Effective Communications Strategies

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Réunir les
communautés régionales
D'EXPRESSION ANGLAISE DU QUÉBEC

Connecting
QUEBEC'S REGIONAL
ENGLISH-SPEAKING
Communities

Effective Communications Strategies

Secrétariat aux relations
avec les Québécois
d'expression anglaise

Québec

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Deliver
information
well

*Identify the messages you
need to promote, to whom
you're targeting those
messages, and with which
method(s).*
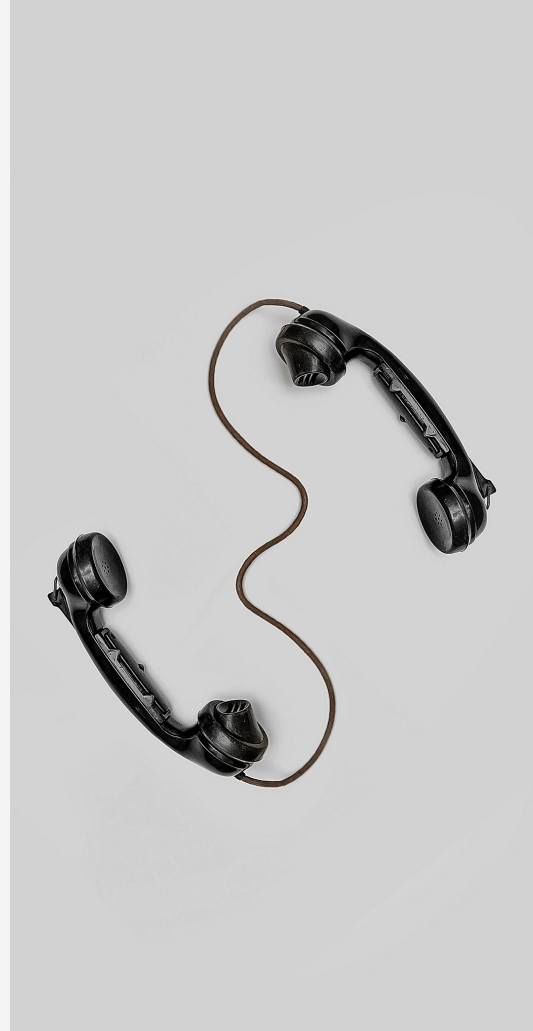
Generally speaking, communication plans can be used to promote your organization, to pitch new initiatives or launch new activities, and in a crisis. They can help your organization to communicate effectively with community members, partners, stakeholders and government while also meeting core organizational objectives.

Communication plans can assist your organization in clarifying the purpose of an activity launch or new initiative and officially determine the messages you want to deliver to your intended audience(s).

Additionally, a communications plan can help your organization communicate internally,

This guide touches on the key elements of a communications strategy and provides examples and tips on how you can integrate press/PR plans, web strategies and marketing plans into your organization's overall communications strategy.

It will help your organization identify the messages you need to promote, your target audience, and the method(s) by which you'll communicate.

