

Chapter 1: STRATEGIC COMMUNICATIONS PLANNING

“If you have ideas, you have the main asset you need, and there isn't any limit to what you can do with your business and your life. Ideas are any man's greatest asset.”
Harvey S. Firestone

Getting your message out is the backbone of any activity or program and vital to the success of an organization. A comprehensive strategic communications plan for creative campaigns, events, and day-to-day public relations that work within and outside of an organization is absolutely critical. Organizations have a tendency to run toward whatever is hot at any given time, even when it is not in their best interest. Without a focus and strategic direction, organizations will become a part of someone else's plan and will start reacting to others' issues, which can be time consuming and deadly.

Identify Your Mission


When preparing a strategic communications plan it is necessary to identify the mission, vision and goals of the organization. The mission statement reflects the vision, values and culture of the organization. Commitment to the mission statement establishes a standard that represents the organization's commitment to its vision. The credibility of the statement may speak to its deeply held commitment to the public.

Sample mission statements:




parks, recreation & marine

Mission of the City of Long Beach Parks, Recreation & Marine:
We create community and enhance the quality of life in Long Beach through people, places, programs, and partnerships.



OUTWARD BOUND

Changing Lives
Building Teams
Transforming Schools



Outward Bound's Mission:
Our Mission is to inspire character development and self-discovery in people of all ages and walks of life through challenge and adventure, and to impel them to achieve more than they ever thought possible, to show compassion for others and to actively engage in creating a better world.



California State Parks Mission:

To provide for the health, inspiration and education of the people of California by helping to preserve the state's extraordinary biological diversity, protecting its most valued natural and cultural resources, and creating opportunities for high-quality outdoor recreation.



County of Los Angeles Department of Parks and Recreation Healthy Parks Program Mission:

Creating healthy communities through people, parks and programs by offering family-oriented and culturally informed, health, nutrition, exercise programs, and educational opportunities that work together to improve the quality of life for all Los Angeles Country residents.



The California Park & Recreation Society provides the leadership to advance the positive impact and value of the profession on society.

Develop a message that is connected to your mission, a short phrase that you want to use to describe your issue or product and use it when you talk with reporters (for example: “parks are healthy places to play”). Develop three or four short "message points" for spokespeople to choose from when talking to the press. Include basic facts about your issues/group and draw from public opinion data any messages that resonate with your target audiences. Review the message points before media appearances or interviews.

Strategies and Tactics

Time and budget must work together. There are more ideas and strategies than there are money, staff resources, and time to make them possible. Money is always being closely watched and organizations are forced to look at everything. Be realistic and run the most efficient strategies that earn maximum results. Determine what resources you will need to carry out your communications plan. Be specific in terms of staff, budget, equipment, consultants and volunteers. Develop a realistic budget that includes staff

time, as well as outside services (graphic design, Web management, media training, etc.) Brainstorm with other staff. Determine what you want to accomplish with your media plan. Use the outlets and formats that your research shows are most likely to reach your target audience.

➤ *Identify Your Audience*

The primary targeted audience for public relations include:

- Stakeholders
 - Adults (further segmented into seniors, women with small children, etc)
 - Youth
 - Ethnic communities
 - Faith based community
- Media - members of local, regional, state, and national press organizations
- The recreation industry
- Employees
- Government – federal, state, and local representatives and legislators
- Others in the chain for services
- Partners - companies or groups that are considered allies of the organization such as tourism industry, chamber of commerce, fitness clubs, swim clubs, etc.
- Non-profit organizations such as the YMCA and youth groups
- For-profit organizations such as KOA campgrounds, etc.

With the target audiences identified, use research to learn who and what influences each audience to determine the best way to reach them. For example:

- Where do they get their information?
- What media do they watch or listen to?
- What do they read?
- Who do they respect?
- Who do they trust and listen to?

The answers to these questions will help you identify and list the media outlets you want to cultivate. If a local non-English radio station is most popular among the age group you want to attract, contact that station and ask about coverage for your events. If a faith-based group is having a carnival that allows other organizations to set up booths or tables, take the opportunity to promote your programs at the event.

