



TOOLBOX



How to Communicate On Your Project

Good communication with neighbours, community leaders and media is a must to promote your project.

Effective communication is a key to the success of any strategy, group or organization. Whether you want to share information among your team or spread the word about your goals and project, the ability to communicate regularly and effectively is critical.

Strong communication links people who are committed to working together to improve their neighbourhoods. Weak communication can hamper your group's progress and success.

So how can you plan your communication?

“Internal” and “external” communication

Effective “internal” communication is the communicating that happens inside your group—it means members of your group understand your purpose and are familiar with what you hope to accomplish. People know when and where events take place.

Leaders and organizers get feedback from everyone involved.

Effective “external” communication means that people outside of your group are aware of who you are and what you're about. They know how, when and why to contact your organization. The better your communication efforts, the more visible your group will be and that translates into more support and accomplishments.

This how-to guide talks about communication strategies—key messages to communicate, tools, and audiences who should hear your group's message, and communication basics— the specific things you should talk about when communicating with residents, the media and community leaders.

Communication Strategies

1. Define who you are

As a group, determine the mission and goals of your group that you would like to communicate to your community. If your group can't state its mission in one or two brief sentences, you may still be unclear what you're really about. What do you hope to change? Are you looking for people to get involved? Are you looking for funding sources?

2. Create a basic fact sheet

- Put your goals in writing, using brief statements or bullet points.
- Describe your group, your goals, activities and who's involved.
- Keep it to one page—this keeps distribution costs down and lets you reach a larger audience.
- Include the group's contact information.
- Provide fact sheets at each gathering for any newcomers who may attend.
- If you feel like you need to address someone who doesn't read your language, translate your materials.

3. Involve community leaders

"Good news travels fast," especially when it comes from the mouths of community leaders or "stakeholders"—those individuals, agencies, organizations or groups who are known for taking responsibility for solving local problems or who would benefit from the problem being solved.

- Alert key community stakeholders, including elected officials, community board members, local business people, community non profit staff, teachers and newspaper staff about your group's work or project.
- Involve informal leaders too—those who may not have an "official" title but who usually have a lot of respect from neighbours, a solid group of followers and a passion for the issue you're working on.
- Put together a contact list of community stakeholders and invite them to attend one of your regularly scheduled meetings.
- Better yet, ask them to speak at your events.
- By involving those with a stake in the success of your efforts, your group is bound to strengthen communications with the neighbourhood at large.

4. Address the media

- Whenever your organization hosts a special event or scores an accomplishment, generate a news release or public service announcement .
- Develop a relationship with local editors and reporters and keep them posted about your group's concerns and successes.

5. Encourage feedback

It's important that your efforts reflect the interests of your community, so regularly ask for feedback from your neighbours including those who are not part of your group. Ask them what they think you're doing right and what they think you could be doing better. Use a variety of methods to get input, from surveys (lists of questions asked in person or by phone), to questionnaires (formal lists of questions circulated in writing), to focus groups (discussions with groups of people who would be impacted by your issue).

Open and frequent communication is especially critical to organizing successful projects that involve a team, a school or a community.

Group members need to interact often, update one another, discuss issues openly and convey all necessary information to one another and to people outside the group. Ensure that information-sharing occurs and you'll discover that your group will attract positive attention from places least expected.

Communication Basics

Whether you are communicating with community stakeholders, a local news reporter, or a resident, it's important that you explain your message clearly so that others understand it the way you intended. Everyone has been in a situation where you have said something to a friend or neighbour and they took it the wrong way and thought you meant something completely different. This misunderstanding is exactly what you want to avoid when communicating with other people.

Ways communication can be used

What are some of the different ways you use messages to communicate with others?

- To inform
- To persuade
- To raise awareness
- To create understanding
- To generate interest
- To motivate people to act

As you can see, you use messages all the time for many different purposes. Without strong and clear communication, you will not be able to effectively convey that message to others.

