Developing a communication plan

> **A communication plan is a strategic blueprint for delivering consistent, coordinated, and targeted messaging to achieve specified goals.**

We all know the importance of effective communication. Developing a communication plan is one way to help ensure your communication efforts are strategic, coordinated, and consistent. A strong communication plan can help you get your message out and achieve your goals.

Follow these seven steps to develop an effective communication plan:

1. Specify goals.
2. Identify target audiences and objectives.
3. Craft key messages.
4. Determine communication strategies.
5. Develop a dissemination and outreach plan.
6. Create a timeline.
7. Measure the results.

Specify goals

What do you hope to accomplish through your communication efforts? List the overarching goals for your communication plan. These goals should align with and support your project goals.

Identify target audiences and objectives

Which stakeholder groups—or *target audiences*—are you trying to engage? For example:

- ☐ State education agency staff
- ☐ District and school administrators
- ☐ Teachers
- ☐ Counselors
- ☐ Curriculum coordinators
- ☐ Professional development providers
- ☐ Curriculum developers
- ☐ Parents/guardians
- ☐ Legislative staff
- ☐ Media outlets, reporters, bloggers
- ☐ Community members
- ☐ Researchers

To help you identify target audiences, consider these questions:

- Who are the *primary* audiences and the *secondary* audiences?
- Who *will* or *should* care about or need to know about your message?
- Who is *talking* about this topic (for example, teachers, parents, media, policymakers)?
- Who has *written* about this topic (for example, reporters, bloggers, researchers)?

Next, specify your communication objectives for each target audience. For example:

- ☐ **Raise awareness:** Build awareness of an issue, benefit, process, product, and so forth.
- ☐ **Change attitudes:** Increase understanding and shape opinions and perceptions.
- ☐ **Motivate action:** Encourage people to take specific actions.

Craft key messages

What are the essential points—or *key messages*—you want to share? These key messages should be tailored to specific audiences and use language that is clear and easily understood. The key messages will serve as a reference and can be "repackaged" across communication products.

To develop key messages:

- **Summary:** Write a one-paragraph summary of the key points you want to make. Often, this language will become the basis for products such as press releases and e-blasts.
- **Key messages:** Next, distill the essence of the summary into three to five brief statements.
  - Develop each key message around a single idea.
  - Link each key message to one or more communication goals or audience objectives.
  - Focus on what the audience will find most compelling, beneficial, useful, or meaningful.
  - Think about ways to reframe each message to make it more relevant and interesting. For example, how might the message be expressed as a headline?

Determine communication strategies

What strategies will you use to share your key messages and achieve your communication objectives for each target audience? Examples include the following:

☐ Social media post	☐ Report
☐ E-blast	☐ Guide or booklet
☐ Website promotion	☐ Case study/testimonial
☐ Newsletter item	☐ Photo essay
☐ Press release	☐ Flyer/brochure/pamphlet
☐ Blog post or article	☐ Infographic/poster/data dashboard
☐ Fact sheet/one-pager	☐ Video/documentary
☐ Policy brief/issue brief	☐ Presentation/briefing
☐ Journal article	☐ Webinar
☐ Executive summary	☐ In-person event or conference

Often, using several strategies in a multifaceted approach is most effective. To help determine which strategies and platforms to use, consider the following:

- **Your audiences:** Investigate which platforms and products your target audiences use and prefer. For example, some groups may be more active on social media than others.
- **Your message:** Match the platform to the message. For example, Twitter works well for breaking news and announcements, a press release works well for sharing news with the media, infographics work well for highlighting processes and key findings, and videos work well for storytelling.

- **Your resources:** Some strategies require more resources than others. For example, social media is quick and inexpensive, whereas videos and conferences require more time and money.

Once you select your strategies, use your audience objectives and key messages to guide your content creation and storytelling. To stay on message, adapt and repurpose your content for different platforms and products.

Develop a dissemination and outreach plan

What *dissemination channels* will you use to share and promote your messages and products? And who can help? Develop a plan to guide dissemination and outreach. Consider the following:

- **Channels:** Identify the dissemination channels (such as your mailing lists, listservs, social media accounts, newsletters, and websites) that you can use to share and promote your communication content and products.
- **Outreach list:** Identify individuals, organizations, and networks to target and leverage for dissemination and outreach. Refer to the list of target audiences on page 1 for stakeholder groups that you may want to include. You may want to build this list early in the process.
- **Media kit:** To help promote your message, create a media kit of sample products to share. This kit might include social media posts, an e-blast, and a newsletter or website item as well as graphics. Send this kit to individuals and groups with whom you have a relationship and ask them to share the content through their own dissemination channels.
- **Media outreach:** If your topic is of interest to the media (newspapers, radio, television), create a press release. Be sure to specify why your topic is newsworthy. Then send the press release along with your media kit to media outlets, reporters, and bloggers.

Create a timeline

When will each activity take place? Build a timeline to manage your communication efforts, including planning, production, and dissemination. This timeline should include not only when each activity will take place, but also who is responsible.

Consider how you want to time your activities. For example, to promote a new program or product, you may want to start with a big push across all your channels and then follow up with staggered releases on a set schedule. Or, to promote an event, you may want to release content in an increasing flow to build momentum. Another approach is to tie your communication activities to a related event or news story to leverage public interest.

Measure the results

What will success look like? What specifically do you want to see happen as a result of your communication efforts? List measurable outcome goals against which to track your progress. Then use tools such as Google Analytics to collect data on your stakeholder reach and engagement.

Consider the following questions:

Effective messaging and audience engagement

- Are we effectively reaching and engaging our target audiences?
- Are our target audiences retaining and repeating our messages?
- Is our messaging producing the desired outcomes?

Strategic messaging and storytelling

- Are we repurposing content effectively for different audiences and channels?
- Is our messaging consistent across communication products and channels?
- Is our messaging appealing to our audiences on an emotional level?