

# Planning Communications

## ***Clear Objectives, Good Relationships are Key to Success***

In the book “News for Change,” Makani Themba-Nixon describes a phone call she received once from a harried health advocate, who wanted media coverage of an initiative that would begin in five days.

“She (the caller) had heard of this thing called media advocacy,” Themba-Nixon said, “and she wanted me to explain how to do it – in 10 minutes. After that, she had to pick up her son from daycare.”

Like many worthwhile things in life, good communications work requires careful planning. It necessitates, among other things, ongoing personal relationships with the news media—which certainly take more than 10 minutes to nurture. News media coverage is not something to be demanded on the spur of the moment, like a cab ride to the airport. Instead, a media strategy should be part of a larger communications plan, one that’s linked closely to your organization’s goals and objectives.

The elements of successful NGO communications include:

1. research
2. planning (goals, objectives, how management liaison will be carried out)
3. identification of target groups
4. message development
5. media scheduling
6. careful identification of costs for each activity
7. evaluation
8. top management buy-in

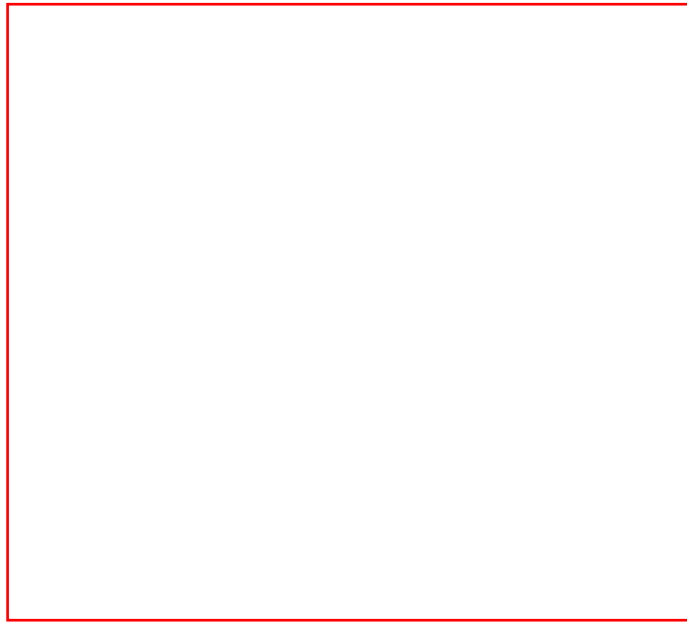
Here are some basic communications objectives that would support a grantee organization’s overall objectives:

- identify and promote understanding of social issues relevant to the organization
- launch new projects supporting these objectives
- stimulate participation in events and activities
- change perceptions or attitudes toward the organization and its work

- gain access to key role-players and opinion leaders
- attract quality staff, volunteers, and donors who will help achieve key objectives.

## Reaching the Right Audience: Program and Policy Advancement

With clear communications objectives in hand, you are ready to identify the various “stakeholders” within your target audience. There are various ways to segment an audience in order to achieve both program success and affect public policy. The key to impacting policy is influencing decisions, which requires reaching the right people with your history. These targeted individuals can effectively communicate your message to a much broader audience.



Insert Pyramid Model Using the pyramid model, you can visualize how items get on the policy agenda are communicated. The model can also be used to design contact lists, since it identifies the various layers of individuals who influence policy.

The pyramid model is applicable for the local, state, and national level. The General Public provides the base that Multipliers, Opinion Leaders, Influentials, and Decision Makers target in communicating messages. In an effective communications effort, contributions from individuals at each level of the pyramid converge. To clarify the model, we’ll use Washington, D.C. as an example of how the levels of the pyramid are constructed to create a communications structure.

**Decisionmakers** are comprised of a very small number of people who are responsible for making important decisions that generally have a broad impact in many spheres. While the smallest group in terms of numbers, their impact is significantly greater than any other group. Their views often shape those in the media, business, and lower levels in government. They are in the public and private sectors. Examples of public sector decisionmakers at the state and local levels include the governor, mayor, city, or municipal manager; leaders of the legislature or city council; and key commissioners. Decisionmakers in the private sector include the CEOs and business leaders of companies important in the area.

