
STRATEGIC COMMUNICATIONS PLAN

Answering incisive questions about a specific issue or project will dictate the best way to achieve the city's priorities. This same process applies regardless of your situation, whether it's improving public understanding of a city problem — such as the need to reduce services due to budget constraints — or responding to a crisis.

If you're charged with writing a communications plan but don't have overall organizational or project goals and objectives to begin with, you won't succeed. The plan must fit into the framework of your city's overall reason for existence and purpose for being involved in the project or issue. Your task is to find the right strategies that solve or address the challenge.

This article explains what must be included in a communications plan to enable its success. It's also critical to understand that a plan that works in one situation won't work in a different situation — plans aren't transferable. You can, however, use another plan as a reference to make sure you have addressed all the elements or to find creative communications tools that worked in other situations. To be successful, a plan must contain the answers to several key questions:

- What is the organizational outcome or problem to be solved?
- Who do we want to reach?
- What do we want each audience member to know?
- How do our different audiences get their information?
- What are the best tools to reach our audiences with our messages?
- How much time do we need to plan, prepare tools and implement?
- How much money or other resources are needed?
- How do we know if we're solving the problem?

How Long and How Much Detail?

The amount of detail for each section can vary tremendously. Typically, a plan is written with as much detail as necessary to convey the recommendations and the reasons behind them. Often, it's then converted to presentation software to show to a decision-making body.



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Some will actually write the plan in the presentation software, which forces the most important elements to the top. You must take into account your own writing style, the amount of experience you have writing plans, and how much detail is needed for a decision-maker such as the city manager to act.

A strategic communications plan should contain these essential elements, which are explained in detail in the sections that follow:

- Introduction, city mission and goal;
- Situation analysis;
- Research;
- Challenges and opportunities;
- Agency objectives;
- Communications objectives;
- Audiences;
- Messages;
- Communications strategies;
- Communications tactics;
- Evaluation; and
- Schedule and budget.



Once you've established strategic communications plans as part of your city's culture, you'll find that your ability to manage complex issues is greatly improved.

Introduction, City Mission and Goal

Often, the introduction is written last as an overall summary of what the reader will find in the plan. This section should explain the process the plan will subsequently go through for approval or when approval took place.

The mission is the overarching reason that the city or the project came into existence; it's a visionary statement that can guide long-term planning, but is often an unattainable statement of a perfect situation. Examples include:

- The city will work with our community to conserve natural resources and safeguard the environment for future generations.
- The Public Works Department provides safe and well-maintained streets for a growing population and thriving business community.

The goal is the desired outcome of a plan of action; it's a more specific expression of a mission or purpose that's often related to one aspect of the issue. If this is a city-

wide communications plan, explain what the organization is trying to accomplish, such as “to protect the public’s safety and health, offer recreational opportunities, provide modern and efficient infrastructure and enforce the laws of our community.” If this is a departmental or division communications plan, the goals and objectives should explain the purpose of the department/division. If it’s a project that crosses departmental lines, note the function of each office involved. For a communications plan focused on a specific project or crisis, explain the goals of the response or of the project in question. Goals must be attainable — for example:

- Provide a safe environment for our children through a clean, well-maintained park system that meets the needs of toddlers through high school-aged young people.

Situation Analysis

Explain in one or two paragraphs the situation facing the city, which is the main reason why a communications plan is being prepared. The need to write a plan generally falls into one of three categories around the need to:

- Deal with a specific crisis, problem or challenge affecting the organization;
- Prepare for a one-time project; or
- Launch an ongoing effort to generate understanding or support.

If a comprehensive plan is being prepared for the entire organization, explain why the plan is being written; otherwise, explain the crisis or project.

Research

A credible communications plan requires solid research. Ideally, your city has adequate resources to conduct formal quantitative research, such as a telephone survey, to establish the baseline views of all residents and business owners or segments of the population, such as by neighborhood. This provides benchmarks against which programs are measured. Qualitative research tools, such as the use of focus groups or “person-on-the-street” interviews, can also be effective.

Often, one-on-one interviews with key members of your target audience will generate the type of information required

to prepare an effective communications plan. Participants may include business representatives, educators, environmental activists, employees, news media and so forth. It’s vital that the information gathered and perceptions drawn are thoroughly reviewed to ensure that they represent a broad range of interests. It’s also imperative for the plan to reflect and address issues, concerns and questions raised in the research.

