

## ELEMENTS OF A COMMUNICATIONS PLAN

An effective communications plan simply is a way to help you think about how to talk to the right people about the right things at the right time – in the right way. It should be a support for your organization’s larger strategy, so that communications becomes another way to “move the strategic ball down the field.”

### ***Situation Snapshot***

Whether or not this is part of your written plan, take some time to reflect: what does the landscape look like? What particular strengths, challenges, or opportunities are facing your organization over the next year? Are there other positive or negative facts, perceptions, etc., that may be relevant?

### ***Communications Objectives***

What are the 2-3 tangible, measurable communications outcomes you want to achieve over the planning time (usually a year)? For each objective, chart out:

#### **Target Audience**

- Identify the primary audience you’re after.
  - What do you want them to do?
  - What will that take?
  - What are the challenges or opportunities here?
- Secondary audience – is there one? How do they differ from primary audience? (Be sure that most energy goes into primary audiences)
- Research – how do you know what they think?
  - How can you check your assumptions?

#### **Key Messages**

What do you want to tell your target audience? Speak in their language, from their perspective, about things they care about. Keep it simple.

- Identify the problem and make sure you have proof points
- Position your organization as part of the solution
- Have a clear call to action

#### **Strategic Approach**

Are there a few overarching strategies that can direct the path forward – besides “getting the word out?” Some strategies that work for non-profits include:

- Define yourself (which could include re-introducing yourself)
- Be the expert
- Court the media
- Put a face on the problem

### **Budget**

- What's the estimated cost of each activity?
- If it's not in this year's budget, can it be done in-kind?
- Are there sponsors or partners who can underwrite or offer in-kind services?

### **Who's Responsible?**

- Present the final plan to staff – and board – to get buy-in and ideas
- Each component of a communications plan depends on someone in the organization to provide information, data, or process support. The plan must have an overall “owner” but everyone in the organization should be accountable for supporting it – make that clear.

### **Timeline**

- Chart out what activity needs to happen what month, or week
- What's already on the calendar (fundraising events, volunteer events, donor thank-you activities)?
- Assign a project manager who'll track deadlines

### **Evaluation**

How and when will you evaluate the success of the plan's implementation?

- What's your system to track media coverage?
- What's the best way to assess your Web site activity (downloads or length of visits is more meaningful than hits, but hits is a start)?

**Matrix for Your Communications Plan**

OBJECTIVE	AUDIENCE	ACTIVITY – CHANNEL/TOOLS	BUDGET	TIMELINE	OWNER
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•</li> <li>•</li> <li>•</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•</li> <li>•</li> <li>•</li> </ul>			
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### Questions To Ask Yourself About the End Game

- What's the point – what are we trying to do here (for which communications is a strategy, not an end unto itself)?
- What's the No. 1 problem that communications must solve?
- What are the organization's top 3-5 strategic goals?
- How is this communications plan going to support/drive towards those organizational goals? Are the plan's communications objectives in sync with that? (i.e., if it doesn't move the ball down the field, is it worth doing?)
- Are there other, short-term organizational goals that a communications plan might address? (like an upcoming capital campaign, for example, or the celebration of a 10-year anniversary)
- Will these communications objectives help us raise money – or retain donors in economic tough times?
- Will these communications objectives help us recruit volunteers?
- Will these communications objectives help fulfill other sustaining organizational goals?

## Communications Channels & Tools

You can use different “channels” to communicate to different audiences (assuming you know how they get their information). Within a channel, there are different tools you can use. Which communications channels might be most effective in reaching your target audience? Which tools could you use?

