportunities”). Acknowledge, also, your audience’s current situation (“Currently our schools are not good, and they are damaging our community”). By acknowledging the current frame, you can use your messages to shift perceptions in the direction you would like.
- 4. Key messages and persuasive strategies** – While you may have a single overarching message, different audiences will require you to express that message differently. Data and logical arguments may sway one group, while images and emotional testimonies will move another. Your message to a parent group regarding local education may focus on stories of a few individual student successes, while your message to policy makers regarding the same effort may focus on the financial rewards a better education system will bring to the entire community.



The Strategy Behind the Story, continued

- 5. Opportunities and barriers for reaching key audiences** – Your communications plan should identify different strategies and opportunities for reaching key audiences. Perhaps one of your biggest obstacles is a lack of communications funding. Getting PR in the local paper may prove to be a challenge. Is there an upcoming town hall meeting in your community, and can you get a representative on the panel to discuss local education? This might be a great opportunity to share your message with policy makers, community members, and the media in one shot.
- 6. Communications activities** – For each goal and strategy, you will need to identify specific activities or tactics. Each activity/tactic should have a clear timeline, communications vehicles, dedicated staff, and a budget. For example, if you create a social media campaign that encourages people to e-mail their policy makers, you will want to include the specific social media you will use (e.g., Facebook), who will post the messages (the policy director), when the messages will go out (every Tuesday in November at 10 a.m.), and the cost (staff time).
- 7. Communications vehicles** – Within each goal, strategy, and tactic there will be different communications vehicles that carry your message to your audience. This includes face-to-face meetings, telephone calls, e-newsletters, blogs, grassroots mobilization, policy reports, op-eds, social media outlets, community meetings, etc. Make sure that you include the specific vehicle or vehicles appropriate for each, understanding that some messages will most certainly use more than one vehicle.
- 8. Implementation plan** – Your implementation plan shows specifically how your communications plan will be implemented. It details the timelines and deadlines for the activities, the person(s) responsible for each activity, and so on. It will serve as a checklist and accountability plan for your organization as the full communications plan is implemented.
- 9. Low-hanging fruit** – Your initiative will have immediate communications needs. Identify “low-hanging fruit” that can be developed to circulate your messages now. Some of these include:
 - Fact sheets to highlight important details of your initiative
 - A PowerPoint deck that conveys key messages of initiative
 - Talking points to ensure clear and consistent messaging
 - E-mail updates to key stakeholders to keep them abreast of efforts
 - Individual meetings with uninformed stakeholders
 - Ambassadors who can be champions of your initiative
- 10. Monitoring and evaluation** – You will want to track and measure success (and struggles), so make each communication goal and strategy measurable. You can measure and evaluate a goal such as “See a 25 percent increase in number of students who successfully graduate high school in School District X, compared to the percentage who graduated five years ago.” It is difficult to monitor or evaluate “Improve education.” Be prepared to make changes in how you are communicating your messages if you are not getting the results you would like.
- 11. Timing considerations** – A realistic time frame for a strategic communications plan is three years. However, the communications plan should include immediate-, short-, and long-term goals. What do you want to see happen within the first couple of weeks and months (immediate)? You may start an online community or create an e-mail



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The Strategy Behind the Story, continued

newsletter. In the short term (three months through two years), you may start seeing more media coverage. Your long-term goals (three years) may be to see statewide support from policy makers. At year three, recreate your communications plan and continue to move ahead.

12. Crisis communications – The communications plan should include how to manage and communicate about any crises that arise. If your goals include strong funding support and the nation finds itself in a financial crisis, how does that change your messages? What if tragedy strikes one of your biggest advocates? What if the behavior of someone on your board or staff is publicly called into question? These are not issues we like to think about, which is why they fall into the category of “crises.” Your best communications plans take emergencies into consideration before they happen.

13. Staffing – Initial discussions should look at who needs to be involved in creating the communications plan. Executive directors and communications staff, of course, are on the list. You may also choose to hire a communications consultant. If so, make sure the person or firm has experience conducting strategic communications planning, preferably with complex, community-based initiatives. That person/firm can manage the implementation but may not be able to fill all your specific needs. If so, he or she should be able to help identify appropriate partners for media relations, advertising, etc.

14. Budget – A detailed budget is a crucial part of any communications plan. It is vital for guiding choices about where to focus limited resources. Like anything, communications can get very expensive, and the plan needs to match the resources available. Remember to budget obvious expenses such as material design, copywriting, website updates, etc., but also remember to budget staff time and other expenses such as travel costs, food and beverages for meetings, etc. Often some of the biggest expenses are found in “surprises.”

A good communications plan will distinguish you from others competing for the same limited resources and the same valuable stakeholder time. You will be developing a road map for immediate success and long-term change. Take a few minutes today to think about who you would engage in communications planning for something you are working on now or something you know you will be working on in the next few months. Then set up an initial meeting to start the conversation about these core components of your communications plan.

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