



# Activity: **Strategic Communications**

A Strategic Communications Plan will help ensure the success of your organization's program planning by engaging stakeholders in the process and shaping the way your work is perceived by everyone involved. Your plan can help you raise public awareness when it comes to the needs of your members—their challenges and successes. It can also help in raising money and garnering public (and government) support.

Typically, organizations have limited resources when conducting major market research. A strong Communications Plan (like a solid Strategic Plan) can help you make the most of those resources by establishing priorities and focusing on the most important tasks. Through the process of developing your plan, you will be able to clarify your objectives and zero in on your target audiences. This plan will also help to ensure that everyone involved is on the same page when it comes to talking about your work.

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## **Elements of Your Strategic Communications Plan**

- **Determine Goal**
- **Identify and Profile Audience**
- **Develop Messages**
- **Select Communication Channels**
- **Choose Activities and Materials**
- **Establish Partnerships**
- **Implement the Plan**
- **Evaluate and Make Mid-Course Corrections**

## STEP ONE: Determine Your Goal

To initiate a successful and effective communications effort, start with an assessment of your current organizational goals. Examine what your organization stands for—its mission, values and beliefs. Look closely at who your organization is serving. This process will help narrow and sharpen the focus for your communication initiative(s).

**What issue is most important to your organization right now?**

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**Who is most affected by the issue stated above?**

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**Who makes decisions about the issue?**

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**What is the overall goal you want to achieve? (i.e., What change would you be able to observe?) (Be specific.)**

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**What tangible outcomes would you like to achieve through a communications effort? i.e., How will you know you are achieving your goals? (Be specific. What would you see, hear, or have in-hand that would let you know you are making progress toward the goal?)**

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## STEP TWO: Identify & Profile Your Audiences

Once you've identified your key issues, it's time to identify and profile specific audiences to target with a communications initiative.

The reason for taking the time to look this closely at your audiences is that this kind of background information is essential in choosing the most effective ways to communicate with the audience. Marketing professionals have learned this lesson well, now we need to apply some of the same kind of thinking to communicating about your issue.

**Of the audiences listed on the Step 1 worksheet, whose knowledge, attitudes and behavior must be changed in order to meet your goal? (These groups now become your primary audiences.)**

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**Who else is affected if you succeed in your goal? (Secondary audience)**

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**Are there others who can influence primary and secondary audiences? (Tertiary audiences) You may wish to design a communication initiative to reach some of these audiences as well. Or you may see a role for these folks as "allies and partners".**

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**Now you are ready to complete worksheets for each of your audiences identified above. (Please see the next page.)**



## STEP THREE: Develop Messages

Your messages are closely tied to your goal and objectives. They deliver important information about the issue and compel the targeted audience to think, feel, or act. They can:

- **Show the importance, urgency, or magnitude of the issue;**
- **Show the relevance of the issue;**
- **Put a “face” on the issue;**
- **Be tied to specific values, beliefs, or interests of the audience;**
- **Reflect an understanding of what would motivate the audience to think, feel, or act;**
- **Be culturally relevant and sensitive;**
- **Be memorable.**

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The messages you develop by using the worksheet provided in this section can be used in many ways. First, they are a set of statements that you and your team agree upon as conveying the key information for your initiative. They will not include all the detail and supporting ideas and data that you may use in printed materials or other forms of communication. The messages you develop in the worksheets can become the underlying themes for your materials and activities.

You may develop slogans based on them. You may develop sets of talking points that members of your team will use in making presentations. And they easily become the basis for radio and print PSAs, the genesis for posters, and may suggest topics for fact sheets, drop-in articles, and even letters to the editor or newspaper editorials.

Before turning to the Message Development Worksheet, take a few moments to read “Considerations for Message Construction” below.

## Considerations for Message Construction

Both the channel (the conduit for sending your message to the chosen target audience) and the purpose of communicating information influence message design. Information may be designed to convey new facts, alter attitudes, change behavior, or encourage participation in decision-making. Some of these purposes overlap; often they are progressive. That is, for persuasion to work, the public must first receive information, then understand it, believe it, agree with it, and then act upon it. Regardless of the purpose, messages must be developed with consideration of the desired outcome.

Factors that help determine public acceptance include:

**Clarity**—Messages must clearly convey information to assure the public’s understanding and to limit the chances for misunderstanding or inappropriate action. Clear messages contain as few technical/scientific/bureaucratic terms as possible, and eliminate information that the audience does not need in order to make necessary decisions (such as unnecessarily detailed explanations). Readability tests can help determine the reading level required to understand drafted material and help writers to be conscientious about the selection of words and phrases.

**Consistency**—In an ideal world there would be specific consensus on the meaning of new findings, and all messages on a particular topic would be consistent. Unfortunately, consistency is sometimes elusive. Experts tend to interpret new data differently, making consensus among government, industry, and public interest groups difficult.

**Main Points**—The main points should be stressed, repeated, and never hidden within less strategically important information.