### Channels

#### **1. Media**

TV  
Radio  
Newspapers  
Public transit  
Billboards  
Online media  
Web sites

#### **2. Grassroots outreach**

Community or recreation centers  
Churches, synagogues or mosques  
Shopping malls  
Schools  
Libraries  
Grocery stores  
Laundromats

#### **3. Opinion leader outreach**

Meetings  
Invitations  
Mailings  
E-communications  
Printed newsletters

#### **4. Traditional marketing**

Literature racks  
Targeted direct mail  
Paid advertising  
Promotional/giveaway items

### Tools

News conference  
News release  
Press kit  
Pitching story to media  
Letter to editor  
Editorial column  
Public service advertising  
Blogs  
Interactive web site content

Posters  
Tear-off pads  
Brochures  
Table-top displays  
Kiosk  
Bulletin board displays  
Literature rack  
Grocery bags & receipts

Events  
Web site content  
Article reprint  
E-newsletters  
Annual reports (e- and print)  
Personal emails (or alerts)

Rack cards or brochures  
Direct mail postcards  
Radio, cable, print advertising

### **Web 2.0 as Social Marketing Tool**

- Embrace social media
  - MySpace
  - friendfeed
  - twitter
  - facebook
  - flickr
  
- Use [www.google.com/alerts](http://www.google.com/alerts) to find your footprint -- helps identify social media sites your target audience visits
  
- Social marketing is great for community building, targeting 20-somethings

#### **But be strategic!**

- Is your audience online?
- Are your tech bases already covered?
- Staff time and role clarity required

Not for control freaks – or a 1-way dialogue.

*Need help deciding if you should take the plunge? [www.wearemedia.org/module+1worksheet+1](http://www.wearemedia.org/module+1worksheet+1) (NC Center for Nonprofits)*

- Online social news networks can be great resources.
- Aggregate/rank news and content submitted by users.
  - Niche news can stand out and momentum can build
  - But topic matters and so does taking part in the community
  - Digg
  - Reddit
  - Mixx
  - Propeller
  - Newsvine

### Cost/Benefit Chart of Selected Tools

Matching the right tools to the right job takes some planning. It's all about finding the most effective ways of reaching your target audiences with the appropriate medium for your message – all within your budget.

<b>VEHICLE</b>	<b>REACH</b>	<b>COST</b>	<b>BEST USE</b>
Annual report	Targeted	High	Stewarding and attracting donors, foundations, partners, etc.
Print newsletter	Targeted	Mid	Stewarding and attracting donors and constituents
E-newsletter	Targeted	Low	Stewarding and attracting donors and constituents
Major event or fundraiser	Targeted	High	Stewarding and attracting donors, partners, media
Web site	General	Mid to high	Promotional/informational
Press kit	General	Low to mid	Building awareness and reaching new audiences
News release	General	Low	Building awareness and reaching new audiences
Public opinion poll	General	Mid to high	Benchmarking/testing
Bumper sticker	General	Low	Reaching new supporters and constituents
Direct mail appeal	Targeted	Low to high	Attracting donors

## Communications Plan Template

### ***Situation Analysis***

(Describe scenario as planning period begins. What particular issues, facts, perceptions, etc., are relevant to the communications plan being undertaken?)

### ***Key Objectives of the Communication Plan***

(What tangible outcomes would you like to achieve as a result of the communications effort?)

### ***Identify and profile each target audience.***

(Describe specific audiences you are targeting through the communication effort, and the ways the knowledge, attitudes and behavior of each needs to change in order to meet your goal(s). What barriers must be overcome to each audience fully supporting or participating in reaching your goal? What are the characteristics of each audience that would effect how you would choose to communicate with them — language, education, media habits, etc.?) What research is needed to understand each audience better and how to reach it?

*Target Audience A:*

*Target Audience B:*

*Others?*



### ***Key Messages***

- Key Messages Common to All Target Audiences:
  
- Key Messages Specific to Target Audience A:
  
- Key Messages Specific to Target Audience B:
  
- Appropriate Spokespeople
  
- News Hooks during Plan

### ***Communications Channels***

(Based on what you know about each target audience, pick communications channels that would be effective ways of reaching them. In each category, be specific about which particular channels you will use within the category selected.)