➤ *Devise a Strategy for Positive Media Coverage*¹

Develop a calendar of media events to highlight your group's projects, such as the release of a report, timed with ready-made news hooks like International Women's Day or Arbor Day. Include information on which reporters you will target. Cultivate relationships with members of the press, suggesting ideas for feature stories, "expert" responses to breaking news or guests for their shows. Write and submit opinion

¹ "Communications Plan Quick Tips," www.ccmc.org/mediatools.htm

editorials (aka 'op-ed) or columns to newspapers and magazines. Be on the look-out for creative opportunities to link your group to cultural events, such as TV shows (an episode might cover your issue) and movies.

➤ *Attract Editorial Endorsements and Columnist Support*

Set up meetings with editorial boards of local papers to encourage them to state an opinion on your issues. Send columnists ideas for op-ed pieces. Encourage local newspapers and TV stations to endorse walk-a-thons and other events that bring publicity and funding to your issue.

Set Goals

Identify goals that are realistic and achievable. Try to base the goals on available research to give you a baseline to help measure results. The following sample goals include measurable outcomes:

Goal 1: Enhance visibility of agency among Latinos

- Raise Latino attendance or membership at our facilities by 15% within six months from current baseline of ___X#_____
- Garner quarterly media coverage in the local Latino newspaper or television station regarding our agency's positive impact and services to the Latino community from the current baseline of ___X#_____

Goal 2: Encourage financial contributions for a capital campaign to purchase XYZ property

- Solicit contributions from different sectors of the community – private, non-profit, individual, corporate – with targeted printed materials
- Identify a certain amount of money raised as 'successful,' and publicize results

Goal 3: Generate positive media coverage of the agency following negative news coverage over a community dispute such as about the use of land at a local park for dogs.

- Garner quarterly coverage on collaborative efforts to resolve the dog vs. people conflict.
- Secure coverage of programs that benefit the entire community from the current baseline of ___X#_____

Your Communications Plan should now include the primary message you want to convey to the media and public, a comprehensive media contact list, a calendar of media opportunities, and realistic goals. Using this plan you can tailor media contacts to match the specific event or activity you are promoting.

Polish Your Plan and Your Skills

➤ *Build Media Skills*

Provide media and interview training for your spokespeople (more in Chapter 3). Make sure they practice before a video camera, honing their message and image into a persuasive, articulate presentation. Provide media-readiness and message training for staff and board members so they can be strong advocates for your group or recreation program. Develop profiles of individuals willing to share their stories with the press – have guidelines to protect their privacy and make sure they have media training beforehand.

➤ *Develop a Crisis Control Plan*

Be prepared for a sudden media backlash or controversy, no matter how moderate your cause, group, and issues are. Include crisis control in your communications plan (more in Chapter 3). Put a crisis coordination team in place and create a plan to respond. These precautionary steps will let you get control of events before they control you.

➤ *Include Evaluation Methods*

Make sure your communications plan includes mechanisms to evaluate your media activities and goals. Evaluation methods might include: tracking shifts in public opinion or government policies; measuring increases in membership, funding or visibility; or improving institutional capacity. This topic will be covered more thoroughly in Chapter 6.

➤ *Keep Your Plan Flexible*

The best communications plan will always need adjustment based on what works for your organization. The key is to be flexible and creative, willing to make changes quickly as news coverage changes. If you plan a news conference on the day of a natural disaster, expect little or no coverage unless you are directly involved in the cleanup activities. By contrast, slow news days can produce great coverage for organizations who happen to be fully prepared at the right place and time. Remember that good media coverage is earned and must be ongoing. ...

You have the opportunity, the clout, the ability, and the resources to reach the media and achieve your goals. Keep at it. Do not stop. When your communications plan does take off, record successful techniques for the future. Constantly analyze your efforts. Figure out why they worked, or just as important, why they did not. And remember, review, revise, and repeat.²

² Bonk, Griggs and Tynes, pp. 161-162, 163.