

Parks and Green Spaces: How to create a communications plan for your community organisation

This guide is for anyone who works in their community and wants to learn how to develop a communications plan.

A communications plan can help you raise awareness about community issues or about your community organisation's services.

You will learn what the important steps are to consider when creating an effective communications plan. Developing a communication plan can help focus your message and reach your target audience. A plan can also influence the efficiency and simplicity of your communication methods. This guide looks at what is involved in a communications plan how and when to create one, and how to use a communications plan to raise awareness about your community issue or project.

What do we mean by communication?

Communication is the process of transmitting ideas and information. For a community-based organisation the majority of communications will involve be aimed at conveying the value and impact of the group to the community it serves, and relevant stakeholders.

What forms of communication exist?

Communication can take many forms, including:

- Word of mouth
- News stories in both print (e.g. local newspaper) and digital format (e.g. social media channels such as a community Facebook group).
- Press releases
- Posters, brochures, and fliers
- Outreach and presentations to partner organisations such as health and community service providers or other community groups organisations and charities.

- Special events and open houses that your organisation hosts
- To communicate effectively, it helps to plan out what you want from your communication, and what you need to do to get it.

What is a communications plan?

Creating a communications plan will help you to organise your actions in such a way that you are better able to reach your audience with your key messages.

In the following toolkit your goal is to raise awareness in your community about the long-term benefits of your initiative.

What do you need to consider when developing a basic communications plan?

Here's useful checklist of some questions to consider before developing your plan:

- Why do you want to communicate with the community? (What's your purpose?)
- Who do you want to communicate it to? (Who's your audience?)
- What do you want to communicate? (What's your message?)
- How do you want to communicate it? (What communication channels, both online and offline, will you use?)
- Who should you contact and what should you do in order to use those channels? (How will you practically distribute your message?)

The answers to these questions constitute your action plan for communicating successfully with your audience.

The remainder of your communication plan, involves three steps:

- **Implement your action plan.** Design your message and distribute it to your intended audience.
- Evaluate your communications efforts and adjust your plan accordingly.
- **Keep at it.** Communication is an ongoing activity for any organisation that serves, depends upon, or is in any way connected with the community. The purpose, audience, message, and channels may change, but the need to maintain relationships with the media and with key people in the

community remain. As a result, an important part of any communication plan is to continue using and revising your plan, based on your experience, throughout the existence of your organisation.

Why should you develop a communications plan?

A plan:

- will make it possible to target your communication accurately. It gives you a structure to determine who you need to reach and how.
- can be long-term, helping you map out how to raise your profile and refine your image in the community over time.
- will make your communication efforts more efficient, effective, and lasting.
- makes everything easier. If you spend some time planning at the beginning of an effort, you can save a great deal of time later on, because you know exactly what you should be doing at any point in the process.

When should you develop a communications plan?

As soon as your community organisation begins planning its objectives and activities, you should also begin planning ways to communicate them; successful communication is an ongoing process, not a one-time event. It's useful at all points in your organisation's development - it can help get the word out about a new organisation, renew interest in a long-standing program or help attract new funding sources.

Sections to include in your communications plan

- Identify the purpose of your communication
- Identify your audience
- Plan and design your message
- Consider your resources
- Plan for obstacles and emergencies

- Strategise how you'll connect with the media and others who can help you spread your message
- Create an action plan

Decide how you'll evaluate your plan, evaluate and adjust it **Identify the purpose of your communication.** What you want to say will depend on what you're trying to accomplish with your communications strategy. You might be concerned with one or a combination of the following:

- Becoming known, or better known, in the community
- Educating the public about the issue your community organisation addresses
- Recruiting participants or beneficiaries for your service
- Recruiting volunteers to help with your work
- Rallying supporters or the general public behind your cause
- Announcing events
- Celebrating your successes
- Raising money to fund your work
- Countering the arguments or misunderstandings of those opposed to your work.
- Dealing with an organisational crisis that's public knowledge – for example, the recent COVID-19 crisis or a staff member who commits a crime

Identify your audience

Who are you trying to reach? Knowing who your audience is makes it possible to plan your communication logically. You'll likely need different messages for different groups, and you'll need different channels and methods to reach each of those groups.

How do you focus on your audience? You can group people according to a number of characteristics:

- **Demographics.** Demographics are simply basic statistical information about people, such as gender, age, ethnicity, income, etc.
- **Geography.** You might want to focus on a whole town or region, on one or more neighbourhoods, or on people who live near a particular geographic or man-made feature.
- **Employment.** You may be interested in people in a particular line of work, or in people who are unemployed.

- Health. Your concern might be with people at risk of or experiencing a particular condition. Alter – or you might be aiming a health promotion effort – “Eat healthy, exercise regularly” – at the whole community.
- Behaviour. You may be targeting your message to smokers, for example, or to youth engaged in violence.
- Attitudes. Are you trying to change people’s minds, or bring them to the next level of understanding?

Clarifying your message

When creating your message, consider content, mood, language, and design.