- Television stations
- Radio Stations
- Newspapers
- Web sites
- Community centers
- Laundromats
- Malls
- Schools
- Vocational and language training centers
- Libraries
- Recreation centers
- Supermarkets
- Literature rack
- Mail

### ***Communications Tools***

(Indicate which tools you will employ, and what the purpose of each will be.)

- Brochures
- Flyers
- Posters
- Newsletters
- Annual report
- Web site
- Press kit
- News release
- Story pitch
- Article reprint
- Letter to the editor
- Op-ed piece
- News conference
- Direct mail
- PSA
- Advertising
- Event
- Electronic media
- Blog
- Promotional items and giveaways
- Others

***Plan Implementation***

(By each planned activity, assign a budget estimate, staff that will be responsible for the deliverable and a date for each step in the implementation of the activity. Create a timeline for the entire plan.)

***Evaluation***

(Specify times to take stock of progress in implementing the communications plan. Determine strengths and weaknesses of plan execution to date. When obstacles are identified, create and implement new approaches. Evaluate again at the next touch point.)

***Before Next Year's Planning Process Commences***

1. Identify successes.
2. Identify disappointments.
3. Identify what you want to do differently going forward.

## Media Outreach Tips to Support Education Advocacy

Media relations can be a smart strategy to help build public support – and political will – for your high school dropout prevention initiative. United Way and partner marketing communications staff are the best resources for generating visibility in your community, but here are some basic rules of thumb that other education advocates have used successfully.

### Create Your Own Breaking News

- You can stage media events or press conferences to attract public attention to the message.
- Organize around a particular calendar event, appointment or important public announcement.
- Create a background fact sheet for media to illustrate the problem and highlight community solutions underway.

### Find the Right News Angle

You are the expert on what is likely to work best in your area, so let common sense and experience be your guide when choosing the right course to pursue. Stories on education needs and pressures can highlight a problem, its implications and provide a solution or call to action. As part of your media outreach effort, you can pitch stories related to issues like the following:

- **Emphasize the local problem** – It’s anathema for many advocates, but highlighting the problem is a critical media angle. News is superlative, so the worse your state or community ranks, the more newsworthy it is. For example, a 2007 analysis of Education Department data conducted by Johns Hopkins found that one in 10 high schools across America qualify as “dropout factories,” a high school where no more than 60 percent of the students who start as freshmen make it to their senior year. That dubious distinction applies to about 1,700 regular or vocational high schools nationwide – 12 percent of all such schools. How it looks in your state or community can help make the case for community action.
- **Point out the implications:** Gathering data or research that illustrates the depth of your high school dropout problem can garner attention. But don’t stop with grim statistics. Help the media understand the long-range implications. Dropping out is the single most powerful predictor of a family’s ability to break the cycle of poverty, according to the Forum for Youth Investment. High school dropouts are more likely to receive government assistance, and for longer. They’re more likely to end up in prison, too – more than three-quarters of men and women in prison are dropouts. (Refer to your *Mobilization Plan Blueprint for Increasing High School Graduation Rates* for more data, and sources.)
- **Highlight solutions and individual success:** A high school diploma translates into \$260,000 over the course of a lifetime, with graduates earning 74% more over their lives than dropouts (see *Mobilization Plan Blueprint for Increasing High School Graduation Rates* for sources). It’s a human interest story, best illustrated by a successful graduate who benefited from a dropout prevention program in your community. This angle can remind media of the problem, but also present an uplifting personal story that underscores the solutions your coalition is advocating.
- **Highlight solutions and community programs:** Highlighting community dropout prevention programs that work is another good feature angle. Do your homework; compile relevant statistics on the problem

and succinct summaries of programs' outcomes to synthesize for the media. People care about people, not programs, so always describe the programs' impact in human terms and include an individual success story!

