

COMMUNICATIONS PLANNING

WHY SHOULD YOUR NON-PROFIT DEVELOP A COMMUNICATIONS PLAN?

For many reasons:

1. Most NGOs have limited resources — both time and money. A strategic communications plan will help your group focus those resources on the most important tasks *and* set priorities. Without a plan, groups run the risk of reacting to external events in a knee-jerk manner, wasting valuable communication opportunities and getting pulled “off-mission” in the process.
2. A good plan imposes discipline and clear thinking that will help you clarify your objectives and target audiences, sharpen your message and help you better understand the environment in which you will be delivering that message.
3. Strategic communications planning will help your organization integrate all of its communications work on a particular issue, including not only media activities, but government relations, grassroots organizing, fundraising, and communications with members.
4. A good plan will help ensure that everyone in your organization is on the same page when they communicate with the rest of the world.
5. A strategic communications plan will help you develop better media plans, too. And a well-developed media plan is important because the media is the primary education force in our society, they set the public policy agenda and frame public perception on many issues.

WHO SHOULD BE INVOLVED IN COMMUNICATIONS PLANNING?

Several people! In fact, forming a communications planning committee is a critical first step in developing your plan. A good plan requires broad participation from your organization or coalition of groups working on the same issue. Try to engage staff, board and volunteers in the process. If possible, bring an experienced communications strategist in to facilitate meetings and keep your planning work moving.

OVERVIEW OF A CLASSIC COMMUNICATIONS PLAN

All communications work is more art than a science. However, a typical plan outline will often look something like this:

1. Situation Analysis: Organizational Background
2. Situation Analysis: External or Public Environment
3. Campaign/Organizational Goal and Key Objectives
4. Communication Objectives
5. Target Audiences
6. Key Messages
7. Strategies
8. Tactics
9. Timing
10. Timelines
11. Spokespeople

In the following paragraphs, we address these typical sections of a strategic communications plan.

SITUATION ANALYSIS: ORGANIZATIONAL BACKGROUND

If your organization is developing an overall communications plan (rather than a plan for one specific campaign), it is important that you stand back and consider how your organization is positioned within the community it serves. Although you don't necessarily have to include all the items on the following list, it is important that you have considered the value of each.

- The history of your organization
- The history/facts about the issue you are addressing
 - Why is it an important issue? (Include statistics if possible)
- The services your organization provides to the community
- The people who benefit from your services
 - Think broadly—not just direct clients but whole communities...
- The function your organization serves
 - Basically, your mission statement, answering what function you perform, for whom, how and why you do all this. In some cases this may be very similar to the services you provide.
- Your organization's role in your service area
 - Where do you fit compared to other services in your market?
 - Where does your market fit within the larger community?
- Performance indicators

- How many clients do you serve?
- What policies have you helped change?
- Competition analysis
 - Who delivers similar services?
 - How are you different?
 - How are you better?

SITUATION ANALYSIS: EXTERNAL OR PUBLIC ENVIRONMENT

(The following questions are partly adapted from Nigel Atkin's, A Guide for Communications Planning, 1997)

It is important to be aware of the external threats and opportunities to your organization, to those who may be opposed to your messages, and to have a good sense of the communications environment in which you will be delivering your message. Consider these questions:

- What is the current local/national perception of your organization, program and/or issues?
 - Are you widely seen as a “grassroots” organization?
 - As a well-funded international advocacy group?
 - As a statesmanlike or “think-tank” organization?
 - As credible?
 - As radical, or mainstream?
 - How do you *want* to be positioned?
- Has there been a history of media stories on you or your work?
 - Letters to the editor?
 - Talk radio interviews?
 - Feature stories?
 - In other words, how exposed is your group?
 - How has it been positioned within the media to date?
- Have any special studies or surveys been carried out affecting your issue area?
- Is more research required to understand attitudes and public opinion towards your issue?
 - Is there anything available now, for free (e.g. recent opinion polls by groups like IMPACS, Environics or Viewpoints Research?)
- Has the issue generated local debate, questions from media or questions in the Legislature?
 - In other words, is it on the public's “radar screen” or would most people consider it to be “new”?

- Has there been any significant lobbying of your office, in person or through correspondence?
- Who are your allies?
 - Who publicly supports your position?
- Do you have opponents?
 - What are their messages?
 - What effect are these messages having on your organization or work?
 - What are *their* strengths and weaknesses?