KEY
ELEMENTS
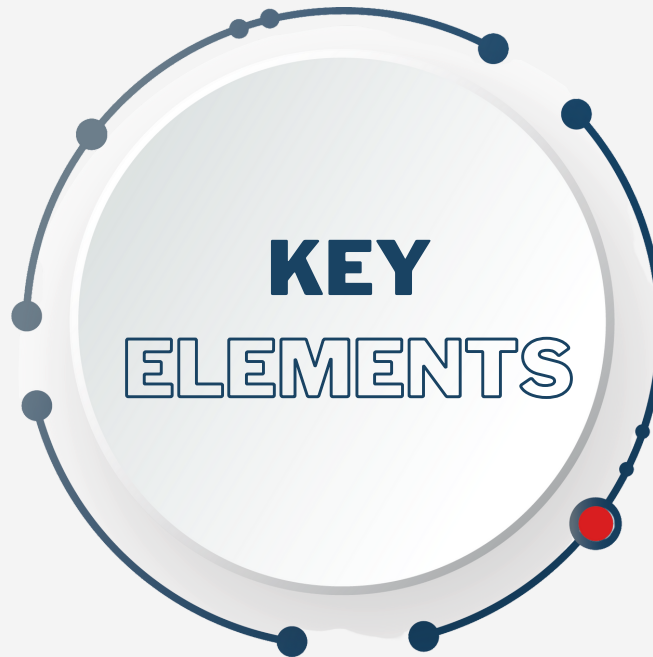
01 STATEMENT OF PURPOSE

It is useful to say up front why you have developed a communications strategy and what you hope to achieve with it. The statement does not need to be very detailed; it acts as a reference and reminder for those using it in their work. For example:

"This communications strategy shows how effective communications can:

- help us achieve our overall organizational objectives
- engage effectively with stakeholders
- demonstrate the success of our work
- ensure people understand what we do
- change behaviour and perceptions where necessary."

02 YOUR CURRENT SITUATION

The introductory part of the communications strategy should include a brief outline of your organization's mission, mandate, and the territory it covers. It should also look at your organization's communications strengths – what has been successful and what hasn't worked well in the recent past (the last 3 - 5 years). The following tools can be used to help analyze your organization's current situation.

PEST analysis

This involves listing the **Political**, **Economic**, **Social** and **Technological** factors that could affect your organization's work. These factors might be positive or negative and should include issues that are likely to have an impact on how your organization operates. You should indicate why each factor will have an effect.

For example, under '**political**' you might include:
Change of government:

- Need to build contacts with new civil servants/MPs or MNAs.
- Need to understand new policy agenda.
- Implications for target audience or media.

SWOT analysis

A SWOT analysis involves listing your organization's **strengths**, **weaknesses, opportunities**, and **threats**.

Think about what this means in terms of your organization's communications priorities:
- How can threats be turned into opportunities?
- How can you play on your strengths through effective communications?

03 ORGANIZATIONAL OBJECTIVES & COMMUNICATIONS OBJECTIVES

Any communications strategy developed by your organization should closely reflect your organization's strategic plan; cover your organization's overall vision, core aims and objectives; and suggest how communications can help deliver these goals.

In addition to referring to specific objectives, this section of the strategy should include an overall sense of the principles of communications that underpin the strategy and the key messages that the organization wants to convey:

Each of the organization's strategic objectives (from its strategic plan) can be broken down to show how operations and communications can contribute to delivering the objectives.

- Communications objectives are as fundamental as operational or policy objectives to achieving the organization's overall mission - not an add-on.

04   IDENTIFYING STAKEHOLDERS

In this section of your communications strategy, you should give a detailed description of your main audiences – both external and internal. These might include:

- the public
- politicians
- service users
- staff
- volunteers

It is also sometimes appropriate to refer to/acknowledge potential audiences that your organization wishes to connect with.

It is common for organizations to find that they have several different audiences who they need to interact with. One part of the strategy might look at matching audience interests with different parts of your organization or activities.

QUICK TIPS Matching interests may make it easier to prioritize your communications work and hit your communications goals more efficiently.

Another way of prioritizing your audiences or stakeholders might be to **map** them.

- Choose criteria which are important to your organization and then rank your different audiences against those criteria.
  - This can help highlight which are the most important and therefore the ones on which you should be spending most of your effort communicating.
    - It is easier to do this analysis with two criteria, so you can highlight the differences between audiences.

Some simple examples of mapping stakeholders include looking at their influence on policy and resources and their interest in your organization.

QUICK TIPS Don't forget your internal audiences – staff, board members, etc.

- Internal communications is a crucial part of any communications strategy.

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05 MESSAGES

Once your audiences have been identified, the next step is to break down your objectives into relevant messages for each of those audiences.

- Start with the audiences that are the highest priority.

QUICK TIPS

Remember that your messages should be relevant and appropriate to the audience.