- **Frame education as economic development:** High school graduates are part of what's needed for a local, competent workforce that strengthens and/or revitalizes local economies. Local economic development officials, Chambers of Commerce or state Commerce Department officials can testify to the importance of schools producing strong graduates in order for the community or state to develop a strong workforce.
- **Tie local workforce issues to globalization:** Globalization forces, like increased outsourcing and economic competition from China and India, have intensified the need to build U.S. human capital. There are many examples of the growing media focus on policy and business initiatives designed to bolster the country's role as supplier of highly-educated, highly-skilled workers to the global economy.
- **Showcasing the depth and breadth of coalition, especially with unlikely allies:** The bigger and more diverse your high school dropout prevention coalition is, the more newsworthy it is. Unlikely allies are especially effective spokespeople. Business leaders are great spokespeople for education, because they can link it to local workforce and job issues. Employers put the jobs spin on the story, taking it out of the individual context and framing it as a community-wide concern.

### **Use the Right Tools**

High school dropout prevention isn't in the news often, so effective advocates must use a variety of effective communication tools to draw attention to the work and issues facing dropouts. The following are different tools available to publicize your institution, events and goals:

#### **1. Editorial Strategies**

Editorials are an important communications tool for advocates – more important than traditional media relations, in many cases. Editorial strategies let you make your case directly to opinion leaders, and can provide a tangible persuasion piece you can subsequently email to larger audiences. Editorials are read by those who influence decision makers, make policy themselves, or provide critical support for initiatives.

Editorials have the power to sway public opinion, and you can impact editorial by meeting or communicating with the editorial boards of major newspapers. An editorial board meeting:

- Is a face-to-face meeting with editor(s), editorial writers and sometimes news reporters
- Generally lasts an hour
- Entails detailed preparation

You should request an editorial board meeting to inform editors if:

- Your issue is statewide
- Has broad reach
- Involves significant legislative action or public funding implications
- You and others stakeholders/spokespeople have:
  - Specific expertise to offer

- Diverse supporters
- Time and energy to prepare for meeting

To time your meeting most effectively:

- Consider current issues in the news
- Examine previous commentary to identify issues of interest
- Determine whether your issue has been commented on "sufficiently"

To schedule an editorial board meeting:

- First, request the meeting in writing or via email
- Follow-up with a phone call

To prepare for an editorial board meeting:

- Prepare background packets for each editor and reporter expected to attend
- Send packets in advance of the meeting
- Anticipate questions and practice answers
- Be prepared to address criticism and take tough questions
- Expect that you are there to inform them and provide your opinion as background – but it is not a given that they will write about your issue or cite you specifically

During the editorial board meeting:

- Be polite
- Do not argue or act defensively
- Do not ask the editorial board if or when they will write an editorial

Following the meeting:

- Contact the board again in writing to thank them for their time and attention
- Make yourselves available for further information
- This will help keep you in good stead with the board and advance your cause

Not every issue or situation lends itself to an editorial board meeting, however. A memo is a better approach to conduct editorial outreach if the issue or the publication is smaller and/or staff time and availability is a problem.

An editorial board memo should:

- Tell the editors why they should comment on your issue and
- Provide them with a brief analysis
- You can send or email this memo directly to the editorial board and then follow-up with a phone call to ensure receipt.

## 2. Community editorial columns

Editorial columns written by community members are called “op-eds,” because they run on the newspaper page opposite the editorials. Op-eds are a great way to voice your thoughts and ideas to opinion leaders.

Op-eds generally consist of about 650 words and present an opinion on a current issue. Pay attention to current events and look for an angle that is provocative and new. Most editors see this as a section for sharp opinion, advocacy, denunciations, controversy, and surprise. In general, keep these four points in mind to increase the chances of your op-ed running.

You can use the mnemonic device "RANT" to remember Relevance, Author, Notable Idea and Timeliness.