Content: In the course of a national adult literacy campaign in the 1980’s, educators learned that TV ads that profiled proud, excited, successful adult learners attracted new learners to literacy programs. Ads that described the difficulties of adults with poor reading, writing, and math skills attracted potential volunteers. Both ads were meant to make the same points – the importance of basic skills and the need for literacy efforts – but they spoke to different groups.

Tone: Consider what emotions you want to appeal to. In general, if the tone is too extreme – too negative, too frightening, trying to make your audience feel too guilty – people won’t pay much attention to it. It may take some experience to learn how to strike the right balance. Keeping your tone positive will usually reach more people than evoking negative feelings such as fear or anger.

Language: There are two aspects to language here: one is the actual language – e.g. English, Spanish or Korean – that your intended audience speaks. You can address the language people speak by presenting any printed material in both the official language and the language(s) of the population(s) you’re hoping to reach, and by providing translation for spoken or broadcast messages.

The other is the kind of language you use – which is more complicated. If your message is too formal, your audience might feel you’re not really talking to them. You should use conversational, straightforward language that expresses what you want to say simply and clearly.

Channels of communication

What does your intended audience read, listen to, watch, engage in? You have to reach them by placing your message where they’ll see it. ‘Offline communications’ usually refers to traditional print or hard copy channels like posters and brochures.

‘Online communications’ usually refers to social media channels like Facebook and Twitter or e-newsletters usually sent by email.

Posters, fliers, and brochures

These can be more compelling in places where the issue is already in people’s minds (doctors’ offices for health issues, supermarkets for nutrition, etc).

Newsletters

These could be online or offline

Promotional materials

Items such as caps, T-shirts, and mugs can serve as effective channels for your message.

Other reading material

Another way to reach your audience is through producing engaging reading materials. You can make this stand out either through format or content.

You may focus on building a narrative that story readers want to follow, or on using a compelling medium or design e.g. using a story book with illustrated images to get messages to children

Internet sites

In addition to your community organisation's website, sites like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and YouTube are effective mediums for communication

Press releases

You could contact local or regional publications offering up a story on your community organisation’s achievements and/or asking for help based on your key messages e.g. if you are looking for volunteers you can ask for the call to action in the news article to be to contact you to sign-up as a volunteer.

Letters to the Editor, news stories, columns, and reports

Similar to the above, you can choose to tell your story in a way you wish to, emphasising key points that you prefer – make sure you get final sight of the

completed article to make sure you are happy with how the newspaper have presented your organisation.

Community outreach events or national events

Your organisation can participate in trending national events. A good example of this is the ‘ice bucket challenge’ on social media a few years ago. This is an easy way of raising your profile.

What resources you have available

What do you have the money to do? Do you have the people to make it possible? If you’re going to spend money, what are the chances that the results will be worth the expense? Who will lose what, and who will gain what by your use of financial and human resources?

Your plan should include careful determinations of how much you can spend and how much staff and volunteer time it’s reasonable to use. You may also be able to get materials, airtime, and other goods and services donated from individuals, businesses, other organizations.

Contingency planning

Any number of things can happen in the course of a communication effort. Someone can forget to e-mail a press release, or forget to include a phone number or e-mail address. A crucial word on your posters or in your brochure can be misspelled, or a reporter might get important information wrong. Worse, you might have to deal with a real disaster involving the organisation that has the potential to discredit your work.

It’s important to try to anticipate these kinds of problems, and to create a plan to deal with them. Crisis planning should be part of any communication plan, so you’ll know exactly what to do when a problem or crisis occurs. Crisis plans should include who takes responsibility for what – dealing with the media, correcting errors, deciding when something has to be redone rather than fixed, etc. It should cover as many situations, and as many aspects of each situation, as possible.

How to connect with media and others to spread your message.

Establishing relationships with journalists and media outlets is an important part of a communication plan, as is establishing relationships with influential individuals and institutions in the community you're trying to reach. You have to make personal contacts, give the media and others reasons to want to help you, and maintain and cultivate these relationships over time.

The individuals that can help you spread your message can vary from formal community leaders – elected officials, CEOs of important local businesses, clergy, etc. – to community activists and ordinary citizens. Institutions and organisations, such as colleges, hospitals, service clubs, faith communities, and other health and community organisations all have access to groups of community members who might need to hear your message.

Create your communications plan

Now the task is to put it all together into a plan. By the time you reach this point, your plan will already be essentially ready. You already know: what your purpose is and who you need to reach to accomplish it what your message should contain and look like, what you can afford, what problems you might face, what channels can best be used to reach your intended audience, and how to gain access to those channels. Now it's just a matter of putting the details together and into action.

This means composing and designing your message (perhaps more than one, in order to use lots of channels), making contact with the people who can help you get your message out, and getting everything in place to start your communication effort. Once this is done, you'll evaluate your effort so that you can continue to make it better.

Evaluate the results and adjust future communication plans accordingly

You should evaluate your communication plan both in terms of how well you carried it out and how well it worked. This will enable you to make changes to improve it. This way it will become more effective which each iteration.

And there's really a ninth step to developing a communication plan; as with just about every phase of health and community work, you have to keep up the effort, adjusting your plan and communicating with the community.