CAMPAIGN/ORGANIZATIONAL GOAL AND KEY OBJECTIVES

The answers to these questions should reflect your organization's mission. It is assumed that your organization has undertaken a strategic planning process at some point in its recent history. It is worth emphasizing that media coverage, in and of itself, is ***not*** an organizational or campaign goal or objective. Communications work of any kind is the means, not the end. It should spring from, and support, your organization's mission and overarching goals.

- What is your organization's ultimate goal?
- How will the world be a better place once you achieve your goal?
- How do you want your organization to be perceived?
- How do you want your issues and/or programs to be perceived?
- How do you want your community to be perceived?
- What is the projected timeline for achieving your goals?
- For each goal you have defined, you need to develop specific, measurable and achievable objectives.
- What are your interim objectives—the smaller wins or “mini-goals”.

COMMUNICATIONS OBJECTIVES

In essence, why are you mounting a communications campaign? Again, objectives are ideally concrete, measurable and specific. Consider these questions:

- What is your ultimate objective?
 - For example, to get a key decision-maker to introduce new Bill into the Legislature, or to impose a moratorium on a specific industrial activity
- What do you want your target audience to do, **exactly**? What is your “call to action”?
 - Do you want your audience to write a letter to a decision-maker?
 - Do you want them to make a supportive call in to a talk show during a critical debate with your organization’s Executive Director?
 - Do you want them to change a personal behaviour?
- How will you measure success? What will your benchmarks be?
 - Is it that 100 people will call you by a certain date?
 - Is it that you will generate \$5,000 in new donations?
 - Is it that your event will be sold-out?
- Do you want to provide your audience with new information?
 - What do you want them to do with this information?

TARGET AUDIENCE(S)

Your ‘A’ List, Primary Audiences

- Who do you **ultimately** want to influence?
 - Name names. “Business leaders” isn’t good enough. You want to influence Jimmy James, CEO of BigBiz Corp. You don’t want to influence “politicians”, but the Minister of the Environment.
- How can you reach your target audiences?
 - Does the Minister have an Advisor?
 - Does the Advisor have Issue Researchers?
 - Who are they? Know their names. List them in order of priority to reaching your goal or key objectives.

Your ‘B’ List, Secondary Audiences

- Who supports your work?
 - And, who is critical of your work?
 - These folks may be talking to your key audiences as well. Know what they are saying and be prepared to respond.

- How has each media represented your issue?
 - Know who the sympathetic reporters are by name. Know when their articles/ columns/ shows run. Follow them.
 - Know who the oppositional reporters are by name. Know when their articles/ columns/ shows run. Follow them, too.
- Are recipients of your service an audience?
 - What message do they need?
- Are your organization's staff, volunteers, donors and friends an audience?
 - What is the message you need to communicate to them?

KEY MESSAGES

There are many ways of communicating about the same issue. It is important to know which words will resonate with your audiences; which words or ideas the public will embrace. Some research, such as informal focus group testing or direct mail questionnaires may be required to fully understand your audiences' motivations. The results of testing may be unexpected — even counter-intuitive. Message testing is an important step to ensuring you develop a successful communications campaign.

- What is your “hook”?
 - What are the specific phrases and words that capture your message most clearly and simply?
 - Can you state your message in a bumper sticker? State your message in one single sentence. Any longer, and the thought has not been adequately focused.

STRATEGIES

Although it may be tempting, do not start developing your Communications Plan by identifying strategies. Go through the planning process to first develop or identify goals, objectives, clear messages and target audiences. You will ultimately develop much more effective strategies in this way. Media relations are only one kind of strategy, and may not be the most effective one for your particular issue. Your issue may be advanced more effectively, for example, through a single briefing with a key decision-maker, rather than through a strategy which generates 1000 faxes to his or her office. The strategy you select depends entirely on the situation, objectives, and a clear understanding of who constitutes your target audience, and what will move them to act.

Consider the following questions when developing your strategies:

- Is your strategy proactive or reactive?