**Relevance** -- Relevance to ongoing events is key. If properly crafted your op-ed can achieve this goal.

**Author** -- The author's byline can make a huge difference. Having the article signed by a local or national expert, community college president, respected business leader, a member of the clergy or a well-known politician could enhance its prospects of being printed.

**Notable Idea** -- Editors are looking for a provocative idea on any subject; an opinion on a current issue that is controversial, unexpected, authoritative or newsworthy; a rallying call on a neglected subject; or a humorous angle on a current issue.

**Timeliness** -- Timeliness is an important consideration. Even if your op-ed does not break new ground, you may be able to find a news hook: legislative agenda, research results, an anniversary, an election, an upcoming conference, a report, a vote in Congress or pending action by local or state government.

**Targeting your op-ed** – Which is the best outlet to use to reach your target audience—your local daily or weekly paper, a professional education or business journal, a state or regional paper, or a competitive national newspaper or magazine?

- Most publications want an exclusive op-ed, so decide where you would most like your op-ed to appear, and plan to send it there first. If it is not accepted for publication, you can go to your second choice or third choice.

**Submitting your op-ed** -- Check the Web site or call ahead to confirm the name of the op-ed editor and to ask about criteria for submissions. Larger newspapers including the *New York Times* and *USA Today* have detailed recorded messages that explain how to submit an op-ed, recommend word counts, and describe the process by which you will be notified if a submission has been accepted or declined.

- If your target publication does not have a recorded message, you will want to ask questions about the submission guidelines as well as confirm the approval process. In most cases, the newspaper or magazine will call you to clarify some of the facts only when the editors have decided to print your piece.
- Follow all directions you initially received when calling for submission guidelines. Do not forget to include your name, title, and affiliation and contact information at the end.
- You will be notified if your article is accepted for publication. Constant calls to the op-ed staff may not help and could hurt you.

**Writing your op-ed** -- Here are some helpful hints to consider when writing the op-ed:

- Try to reduce your point to a single sentence. For example: "A healthy workforce requires a minimum of two years of post-secondary education." See if your sentence passes the "wow" test or the "hmm" test; if not, the point needs sharpening.
- Any point worth making will have to be defended. Determine your best three or four supporting arguments, and state each one in a single paragraph. Be as specific as possible.
- Use the active voice rather than the passive voice.
- Raise your opponents' best arguments, and challenge them with offsetting facts, irony, disdain, or whatever is appropriate, but address them.
- Ask yourself what's the minimum background information a reader absolutely has to have in order to grasp this point? Write two paragraphs that summarize this information.
- Put yourself in the mind of your target reader. What kind of opening might catch this person's attention? If you can raise questions and provoke enough interest to entice the reader past the first paragraph, you stand a better chance of obtaining an editor's interest as well.
- Now, write the piece. Re-state your key points in the final paragraph.
- Edit to eliminate repetition. Trim words, not ideas. Stay within the preferred word count. Convert passive verbs to active ones. Give the piece to someone else and ask that person to review it. If re-writing or cutting is required, you want to do it yourself, rather than leave it to the discretion of the newspaper editor.
- Stay ready to update and revise in the hours before publication if there is late-breaking news relevant to your topic.

### **3. Letters to the editor**

Letters to the editor are great ways for advocates to reflect the message frame – opportunity, access, expansion. They can be sent in response to a news article, editorial, or another letter to the editor and should steer clear of focusing on any particular person. A letter should:

- Be 150-250 words or fewer, unless otherwise indicated by a particular publication
- Reflect the message frame
- Be submitted via email or by fax to be published in a timely fashion
- Include the writer's full name, address and daytime phone number for verification purposes

### **4. Media pitches**

If you have a story you think is newsworthy, you must make your case to the media. Emails are usually the best and easiest means of communicating with reporters, although some require a faxed advisory. An effective email pitch is not a press release, but a brief description of and argument for your proposed story. It should :

- Relate to issues in the news (and spell out the local angle)
- Have a short subject line
- Be no more than one page
- Make a request