**Influentials.** These include important people in the community who may not hold positions at the very highest level. They often take their cues from the decision makers, but may be as likely to influence them on key issues and positions. The opinions of influentials can lend support to those of the decision makers and also affect those below them. Thus, information flows both upward and downward.

In the public sector influentials include the advisors, confidants, and counsel to heads of government—non-elected officials whom decisionmakers rely on. In the private sector, influentials can include members of a company's executive committee, key members of the top-tier media, other business executives and leaders with whom they may have social relationships. Influentials often include academics and leading members of the clergy.

**Opinion Leaders.** This group raises issues that affect influentials and decisionmakers as well as the general public. Opinion leaders include journalists who write or broadcast agenda-setting stories. Flowing upward on the pyramid, their stories could affect both influentials and decision makers, thus resulting in a new direction, policy, or legislation. Opinion leaders also include leaders in specific fields of expertise. For example, experts in oral health, the elderly, and housing often set the agenda in their fields. Their opinions may also carry downward to the general public and can help build grassroots and local support or opposition for certain initiatives.

**Multipliers** are comprised of an interesting group. Unlike the other layers mentioned above, multipliers generally don't hold key positions in the public and private sectors and are usually not members of the media. Instead, they tend to be people who members of the general public turn to for information or confirmation of information on a regular and personal basis. A multiplier might be the person in the office, or a religious organization whom people turn to discuss issues. It might be a person who people believe understands or has good opinions or feelings about certain subjects. For example, after a story about Medicare prescription drug coverage appears, people might turn to that person for his or her opinion. That opinion or feeling can help shape those of the general public.

The **General Public** usually gets its information from the other tiers of the pyramid. However, the general public can occasionally reach decisionmakers and others through their own direct efforts. For example, approximately half of the eligible general public exercises its right to vote. Others belong to civic clubs and organizations that mobilize to effectuate change. Some even actively participate in political activities such as The Million Mom March. And we're consumers of a broad range of products and services.

## Shaping and Developing Messages

In communications work, messages can be thought of as messengers that deliver the ideas and change statements that our organizations believe in. Does your nonprofit want the public to understand the importance of farmland

preservation? If so, you need to consider where they currently stand on the issue. For instance, you may need to explain why turning cropland into malls and subdivisions will threaten the nation's food security and drain much-needed resources away from urban and suburban areas. By building public awareness of the larger picture, you prepare your audience for subsequent messages that target a more narrow focus. Once the public understands what's at stake, chances are they'll be more receptive to your follow-up activities and marketing efforts. An example here might be a "Buy Local" campaign, led by your nonprofit, that encourages stores and consumers to purchase locally grown produce.

## Making Sure You Send the Right Message

***The following suggestions apply to whether you are talking with a colleague, a news media reporter, a prospective donor, your boss, or a member of your NGO's Board of Trustees.***

While it is crucial to develop effective messages, representatives of your organization must themselves be competent communicators. As we all know, it's not just what we say, but how we say it that makes that difference. Ready to experiment a bit on yourself? The next time you go into a meeting with a person, take a few minutes in advance to quietly prepare yourself mentally for "conscious" communication. This does not mean self-conscious communication. Rather, listen to the choice of words you use, be aware of your body language, create an environment in which your communication partners feel comfortable to respond and take part in the communication.

As a good communicator, and a key player in your NGO's services and mission, you practice a holistic approach and use all the communication skills as a total package - words, voice, eyes, face and body. You become known for speaking clearly, with enthusiasm and at a steady pace that is understandable to your stakeholder. You maintain as much eye contact as possible, without staring down your communication partner, and you share eye contact with everyone in the meeting. Eyes transmit caring, enthusiasm, and sincerity. The face can register happiness, confidence, and conviction, while your whole body position conveys confidence and interest. And listen proactively and carefully. Only if stakeholders feel that you take them seriously will they accept your message in a positive spirit.