- Low profile or high profile?
- Local jurisdiction or nation-wide?
- What are the major communications opportunities?
- What are the major communications impediments?
- What communications strengths are available in your organization?
 - Clipping files, strong public speakers, and staff who are well connected in the community, etc.?
- What alliances does your organization have?
- Does your approach warrant paid advertising through print, radio and/or TV (assuming you have the resources to do so!)?
- Who are your opponents?
 - What do you anticipate their key messages will be in response to your release?
 - How will you respond?
- What are the potential weak points in your argument or story?
- How creative can you be?
- Does your strategy warrant the development of a specific Media Strategy?
 - Which kind of media coverage will result in the greatest impact on decision-makers?
 - Is the issue big enough, newsworthy enough to warrant a press conference? An exclusive? With whom?
 - Should your story be delivered in a media briefing with specific reporters invited? An editorial board meeting with one media outlet?
 - Can your story be made visual? Are there ways in which your story could be staged, presented and/or supported by visual materials?
 - When should your release be timed? How does it fit with other current events? What are current editorial priorities?
 - If a government official could be asked by the media to respond to your release, should you inform that official? How much time will you give them? Remember that government has communications staff and they may find it in their interest to undermine your message.

TACTICS

There are literally dozens of methods to reach an audience. In selecting and prioritizing your tactics, consider these questions:

- How big is your budget?
- What personnel resources are available to you?

- How much time will they be required to spend on communications efforts?
- Is this reasonable given their current work expectations?
- In brief, how do you plan to deliver your key message(s) to your target audiences?

Here's an example: If your strategy is to inform the Minister of your issue portfolio in more detail (and you don't trust that his or her advisors are fully informed themselves) your tactics could include the preparation and delivery of a briefing session, backed up by a briefing kit. Steps could include:

- preparing a Question & Answer document;
- doing background research on the political environment around your issue;
- knowing when major decisions about your issue or policies related to your issue will be made.

TIMING

Timing refers to the natural links onto which you can hook your communications. For example, if the government will be making budget decisions that will impact your issue area, be prepared to respond. Be proactive and contact media and assistants to the Minister before the decision and announcements are made. Does your issue have natural links to stories around specific holidays? Plan out your activities well in advance of the holiday you are hooking your campaign on.

TIMELINE

Develop an internal timeline based on notes in your Timing section. Be as specific as possible. If you are going to produce a briefing kit to educate your target audience, put every element of its research and production in a timeline. If you skip this step, you may find yourself amazed at how quickly the meeting you needed your briefing kit for came up...or, you may realize that you don't have time to prepare a full briefing kit, but could manage to pull together an informative Question & Answer sheet.

SPOKESPEOPLE

Determine who within your group will project the most credible voice to your key audiences. You may want to train one person to address the government and editorial boards, and another to share your message with stakeholders. If you are dealing with a variety of issues, you may also want more than one spokesperson. See [The Media Interview \[link\]](#) and [Developing Relationships with Reporters \[link\]](#) for more information about this important area of your strategic plan.

NOW, USE THE PLAN!

Don't shelve your work and return to fighting fires. Use it! Refer back to your communications workplan on a regular basis. Build an evaluation process into the project timeline. The greatest benefit in having built your Strategic Communications Plan, other than the fact that you were able to pull off a fantastic campaign, is that the next time you decide to mount a communications campaign, a large chunk of the work will already be done. And, if you track your successes, challenges and failures, then you'll be able to adapt subsequent campaigns to accommodate what you learned the first time around.

SUMMARY OF SAMPLE COMMUNICATIONS PLAN

SAMPLE MEDIA PLAN #1- SMITHERS HOSPITAL

Background:	Smithers General Hospital is slated to be shut down in December 2001. Over 300 jobs will be lost, and the closing will force local residents to travel over 200 km to receive hospital care. The provincial government has refused to meet with community leaders to discuss the impact the closure will have on local community residents. In response, the Smithers General Hospital and the Smithers Community Health Centre are launching a communications campaign to educate the government on how, in this resource-based town, accidents are common and traveling 200 km for emergency care can mean the difference between life and death. A one-year study will be conducted. It will rely on interviews with residents to document what effect the closing will have on the community. It will focus on emergency access, but will also gather other demographic, attitudinal and behavioral information.				
Public Environment:	Hospitals are being closed in rural communities in most provinces. Major, city-centred media outlets are generally supportive of the closures in their editorial pages. Local media has all but ignored this issue. There are a couple of sympathetic reporters who are willing to write on the issue, but they have stated a need for 'news'.				
Goal/Key Objectives:	To stop the closing of Smithers General Hospital.				
Communications Objectives:	To raise the profile of the issue so that Smithers' residents take ownership of the problem and participate in the survey. To change the provincial government's position that Smithers General Hospital is expendable.				
Audience(s):	<table><tr><td data-bbox="552 1711 779 1753">Primary:</td><td data-bbox="779 1711 1341 1753">Minister of Health Premier of BC</td></tr><tr><td data-bbox="552 1795 779 1837">Secondary:</td><td data-bbox="779 1795 1341 1879">Smithers' business and community leaders, particularly: the mayor, First Nations' leaders,</td></tr></table>	Primary:	Minister of Health Premier of BC	Secondary:	Smithers' business and community leaders, particularly: the mayor, First Nations' leaders,
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Chamber of Commerce president, mining
company president, timber company president
Smithers' general public