**Tone and Appeal**—A message should be reassuring, alarming, challenging, or straightforward, depending upon the desired impact and the target audience. Messages should also be truthful, honest and as complete as possible.

**Credibility**—The spokesperson and source of the information should be believable and trustworthy.

**Public Need**—For a message to break through the “information clutter” of society, messages should be based on what the target audience perceives as most important to them, what they want to know, and not what is most important or most interesting to the originating agency.

Prior to final production, messages should be pretested with the target audiences (and in some cases with channel “gatekeepers”) to assure public understanding and other intended responses.

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# Message Development Worksheet

*(Please note that you will need to make multiple copies of this worksheet.)*

*(Please refer to your completed worksheets for steps one and two.)*

**AUDIENCE:** \_\_\_\_\_

**What are the barriers and benefits to your audience thinking, feeling, or acting on your issue?**

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**What change in ATTITUDE (the way they feel about the issue) do you want to motivate in your audience to meet your goal?**

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**What change in the BEHAVIOR (day-to-day actions) of your audience are you trying to achieve?**

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**Now, based on what you know about your audience needs to hear in order to think, feel or act, what are the three most compelling sentences you could use to motivate the audience? These are your messages.**

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## **STEP FOUR: Select Communications Channels**

Communications channels carry the messages to the target audiences.

Channels take many forms and there is an infinite list of possibilities. Answering some key questions will aid you in identifying the most effective channels for reaching your audiences.

### **SAMPLE CHANNELS**

- **Television stations**
- **Radio stations**
- **Newspapers**
- **Websites**
- **Community centers**
- **Street festivals**
- **Laundromats**
- **City government offices**
- **Malls**
- **Parks**
- **Schools, colleges, and vocational training centers**
- **Libraries**
- **Recreation centers (e.g. basketball courts or soccer fields)**
- **Community non-profit offices**
- **Transportation depots/stations**
- **Supermarkets**
- **Restaurants**

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# Channel Development Worksheet

*(Please note that you will need to make multiple copies of this worksheet.)*

*(Please refer to your completed worksheets for step two.)*

**AUDIENCE:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Where or from whom does this audience get its information? Who do they find credible?**

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**Where does this audience spend most of its time? Where are they most likely to give you their attention?**

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**Complete list of channels your team wants to use to reach this audience:**

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## STEP FIVE: Choose Activities & Materials

What are the activities, events, and/or materials—to be used in your selected channels—that will most effectively carry your message to the intended audiences? In choosing these, you should consider:

- **Appropriateness to audience, goal, and message**
- **Relevance to desired outcomes**
- **Timing**
- **Costs/Resources**
- **Climate of community toward the issue/activity**
- **Cultural appropriateness (including language)**
- **Environment—geographic considerations**

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### SAMPLE ACTIVITIES

- **News conferences**
- **Editorial board meetings at newspapers**
- **Radio talk or call-in shows**
- **A benefit race**
- **Parades**
- **Web links**
- **Conferences**
- **One-on-one meetings**
- **Open houses**
- **Speeches**
- **Hotlines**
- **Listserves**
- **Information Fair**

### MATERIALS TO SUPPORT ACTIVITIES

- **News releases**
- **Fliers and brochures**
- **Opinion editorials (op-eds)**
- **Letters to the editor**
- **Posters**
- **Public service announcements (PSAs)**
- **Bookmarks**
- **Video presentations**
- **Web pages**
- **A float in a parade**
- **Buttons, pins, and ribbons**
- **Promotional items and giveaways**



# Harnessing the Power of Partnerships

## Allies and Partners

Groups, organizations, or businesses may exist that would aid you in reaching our goal by providing funds, expertise or other resources toward your communications. The prospect of developing partnerships with area businesses and local organizations may seem overwhelming if you haven't had much experience in working with the private sector. However, there are some practical steps you can follow that will focus your energies and resources where they will be most effective.

## Determine Your Needs

Before you ask for help, it's important to identify what you need most. Make a "Wish List" and include areas like equipment (computers, vehicles, or supplies); services; educational activities and materials; and specific products that can be donated. This list will help set your priorities and guide who you need to contact.

## Identify Potential Partners

There may be hundreds of organizations to approach in your community—where do you start? Let your fingers do the walking and start with the online or with the phone book. By using your Wish List to identify categories of need, you can narrow the types of organizations that can help you. Don't limit yourself at this stage and try to be imaginative. For instance, a local coffee shop may not have an obvious link, but if it is a popular hang-out for college students, the restaurant might host an event and allow you to hand out information.

Other sources for potential partners are your Chamber of Commerce directory, general corporate directories, and personal contacts, including your board of directors or existing coalitions. For national contacts as well as local, there are several national directories that are available at your local library. Don't forget to monitor the local media. Who sponsored that nonprofit event and where was it held? What company bought the T-shirts for the annual 10K Run to support environmental research? Also, if you have a good relationship with other associations, they may share their giving list.