## Words That Kill/Words That Sell

As you hone your messages, remember that words matter. Certain words, especially, can cause people to stop reading, or listening, or elicit a negative association that you never intended. And then there are words that creep in like a mild headache, make the mind start to wander to other topics, or find a sudden excuse to do something else. What are these turn-offs? "Magic" words. Words magic in their ability to either dissuade or persuade. Pull out an old press release, a print advertisement for your NGO, or a written presentation you made

three months ago. See if you find, or frequently use, these killer-words:

Difficult	Death	Obligation	Wrong
Failure	Decision	Fail	Bad
Deal	Cost	Sell	Taxes
Liability	Worry	Loss	Hard
Contract	Buy	Complicated	Dangerous

Framing a message for the news media and media “gatekeepers” requires close attention to news value and an understanding of media needs. Key among those needs are impact, proximity (distance between the audience and the problem), timeliness (like bread, news gets stale), prominence (celebrity events do sell); conflict, and avoiding oversimplified versions of winners and losers.

On an even more basic level, NGO leaders should frame all their messages just as corporate and agency public relations people have learned to do: the 30-3-30 formula.

<b>30</b>	The first number means that many people in the audience or reading your case statement will give you no more than 30 seconds, no matter how attractive or interesting you make the presentation. For them, this is the only time you have to get your message across.
<b>3</b>	This number indicates some will give you up to three minutes, meaning you can count on bold lines, subheadings, illustrations, summary statements, compelling opening statements to carry the message.
<b>30</b>	Thirty-minute audience members will, however, spend the time necessary to get the message content, even if the details are reported in small type or your oral presentation skills are not quite ready for primetime television.

<p>Internal/External Stakeholder Written (blind, confidential) assessment of NGO's policies, services, suggested improvements. Feedback to staff, board. Include awareness/response on new youth program. Results: improved services, marketing, communications</p>	<p>Visits by youth to state and national policymakers to encourage support of efforts focused on family farming, needs of rural youth</p>
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Individual briefings for key donors and advocates – secure earmarked \$\$\$\$ to underwrite marketing segment of project

### Rural School Based Information Aimed At Preteens

These marketing elements are basic examples of how to reach various constituent groups to support a project initiative, while also evaluating the overall stakeholder perceptions of the organization and its services.

## Hiring a Consultant

Does this all sound like too much work? If so, don't despair. The same principles for developing a message, and analyzing an audience, hold true at the local or national level. If your association has a limited budget, contact a local college or university and ask if they have a public relations or marketing program. Under the guidance of a faculty member, students often do effective (and affordable) work for nonprofit organizations. Organizations like the Public Relations Society of America may also offer pro-bono services.

Another viable alternative, even for organizations with a full-time communications staff, is to hire a consultant. Consultants can be used on an as-needed, or part-time contractual basis. This flexibility allows NGOs to keep their costs manageable, while benefiting from the expertise that a good consultant can offer.

NGOs often hire consultants to assist in grant proposal writing, develop effective marketing/communications activities for a funded project, and/or evaluate current activities in a given area. Almost no reputable consulting firms charge based on a fixed percentage of, say, money received from a grant proposal they have written for an organization or a telethon they have helped organize. Why? Because someone paid on a commission may use techniques that pressure the donor to give, and many donors would be upset to hear that the proposal writer received a percentage-based commission.

Most professional marketing and fundraising consultants are proud of their training, and their on-the-job, track record of success. They adhere to a code of

professional ethics and are members of such organizations as the Association of Fundraising Professionals, Council for Advancement and Support of Education, and the Public Relations Society of America. Check a potential consultant's references and credentials. Talk with clients who are not on a consultant's automatic reference list. Develop a specific, outcome-oriented contract with the consultant, which details roles and responsibilities, deadlines, deliverables, includes an "out clause" for the organization, and which closely adheres to IRS regulations that distinguish between consultants and paid employees.

Successful communications and social marketing also require that an organization make a financial commitment of its own. This may involve budget support, staff time, opportunity for professional education, and membership in professional associations. Consultants can only help guide the way. They can't get you where you need to go with your organization and project.

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