Elements of a 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 1: Determine 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?

_____
_____
_____
_____

Who is most affected by the issue stated above?

_____
_____
_____
_____

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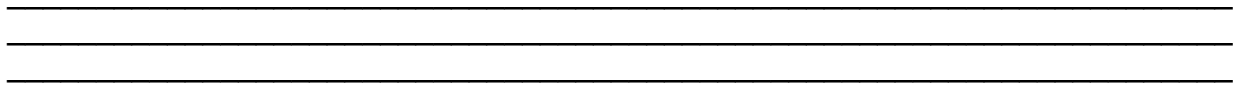
What tangible outcomes would you like to achieve through a communications effort? i.e., How will you know you are achieving your goals? (Be specific. What would you see, hear, or have in-hand that would let you know you are making progress toward the goal?)

Step 2: Identify and Profile the 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. Madison Avenue has learned this lesson well, now we need to apply some of the same kind of thinking to communicating about your issue.

Audience Definition Worksheet

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)

_____
_____
_____
_____

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".)

_____
_____
_____
_____

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

Audience Segmentation Worksheet
(Note: you will probably need to make multiple copies of this worksheet.)

Audience:

_____

Describe what you know about this audience's knowledge, attitudes and
behaviors as they relate to your issue:

_____
_____
_____
_____
_____
_____

What are the barriers to this audience fully supporting or participating in reaching
your goal? What are the benefits if they do?

_____
_____
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What are the characteristics of this audience? How do they spend their time?
What is their gender, ethnicity and income level? How have they been
educated? What are the language considerations? What or who are they
influenced by? What makes new information credible for them? What or who
could motivate change or action?

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Step 3: 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 audience 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

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."

Considerations for Message Construction

Both the *channel* (the conduit for sending your message to the chosen target audience) and the *purpose* of communicating environmental 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 changes 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.

Source: *Making Health Communication Programs Work: A Planner's Guide,* Office of Cancer
Communications, National Cancer Institute, National Institutes of Health (1992).

Message Worksheet *(one for each audience)*

Note: Refer to your completed worksheets for Steps 1 & 2.

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 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 4: Select Communication 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
Web sites
Community centers
Street festivals
Laundromats
City government offices (e.g. Division of Motor Vehicles)
Malls
Parks
Schools, colleges, vocational and language training centers
Libraries
Recreation centers (e.g. basketball courts or soccer fields)
Community non-profit offices
Transportation depots/stations
Supermarkets
Fast food restaurants
Literature Racks

Channel Worksheet *(one worksheet for each audience)*
Note: Use the work you did in Step 2 to help you with these worksheets.

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 5: Choose Activities and 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

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
Listservs
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

Step 6: Establish Partnerships

Groups, organizations, or businesses may exist that would aid you in reaching
your goal by providing funds, expertise, support, or other resources. Please list
allies or partners who support or work with your audiences or share in your goals.

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HARNESSING THE POWER OF PARTNERSHIPS

Allies and Partners
Groups, organizations, or businesses may exist that would aid you in reaching your 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 Yellow Pages. 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 pizza parlor may not have an obvious link, but if it is a popular hang-out for high school students, the restaurant might host a pizza party and allow you to hand out information on ORVs.

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. The Corporate Giving Directory, which is updated annually, is an excellent choice. Don't forget to monitor the local media. Who sponsored that nonprofit ball 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 nonprofits or agencies, 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!

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.

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 at that time.

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 ORVs 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 ORVs and other environmental 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 7: 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 (date/timeline runs horizontally across page; tasks are listed in chronological order down left-hand side. A line extends across the page from each task, showing the date work begins and ends on that task or subtask).

Sample Timeline Planning Sheet

Activity: Place print PSAs in up to 25 periodicals, newsletters, or bulletins

❑ [Preliminary Work] Design camera-ready PSA "slicks" ;10 person hours.

❑ [Weeks 1 & 2] Identify list of potential placement opportunities and get names and addresses of public service director or advertising manager for each publication; (local phone charges); 4-6 person hours.

❑ [Week 1] Draft/review/refine cover letter to director/manager; $0.00; 2 person hours.

❑ [Week 2] Print letters; $0.50 (paper); 1 person hour.

❑ [Week 2] Acquire flat envelopes and blank labels for mailing; $10.00; 1 person hour.

❑ [Week 2] Create labels for mailing; $0.00; 3-4 person hours.

❑ [Week 2] Assemble mailing; $0.00; 2-3 person hours.

❑ [Week 2] Mail print PSAs; $13.75 (.55x25); .25 person hour.

❑ [Week 3] Begin follow-up calls to PSA directors to encourage placement; (local calls); 6-8 hours (could be done by 2 persons;).

❑ [Weeks 3-10] Monitor PSA placement; $5.00 to purchase papers; 3-4 person hours.

❑ [Week 10] Write report about initiative, its outcomes, midcourse corrections, and things you would do differently next time; $2.00 paper & repro; 4-6 person hours.

❑ [Week 10 or 11] Circulate to appropriate members of your organization; $0.00; 1-2 person. hours

Total direct costs: $31.25

Labor: 28-38 person hours (over 4-10 weeks' time after acquiring PSAs)

Step 8: Evaluate and 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.

Campaign Planning Worksheet

Consider the following questions when planning a comprehensive communications campaign:

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

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

3. Who are your target audiences?

4. What are the key communications messages (no more than three, please)?

5. What are your staff and financial resources?

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

7. What media have you targeted?

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

9. What role will consortium members, corporate partners, and staff play?

10. How will you evaluate your campaign?