## Prioritize Your Contacts

When you have a list of possible contacts, begin making your partnership circle. This circle will help you further identify your most important contacts so you can prioritize your efforts. You've chosen possible partners by category—now look for personal contacts. Think of dropping a pebble in the water and watching the ripples spread out. By putting organizations where you already have contacts in the center, you will anchor your effort as you move further and further out.

Start with organizations that have helped in the past—they will be the very center of your circle. Then talk to employees, your board of directors, or coalition members. Who do they know? You may discover that someone on staff went to school with the president of a local bank. Put organizations where you have close personal contacts on the next "wave" of your circle. After examining personal contacts, look for those organizations that would make "perfect partners," i.e., organizations that have supported environmental issues in the past.

Keep going until you get to the very outer layer, which would be organizations where you have no contacts at all and no apparent links. Now you have prioritized your outreach list!

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The final step before preparing your proposals is finding the correct contact. You may have this information if you've used an up-to-date directory or have a personal contact, but if you're not sure, make a phone call. Ask to whom you would send a partnership proposal; be sure to get the person's name, title, full address, and phone number. And finally, don't overlook the importance of using the Internet to research target organizations.

### **Make Your Proposal Strategic**

Companies have a giving strategy, so your proposal should be strategic too. A fundraiser for a major national nonprofit once said, "There is no corporate philanthropy —they all give for a reason." Most organizations give strategically, meaning they give in an area(s) where they have an interest, want to influence someone or something, or stand to gain something—employees, customers, and the community influence those decisions as well. We all know that there can be tough competition for nonprofit support, and that decisions are sometimes made on small details. Look at your partnership circle and carefully look for connections. Has a city councilperson recently dealt with an environmental issue? Look for logical allies and mutual goals and put that information in your proposal.

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Make the proposal "mutually beneficial." Just as you have asked for something, be prepared to offer something in return. Try to at least reward the organization with positive community exposure and recognition for its efforts.

Use your best judgment on the proposal. If you know someone, a letter may suffice. If you're sending a proposal to a large company, you may want to send a letter, an information kit, and a recent newspaper article on what your organization is doing in the community. Always demonstrate the importance of the issue, the importance of the program in the community, specifically how the organization can help strengthen your efforts and how the organization will benefit from its participation.

### **Face-to-Face Follow-up**

About a week after sending your proposal, call the contact to verify that he/she received the information. At this point, introduce yourself (if you don't know the contact already) and offer to answer questions or send more information. Ask when would be a good time to call back to schedule an appointment; mark the date and call promptly.

The best way to "sell" the proposal is face-to-face where you can talk about the campaign, its goals, and its accomplishments. It's important to be realistic. Smaller businesses may not have extra funds to support community programs, but may be able to provide in-kind support. They may be willing to include information on your work in their mailings to the community, fliers to circulate to their employees, in their stores, etc. If you've done your homework, you will be able to request help that the company will gladly agree to provide.

### **Make Your Community Partners Part of Your Team**

Don't ask for something and then never contact the organization again! Keep a database of all donors (even listing those who said they might give in the future) and recognize them periodically with a personal note or newsletter. Keep them informed on what's happening with your work and other issues in the community and continually offer opportunities for participation, including volunteering. Also, offer a chance for feedback so you can establish a two-way dialogue with your partners. A town meeting, an online seminar, or a presentation, are all ways to share information with your partners. Make them team members and they will continue to support you for years to come!

## **STEP SEVEN: Implement the Plan**

There are many tools for organizing yourself around time, dollars, and staff needed to implement an initiative. One approach is given here as an example. Of course you should feel free to use your own tried and true management tools.

Use the following steps to determine time, budget and staffing needs:

### **1. List all activities.**

### **2. Under each activity, outline the steps, in order, that will lead to its completion.**

### **3. Assign a budget estimate to each step.**

### **4. Assign a staffing needs estimate to each step.**

### **5. Working backwards from the activity completion point, assign a date for each step in the activity.**

You can plot your dates on calendar pages if you'd like, or you can organize them in another timeline such as a Gantt chart.

With a Gantt chart, the date/timeline runs horizontally across the page; tasks are listed in chronological order down the left hand side. A line then extends across the page from each task, showing the date work begins and ends for that task or sub-task.

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## STEP EIGHT: Evaluate & Make Mid-Course Corrections

- **Specify times to take stock of progress in completing communications plan;**
- **Determine strengths and weaknesses;**
- **Identify obstacles;**
- **Create and implement new approaches for success;**
- **Consult with communications technical assistance advisors.**

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## Campaign Planning Worksheet

Consider the following questions when planning a comprehensive communications campaign:

**1. What are your short-term and long-term campaign objectives?**

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**2. What is your timeline for completion of the campaign?**

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**3. Who are your target audiences?**

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**4. What are the key communications messages (up to 3)?**

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**5. What are your staff and financial resources?**

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**6. What materials and activities will best disseminate these messages?**

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**7. What media have you targeted?**

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**8. What specific roles have you identified for your spokespeople?**

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**9. What role will members, government, partners, and staff play?**

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**10. How will you evaluate your campaign?**

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