- You may wish to speak to your supporters and donors in much more forthright language than you would use for local authorities or other funders.

QUICK TIPS

Continuity across messages is very important.

- It is important to develop your audience's understanding of your organization, so your messaging should always to link back to your key organizational objectives and values.

Examples of how messages can be tailored to different audiences:

Service Users	• Your active service offer • How to access your services • Where to go for information	• We provide useful, practical information and support • We are trustworthy and reliable • We put services users first and value their opinions
Political Representatives	• Desired policy changes • Strong evidence base • Strong supporter base	• We have a strong evidence base, and our points are supported by data • We have a good knowledge of the policy environment • We are a well-respected, authoritative organization
Community Supporters	• We have the ability to make change with your help	• We need you to support our initiative by writing to your representative(s), signing our e-petition, donating to us, attending a town hall, etc

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06 KEY COMMUNICATIONS METHODS

This section is where you should indicate the most appropriate channels for communicating with each audience identified in your communications strategy, These might include:

- An e-bulletin, conference, workshop, leaflet, press release, event – or broader methods such as social media platforms and your website.

There are pros and cons to every communications channel, and the ones at your disposal will vary depending on your organization's needs and resources.

QUICK TIPS Try a simple internal analysis of the methods you have at your disposal to see which are the best to use for getting specific messages to particular audiences.

- Once you have decided on the method(s), you can begin to construct your communications plan, linking audiences, messages and channels.

Examples of linking audiences, messages, and channels:

Service Users	• We provide useful, practical information and support • We are trustworthy and reliable • We put services users first and value their opinions	• Service user e-bulletin • Quarterly service user meetings • Service user representation on the board • Media training for service users who are keen to act as spokespeople
Political Representatives	• We have a strong evidence base, and our points are supported by data • We have a good knowledge of the policy environment • We are a well-respected, authoritative organisation	• Quarterly policy briefings on specific policy areas • Ensure all press releases are sent to relevant government department(s) in advance • Positive media coverage

QUICK TIPS There will likely be several appropriate communications channels for each identified audience.

- You may want to include supplementary strategies for your web/online media presence, press/PR plans and direct marketing.
  - These will help you go into greater detail about how your organization plans use these channels to communicate effectively with relevant stakeholders.

07 WORK PLAN

With your audiences and key communications methods identified, the next step is to create a table indicating the key communications activities, budget, and resources allocated to delivering the strategy.

The work plan should also include proposed timescales and identify particular milestones within the strategy. This will allow you to measure clear steps towards ultimate goals.

- There may be specific projects, events or publications that you know will take place, and these should be highlighted.

08 EVALUATING SUCCESS

Your communications strategy should conclude with a section on evaluation:

- What does success look like and how will you know when objectives have been met?
  - Here you should indicate the tools you will use to evaluate various sections of your communications.
    - These could be simple measures such as the number of responses to e-bulletins, hits to your website or increases in donations following a mail-out.
    - They could be focused on policy changes, for example, have the key calls of your campaign been achieved?
    - You could also include measures of media coverage, not only in terms of volume but also in terms of breadth and depth.
      - How often were your key messages mentioned and has there been a shift in public attitude on issues you've been campaigning for?

QUICK TIPS
Include milestones in your evaluation section so that you can measure progress towards long-term goals.

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PRESS/PR PLAN

A press/PR plan looks specifically at how your organization aims to raise its profile through the media. This includes print, broadcast and online media. This plan should link closely to the broader communications strategy.

DIGITAL STRATEGY

A digital strategy sits alongside an organisation's communications strategy and looks specifically at how the organisation can build its online presence. This includes having an effective website, utilising social media, running online campaigns, and identifying what resources you should have online and for web marketing.

MARKETING PLAN

A marketing plan follows a similar structure to a communications strategy. You should analyze your operating environment, look at your strengths and weaknesses, identify key audiences, and indicate which methods you will use to take any products (knowledge products, for example) to the market.

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