- Messages:** Closing Smithers General Hospital will put hundreds of lives at risk.
Closing Smithers General Hospital will push 300 families into poverty.
Closing Smithers General Hospital will negatively impact tourism and other businesses in the community.
- Strategies:** Create a survey tool to gather stories and information—identify testimonials that illustrate how lack of access to immediate health care has led to deaths.
Prepare a briefing kit that highlights stories identified in the survey.
Facilitate kitchen table meetings throughout the community. Encourage specific actions from all participants, such as sending letters to the Minister of Health, arranging meetings with Smithers MLA.
- Media Strategies:** Target local and Victoria media with stories and statistics.
Focus on editorial pages of newspapers, Victoria-based magazines, talk radio shows and a TV 'news magazine'
- Tactics:** Develop a series of staged events that demonstrate the difficulty of moving injured people 200km to Terrace.
Write a series of human-interest stories based on feedback from survey respondents.
Create a video news release that shows the dangers of working in resource extraction jobs.
- Timing:** BC government releases new provincial budget: February
WorkSmart week: April 1-8
Health union AGM: July 16
Smithers' Community Week (MLA to kick off): August 21
- Timeline:** Survey ready for distribution to community: May 1
Allies identified: June 1
Media materials, stories, VNR completed: July 1
- Spokespeople:** President, Smithers General Hospital
Executive Director, Smithers Community Health Centre

SAMPLE MEDIA PLAN # 2 -- NON-PROFIT SECTOR

Background:

Non-profits in Canada do not have adequate access to mainstream media.

The media is a powerful agent of social change; it determines which issues will be put on the policy agenda and defines how those issues will be presented to the public.

The good work of non-profits is fighting a difficult battle with corporate and commercial interests to get media space.

Many non-profits simply don't have the resources or adequate experience or understanding of how the media work to make the most effective use this powerful tool.

IMPACS, a Vancouver-based non-profit has been created to address these needs.

Public Environment:

In general, the public does not appreciate the value-added non-profit organizations bring to their communities.

The governments, both federal and provincial, are placing more and more responsibility on the non-profit sector to deliver services which the government has historically provided.

The media do not view the activities of non-profits with the same regard they give activities in the for-profit or corporate sector.

Goal/Key Objectives:

Goal 1: Raise the profile of the non-profit sector in Canada.

Goal 2: Create a media environment that places value on the activities of non-profits.

Objective: Deliver affordable and accessible skills training and public relations services adapted to serve non-profit needs.

Communications Objectives: Get people to attend training so that they become better media communicators.

Get media buy-in to the training concept. Get media to run opinion editorials and news stories about the value-added non-profits bring to their communities.

Provide the general public with information that highlights the value of the non-profit sector.

Audience(s):	Primary: individuals working in the non-profit sector editors of community papers Chamber of Commerce staff Secondary: general public
Messages:	The voice of the non-profit sector has been silent too long: it's time to turn up the volume. Non-profits have great stories to tell.
Strategies:	Design then deliver media skills workshops to communities through BC. Write a series of articles for the media that detail the value of the non-profit sector to Canada's social, economic and environmental health.
Media Strategies:	Develop relationships with individual community paper editors and TV and radio producers in each community we go to with training.
Tactics:	Write an opinion editorial, a press release and a series of PSAs for radio, print and TV. Secure a high-profile author for the op/ed. Include a quote from a local community member for the press releases being sent to that community. Get buy-in from the local press by inviting them to speak at the training session.
Timing:	Dates to avoid for spring delivery of training: Earth Day, April 22 Environment Week and the week prior, May 24 to June 6 Victoria Day weekend, May 21 to 24
Timeline:	January: hire trainers, outreach to potential communities February: develop workshop materials, define agenda March: identify sympathetic media, produce and distribute brochure April: focus on media development, deliver 1st two workshops May: more media, more delivery June: evaluate success of project, take a week off to recharge, catch up on gardening
Spokespeople:	Donna Barker, Director, Training and Publications, IMPACS