Challenges and Opportunities

Explain in one or two paragraphs or several bullets the highest priority problems (challenges) and positive things (opportunities) facing the city, either overall or specifically related to the issue. You’re trying to explain the good and bad news about the project, and answering these questions will help you get a handle on the answer for both sections:

- What is the current perception of your city, program or issues?
- How credible is the city?
- How do you want the city to be positioned?
- How has the media covered the city/project/issue?
- How has the city/project/issue been positioned within the media to date?
- Is more research required to understand attitudes and public opinion toward the issue?
- Has the issue generated local debate from the media or in the Legislature?
- Is the public aware of the issue or would most people consider it to be “new”?
- Who are your allies? Who publicly supports your position? Who opposes it?
- What effect are these messages having on your city council and staff?



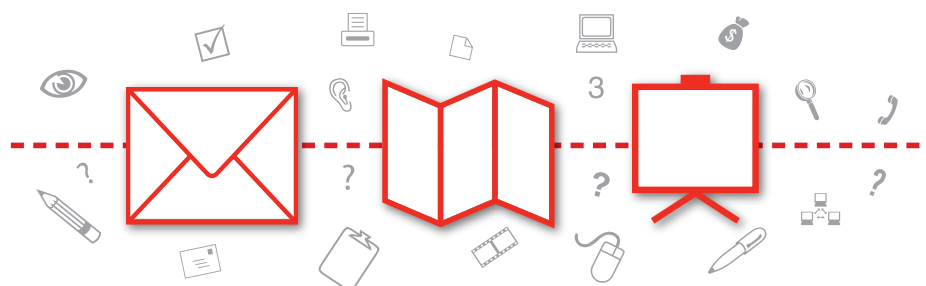
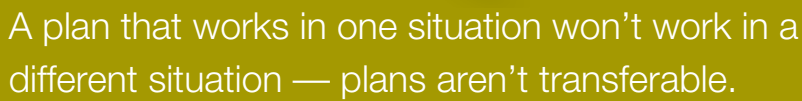
Documenting the hours of staff time spent on implementing a particular campaign is imperative to educating the city council about the demands placed on the communications program.

Examples of challenges may include:

- Reporters feel uninformed or indifferent toward us;
- The city is perceived as beholden to developers;
- The community has little knowledge about how development decisions are made;
- History shows that newspaper editorial opposition will generate significant public interest; and
- Print versions of daily newspapers are declining in readership.

Examples of opportunities may include:

- The media generally like the mayor and city council;
- There’s lots of public interest in this project, and residents are hungry for information;
- Elected officials and city staff are open to creative communications ideas;
- Newer tools such as Twitter and Facebook provide inexpensive communications venues; and
- With adequate time, challenges can be resolved.



Here are four examples of key messages:

- The Mineta San Jose International Airport Improvement Program will meet the needs of Bay Area travelers for decades.
- The Improvement Program puts Mineta San Jose International Airport at the forefront of a safer and easier flying experience.
- The Mineta San Jose International Airport Improvement Program combines the latest technology, smart planning and unique design for the best possible travel experience.
- Getting in and out of Mineta San Jose International Airport will be much easier with the improvement program.

Communications Strategies

Strategies describe the overall game plan by defining the overarching program concept or approach. If you have more than three or four strategies identified in your plan, you've probably begun to include tactics or activities.

Although it may be tempting, don't start developing your communications plan by identifying strategies. Go through the planning process to first identify goals, objectives, messages and audiences. You will ultimately develop much more effective strategies with this approach.

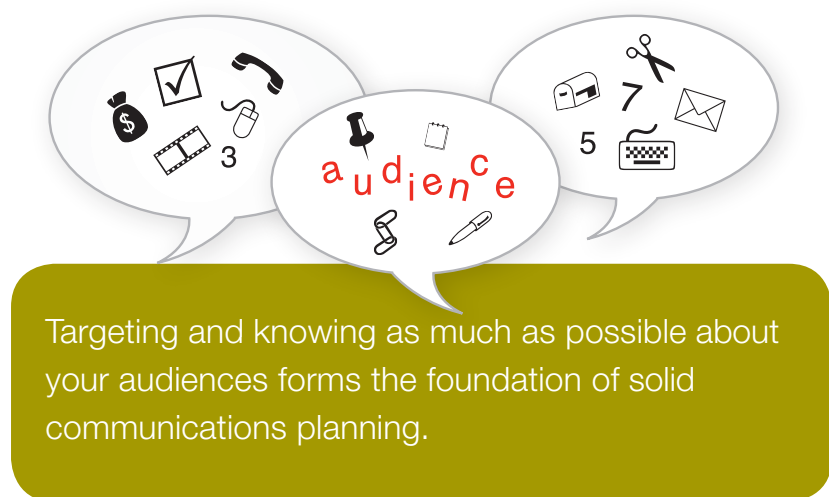
Media relations are just one kind of strategy and may not be the most effective one for your particular issue. You may communicate more effectively through a single briefing with a key decision-maker, rather than through 1,000 e-mails to his or her office. The strategy you select depends entirely on the situation, objectives and understanding of who constitutes your target audience and what will move them to act. Consider the following questions when developing your strategies:

