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The Power of a Communications Plan

Why You Need One Now – and How to Get It Rolling

One of the most important - yet overlooked and underestimated - actions foundations can take to ensure the success of their grantmaking initiatives is to develop and implement a comprehensive communications plan. I've been helping foundations design and develop grantmaking programs for close to 15 years; based on that experience, I have found that when foundations fail to make communications a priority at the beginning, they are less likely to obtain the results they seek. Here's why.

A few years ago, I organized a series of site visits for a foundation client to learn how other funders in other cities design similar initiatives. Some of the best advice we received was that communications begins the moment you begin discussing your new initiative, so be sure to start planning a communications strategy immediately.

Unfortunately, my client didn't follow that advice – for reasons that are easy to understand. We've all been there. It is the beginning of your grantmaking program and you're in the middle of planning and launching, which feels like you're building a plane and flying it at the same time. There is a lot of pressure to get grants out the door, even though you know more research and development are needed. You're scrambling to assess needs, identify partners, get all the funding in place, and collect data. This means communications planning feels like a luxury – or at least something you can put off until the elusive "Phase 2."

Believe me, I get it. But I also guarantee you that if you don't prioritize communications planning now – and I do mean right now – you're going to pay the price a year, or five or ten years, from now when your grantees and partners aren't coordinated and are unable to stay on the same page, and stakeholders and other funders are confused by what you're trying to do. The unfortunate result of that will be that your partners and stakeholders will quickly start losing confidence and your initiative will lose traction.

The good news is there are three simple things you can do right now – whether you're at the beginning of your initiative or you're already midway through and now recognize that you haven't been effectively implementing a communications plan:

1. Make communications a priority right now.

This really is as important as developing a strategy, writing your request for proposal, identifying potential grantees, and finding an evaluator. It needs to be on your list of must-haves and not on the "we'll get to it later" list. Even if your initiative is underway, it's not too late to begin prioritizing this. Don't know where to start? Keep reading.

2. Identify and leverage your existing communications assets.

Look at the existing marketing and communications staff within your foundation as well as those associated with your existing partners and your potential grantees. What are they already doing and how can they be further engaged in this project right away? Down the road, you might want to retain a communications consultant, but right now you need smart communications professionals who can sit around the table to help you identify your communications needs, your key audiences, and your messages, and help you to begin developing a plan. Chances are, these people are already close at hand.



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The Power of a Communications Plan, continued

3. Reach for the low-hanging-fruit in communication needs and opportunities.

I'll bet there are five or ten things you can do right now, even as you are developing a communications plan, that could quickly alleviate some of your communications needs. These could be relatively simple endeavors like developing fact sheets, a standard PowerPoint deck, talking points, or a newsletter. Or they could be a bit more time intensive, such as conducting a series of individual meetings with key stakeholders to update them on progress.

I guarantee that by beginning to prioritize communications now – regardless of where you are in your initiative – you will reap benefits and avoid troubles in the future. The three easy communication tactics we discussed – making communications a priority, identifying and leveraging your communications assets, and reaching for low-hanging-fruit in communications opportunities – make up a terrific launching point. Implementing those tips now, in conjunction with beginning to develop a more comprehensive communications plan, will set you well on your way to ensuring the success of your grantmaking program.

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