

Communications Plan

The communications plan is your road map: the big picture of what you are planning to do. It allows you to see the full scale of a communications project and how it fits with other aspects of your organization. It outlines the roles and responsibilities of project participants in the creation, review, approval, and dissemination of information about key project processes, events, documents, and milestones. It is also designed with your target audience(s) in mind.

Implementing a well-thought-out communications plan will help your project by managing expectations and ensuring effectiveness. It generates and sustains enthusiasm and support for the project. This is especially important at the beginning. Be sure to meet early with internal and external stakeholders and solicit recommendations about what your plan should include. Not only will you garner valuable suggestions, you will also bring the stakeholders on board with the project. Lastly, a strong communications plan will provide relevant, accurate, and consistent information.

There's a tendency to rely on models and best practices when designing plans and programs. It's useful to review communications plan models and practices, but nothing replaces the process of developing a plan tailored to your specific organization and its needs. A communications plan should consider the following:

Determine Goal(s)

Begin by defining the overall issue, then work on the specifics. It is easy to reverse this process. For example, you can get bogged down with who will photograph for your annual report before you have determined what you need the annual report to do. You will likely have multiple communication goals; be sure to set priorities. When you must choose be-

tween conflicting goals, make these decisions as early as possible.

Identify Coalition Partners

Seek ways to solicit as much internal and external support as possible. The more buy-in you have, the greater your chances of long-term success with the project. Give credit where it is due. All large projects are collaborative efforts; recognize that and use it to your advantage. Suggest specific roles for partners so they understand the importance of their contribution.

Size

Your communications plan should be scaleable. Most projects will require some form of both internal and external communication on a regular basis to sustain momentum on the project and for ongoing evaluation. The plan for a very large or high-risk project may be complex. More stakeholders will mean more information needs and that may require more involved logistical support. Responsibilities may be divided between several individuals. Many steps may be required to develop and approve communications to ensure they are accurate and effective. Highly visible projects may require external public relations expertise. Invite feedback on even small projects.

Identify the Target Audience(s)

It is important to identify the target audience(s), imagine the perspective of each audience and analyze that group's current level of awareness. Spend the time to research and assess these targets. Consider the frequency and length of involvement of each audience, and determine who the actual decision makers are. Should you be targeting retail or wholesale? If both, which is more important? Each goal will have at least one target audience (employees, clients, students, sharehold-

ers, etc.), and messages will vary accordingly. List your audiences in order of priority. When you must choose between two audiences, it should be clear who trumps who in a certain situation. Consider factors such as race, ethnicity, gender, age, income, geography, and language.

Identify Key Messages

Key messages are the most fundamental ideas that you want your audiences to remember from this communications campaign. These should be included in announcements, and/or marketing. Remember that these messages must be woven through all of the written, spoken, and visual materials.

Identify the best media and methods available for use on the project, such as meetings, presentations, and e-mail. Remember, people absorb information in different ways. What are the best vehicles for your message: a brochure? a kick-off event? a speech? You must identify communication channels that are popular and credible. To choose the right channel, keep in mind your objectives, audience, and cost. Be aware that you want as much exposure as possible, so explore channels that allow that, such as a series of small ads in lieu of one large splashy one. Use a mix of channels, since audiences respond best to the same message coming repeatedly from a variety of sources.

Staffing and Management

Create a staffing organizational chart. Ensure accountability by choosing a project leader for each part of the project. Assign responsibilities for creating and delivering the various types of communications. Identify information sources and assign responsibility for collecting information to be communicated.

Budget

Get input and anticipate all the expenses that you can as early as possible. Take the time to prioritize these expenditures, basing your list on what gives you the best return on your investment. It seems obvious, but still demands emphasis: resources should be expended only

on communicating information that contributes to the project's success.

Logistic Details

- Determine the approval process needed for each communication.
- Identify all key events, milestones, and delivery dates.
- Define the process for handling ad hoc inquiries and unforeseen issues.
- Develop libraries of project information, such as donor databases and photographs. Assign who is responsible for implementation and maintenance.

Create a Timeline

Create a detailed timeline, making sure to include review time. Have partners make sure it is realistic.

Evaluation Plan

Project effectiveness is largely determined by whether the goals and objectives, and funding are met. Determine evaluation mechanisms for each activity. Include internal and external feedback. Be prepared to update and change the communications plan. Any significant change in a project should prompt a review of the communications plan. There are many ways to determine a communication campaign's success. Information can be gleaned by various methods, such as tracking visits to your Intranet or Internet site, and receiving more compliments (and fewer complaints) on guest cards in hotels, improved staff morale, and demonstrated savings on utility bills.