- Is your strategy proactive or reactive?
- Is it low profile or high profile?
- What are the major communications challenges and opportunities?
- What are your city's communications strengths?
- What alliances does your city have?
- Does your approach warrant paid advertising through print, radio or TV (assuming you have the resources to do so)?

- Which kind of media coverage will result in the greatest impact on decision-makers?
- Is the issue big enough to warrant a press conference? An exclusive feature? With whom?
- Should your story be delivered in a media briefing with specific reporters invited or an editorial board meeting with one outlet?
- Can your story be made visual? Are there ways your story could be presented or supported by visual materials?
- When should your release be timed? How does it fit with other current events?
- Would using social media help tell your story to more people?

Examples of strategies include:

- Develop unified public relations/advertising campaigns to deliver key messages;
- Increase communication with state and federal policy-makers;
- Establish set criteria, a schedule and tools for communicating city council decisions and information to key constituents;
- Maximize satisfaction among senior citizens using the new senior center; and
- Minimize negative media coverage.



Communications Tactics

There are literally hundreds of communications tools available to the public information practitioner. While media relations is the most visible, it's just one of many ways to deliver messages to audiences. This is part of the magic, creativity and fun of communications plan writing: What's the most effective way to accomplish this task?

It's critical for the plan writer to understand the differences between all the available tools. Print media, for example, is very effective for delivering complex, detailed information. But different types of people get their information from newspapers than those who follow current events on television news or online blogs. Tactics are the actual activities that flow from proper objectives and strategies. Typically, a few to several tactics will support each strategy. Examples of tactics include:

- Community leader outreach — speak to service organizations, send a letter or make a presentation to homeowner associations, write an article for the local chamber of commerce newsletter and hold one-on-one briefings.
- Media relations — hold a press conference, conduct a one-on-one briefing, issue a press release, add a website media area and start a story-pitching program.
- Social media — use Twitter, Facebook, a blog or other emerging technologies to communicate your key points.
- Materials — create a brochure, write a fact sheet, develop a list of frequently asked questions and answers, and shoot video footage.
- Special events — offer to staff booths at community events, develop a trade show booth and order giveaway items that promote your message.

Evaluation

Just because you sent 35 press releases doesn't mean that you effectively delivered your key messages to your target audiences. A 10 percent increase in the number of press releases that you send out in the coming year isn't an effective or smart communications objective.

Ideally, the formal research conducted to prepare the plan would be repeated to measure the differences of opinions, beliefs or behavior after plan implementation — this is the truest form of measurement. Checking the organizational and communications objectives after implementation is the best place to start. Did you accomplish the stated objectives? This is why they must be measurable! Evaluation examples (related to the communications objectives noted earlier) include:

- Conduct the survey again to ascertain compliance with shake roof removal;
- Count the number of leaders who attended events and received flyers related to impact of the state budget on the city, and conduct random polls to ensure they understand the issue; and
- Keep senior participation records at beginning and end of year and compare to prior year.

Schedule and Budget

All communications plans must include a detailed timetable that itemizes the production of all materials (such as all media kit elements), meeting dates and assigned responsibility for each activity. The plan budget should be as detailed as possible and include in-house costs as well as any external costs for printing and other items. Documenting the hours of staff time spent on implementing a particular campaign is imperative to educating the city council about the demands placed on the communications program; it's also imperative to include hard costs.



The strategy you select depends entirely on the situation, objectives and understanding of who constitutes your target audience and what will move them to act.

Conclusion

Once you've established strategic communications plans as part of your city's culture, you'll find that your ability to manage complex issues is greatly improved. Your staff will have a blueprint for communicating with the public, your target audiences will receive information through familiar tools and your city council's priorities will elicit essential support from the community. Advance planning goes a long way toward achieving measurable success for your city. ■

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