



How to Build a Communications Plan

If your organization has something to say, you need a communications plan. It's imperative to have a clear, concise and consistent message when communicating with the media, your staff and board members or even your volunteers.

In order to achieve this goal, you will need to outline your plan of attack. Many local organizations want a communications plan

- To educate people in your community about how to be fire safe
- To raise visibility of your organization to increase participation
- To communicate your organization's successes, which may help you in your search for future funding

All of these are good reasons to sit down and plan what you are going to say, whom to say it to and how you are going to take action.

1. What is Your Goal?

It's very important to look at the overall goal of your communications plan. Of course, you may say to yourself, "I want a plan that can do everything." That probably won't be a very effective plan. It could result in a sloppy and disorganized execution, which could ultimately damage the reputation of your organization.

Have a discussion with the decision makers in your group and decide what you want to accomplish with a communications plan. Remember – it might take a few discussion sessions to get everyone to agree on this subject. Achieving consensus may be a long process, but it will pay off in the end.

Examples of a realistic goal for local organizations may be:

***Increasing visibility of our organization in the media
that will result in 10 new volunteers***

It will also be important to make your goals measurable. Increasing fire safety in your town is hard to quantify, but an increase in membership, a 15% increase in the use of chipping programs or 20 more fuel reduction programs in your community are real, measurable results.

2. Identify your Audience

When determining your target audience, start by looking at the internal and external stakeholder groups. What is a stakeholder? These are people who have a "stake" in any wildfire and defensible space management measures. With respect to wildfire issues, a wildfire stakeholder can be defined as anyone who has influence upon the implementation of fire protection measures, such as homeowners, industry, municipal officials and staff, people who use the area for recreation and forestry. Of course, each community is unique and therefore the list of stakeholders will vary among them.

Your target audience could be broad, such as all the residents of your community, or narrow, such as elected officials in your community. Remember that the more you know about your audience and the more narrowly it is defined – the more successful you will be. If you target a neighborhood, instead of the whole town, you will be able to direct your resources better and also be able to measure success more accurately.

3. Assess Information Needs

This is one of the most important steps of a successful communications program and, unfortunately, one of the most often overlooked. It is important to determine what your audience knows, what they need to know, want to know, and expect, and how that information does or should get to them.

This initial research doesn't have to be done by a Ph.D. Just be sure to take a good look around you. Ask yourself:

- What other organizations are involved in this issue?
- What materials and research do they have?
- What has your audience been told in the past, and how often?
- Have there been many news stories on this topic in your community?
- Are there existing materials and campaigns going on in your community?
- Does your audience know about them? Are they working?
- Where does your audience get its information from? The newspaper? The radio? The local gardening or landscaping business or club?

If you spend some time to research these issues, instead of just assuming that you already know, will make your communications more effective and make your organization a valuable asset to your audience.

4. Identify Information Sources

This Web site can provide you with many sources of information, but don't forget about your own community. You can also check with your local representatives of the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection, the U.S. Forest Service and your local Fire Safe Council.

There is a lot of information out there, so share the responsibility for gathering this information. Assign members of your organization to collect and monitor these sources for new and re-occurring information throughout the year. The California Fire Safe Council and CDF provide press kits and campaigns throughout the year, particularly around key events such as Wildfire Awareness Week.

Also, look for information about new projects from the Bureau of Land Management, Department of Parks and Recreation and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife. Having a steady stream of news stories and messages will keep your campaign fresh.

5. Identify the Best Media and Methods Available

These choices will depend, of course, on your target audience. If you are looking for a broader audience, look at a variety of options for media – radio, newspapers and community circulars, local cable shows and online media such as community billboards and Weblogs.

Also, think about other ways to get your message out. Can you reach your audience information presentation at community meetings such as Rotary or local garden clubs? Do you want to start an email list, or is a newsletter (either digitally or on paper) the best route?

Remember that people absorb information in different ways, so think about your target audience before investing in media.

6. Identify Key Messages, Announcements and/or Marketing Tools.

Defining your message is the basis of any successful campaign. But, you don't need a slick advertising campaign or a large marketing budget to make an imprint in your own community.

This Web site can provide you with campaign messages and announcements from the Alliance members to incorporate into your own campaign. Having a consistent theme and message with an existing campaign will give your campaign additional reach and resources. Where you add value to the local press is by giving the campaign a localized feel with community-specific marketing techniques and local spokespersons.

7. Identify Key Events/Milestones/Deliverables

A steady drumbeat of news is a good way to keep your issue relevant, but you don't want to bore your audience with every detail. It is important that your news releases are, in fact, newsworthy.

It is also beneficial to have a calendar that pinpoints key events throughout the year. This will help you define when your communications program will be most effective.

The Alliance's calendar with key events and programs can help get you started. Add in your local events. This will start you on your way to a full newsworthy calendar.

Don't forget that the best message is success. Plan on announcing newsworthy community events and projects as they happen.

8. Document the Approval Process

Nothing stops a good news story like a press release that didn't make it on time. Because each organization is unique, you should decide ahead of time who needs to approve press releases, newsletter articles and other communications materials.

Be realistic about how much time it will take for these people to read and comment. Write down the steps and timeline for this process and get everyone involved to agree to it.

9. Assign Responsibilities for Tactics

Remember that you don't have to do everything by yourself. Assign responsibilities such as spokesperson, copy writer, graphic lay out and community liaison to others in your organization or community.

10. Define an Inquiry Process

When you identify a spokesperson for your organization and the campaign, be sure to develop a process for how the media should contact the spokesperson. Have a procedure on hand on how to handle impromptu requests as well and let everyone in your organization know what to do when a call comes in.

11. Develop a Library

Archiving the organization's projects and other campaign information will be beneficial for staff and volunteers to have a sense of the organization's history.

Keeping accurate records and copies of all press coverage and campaign material makes every future campaign stronger and more effective. Also, it will help you build reports of your completed projects.

12. Encourage Feedback

Feedback helps you evaluate the effectiveness of campaign. Don't be afraid to learn that your approach didn't work for a specific reporter. This will only help you be more effective the next time around.

13. Define a Process for Updating/Changing the Communications Plan.

Have a plan and process to regularly review your communications plan and make changes where needed. It should be thoroughly reviewed at least once a year or at the end of a specific program. It's an excellent time to gather lessons learned.

Remember your communications plan is a work in progress and will grow and evolve. Don't be afraid to take the planning process one step at a time.