- Provide follow up contact information
- Be followed up with a phone call the following day

## 5. Press release

It's always better to generate news through relationships with media and pitching stories. But if you want to announce an organizational event or benchmark that has news value, you can use a press release that's sent to all local media. A press release:

- Can be sent via email or fax
- Has a short subject line
- Should read like a news article
- Includes interesting quotes from experts or other notables
- Is usually 1-2 pages
- Includes a boilerplate footer – a brief general description of your organization/school
- Provides contact information for follow up

## 6. Media advisory

A media advisory is not a press release, but a brief announcement of an upcoming press conference or newsworthy event. It's an important part of outreach and publicity, because it's what may interest or attract media to your event – or cause. Advisories should:

- Provide the five W's – What, Who, When, Where, Why
- Send to targeted media contacts prior to an event (2 weeks with follow-up 1 week and a few days before)
- Can be emailed or faxed
- Has a short subject line
- Includes a boilerplate footer – a brief general description of your organization/school
- Is never more than one page

## 7. Blogs

Blogs have become a major online communication vehicle and therefore should be a part of any comprehensive advocacy plan. Using existing blogs and bloggers to help you spread your message can be a powerful tool.

A blog is like an online personal journal or diary. Blog content is usually driven by one person or a small group of people writing about one general topic like politics or entertainment and is updated on a regular basis, sometimes as often as a few times every day. It is this strong focus on content that assures your message is getting to your targeted audience.

To find the best online sites and blogs that cover community colleges, higher education reform and workforce development:

Set up "Google Alerts," a news alert service you can access via Google news. There you can schedule daily news articles to be delivered to you email inbox by choosing basic key words, like the name of your state and "community college," for example. Go to [www.google.com/alerts](http://www.google.com/alerts)

Search Technorati, the only Internet search engine dedicated to tracking blogs. Using their advanced search engine tool at <http://technorati.com/search?advanced> can help you target your search.

**Getting to Know Bloggers** -- Spend a lot of time reading the blogs you've identified and follow these steps:

- Get to know the blogger/bloggers' writing style,
- Understand their point of view as it relates to your issue, then
- Find a viable entry point to start a conversation.

### **Pitching Bloggers**

When you have identified a connection with a blogger there are some things you can do to make your pitch.

- Introduce yourself and your cause to that blogger. Invite him/her to include a link to your Web site or campaign page in his/her post, if you have one.
- *Do not send press releases.* Rather, start responding to posts by using the comments section of respected bloggers or send an e-mail.
- Personalize your communications – let a blogger know you are familiar with his/her opinions and posts.
- Keep it brief, but don't forget the pitch.
- Make sure you're not asking a question that's already answered in the blog or asking them to talk about an issue in the same way.
- Invite a (credible, well researched) blogger to attend an audio news conference or event if he/she is local to your area.

### **Resources for Researching Blogs**

<http://www.truthlaidbear.com/TrafficRanking.php> - An easy-to-use resource that ranks blogs in order of daily traffic

<http://www.blogpulse.com/> - An automated trend discovery system for blogs

<http://www.globeofblogs.com/?x=topic> - A search engine that indexes blogs by topic, title, and location

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blog> - The Wikipedia definition of a blog with lots of helpful links

<http://www.wamu.org/programs/kn/o6/o2/28.php#10487> - NPR show on the role of blogs in the new information environment

[http://www.pewinternet.org/PPF/r/144/report\\_display.asp](http://www.pewinternet.org/PPF/r/144/report_display.asp) - Pew Internet & American Life Project report on the "State of Blogging"

These tips are adapted largely from “*Making the Case for Community Colleges: Tools for Communication Advocacy*,” designed by national communications firm Douglas Gould and Company for local and state community college advocates and stakeholders as part of the Ford Foundation's Bridges to Opportunity Initiative. For more, visit [www.communitycollececentral.org](http://www.communitycollececentral.org).