There are six key questions you'll need to ask and answer in order to develop the best way to communicate your message to others. Just remember:

- Who?
- When?
- What?
- Where?
- Why?
- How?

Who?

Begin by asking yourself "who?" Who is the individual or group of people you want to reach? This is the most important question to ask and must always come first. If you do not know who your audience is, it makes it difficult to create a message that will capture anyone's attention. Your target audience will likely include people who you want to respond to your message and people who should be aware of your message. You may determine that you have to write one message for one audience and a different message for another audience.

Take advantage of every opportunity to communicate your group's goals and activities to as many people in your community as possible, especially based on need, interest and past experience. Include your neighbours, community board members, local merchants and businesses, elected officials, nonprofits staff members, school teachers ...

What?

"What?" may seem like an odd question at first, but it is actually a very important one to ask. In order for you to communicate well with your audience, you should know what you want to say to them. To figure this out, ask yourself, "What is my primary goal in communicating this message to my audience?" Asking yourself this question will help simplify your message and make it as clear as possible. "What do I want my audience to do as a result of receiving this message?" Asking yourself this question will help write a message that is persuasive and motivates your audience to respond how you want them to.

Why?

"Why?" is a question you should ask yourself to help figure out the reason your message is important in the first place. It will help you to simplify your message and make certain that you emphasize the most important points, especially how your audience will benefit from your message or activity. In order to create a message that will motivate others to do something you must step into their shoes and figure out what their needs and motivations are. The most effective way to do this is to talk to a few neighbours and local experts who are not involved in your group and ask them. Also, explain to them some of the benefits that you have thought of and see if they agree. Between your own ideas and those of a few others, you should be able to come up with the two or three benefits that will be the most motivational to the most people.

When?

The question "when?" is important for two reasons. The first reason is that if you try to organize an event, or launch a project or product it is important to let people know the date and time the event takes place.

The second reason "when?" is such an important question is that it helps you to think about when you should communicate with your audience—is there a strategic moment where they will listen more or get more involved?.

Where?

"where?" reminds you to think about where to publicize your communication so that your target audience is exposed to your message many times. Make sure you get permission to post or hand out flyers at local schools, events, etc. You may hand out flyers to residents in their homes and in public places but you may not leave them indoors or on car windows, telephone poles, etc.

How?

"How?" is the final question to ask yourself. It will help you determine how you will communicate your message.

For instance, you might want to use a flyer or go to a meeting to address local officials. In each case, you have defined the other steps in advance. The hard work is done. The final task is to put the information into a clear format that your audience will understand.

There are three basic methods to communicate your message when you are launching a project.

These include printed promotional materials such as flyers, posters and newsletters; public relations tools such as news releases and public service announcements; and direct communication or "word of mouth." Consider which method is more likely to be seen or read, which is the easiest to distribute, and how much each one will cost.

Flyers, posters and newsletters

Can be used to provide many people with detailed information that would be difficult to communicate through word of mouth only. People can also refer back to the information. The downside of print communications is the cost to reproduce copies.

Public relations tools such as a news release or public service announcement

Can communicate your message to a wide audience through the media—television, newspaper and radio. A news release is a planned news story that you send to your local newspaper. The goal is for them to put your message into the newspaper or for them to call you with questions and write about your event. Or get a free advertisement to communicate your message to the community over television or radio (there is some ways to get this..).

Direct communication

Such as one on-one meetings, informal get-togethers and telephone calls are time-tested, effective means of communication.

Although print and media tools are powerful forms of communication, nothing replaces talking with people.

Talking with others takes more time, but is usually worth the investment. Another benefit of direct communication or "word of mouth" messages is that your audience will often pass your communication on to others whom they believe will be interested in your message.

What else can I communicate with strong impact and less expenses ?

- Get a local celebrity involved in your project
- Take advantage of gatherings
- Find a business that will be a joint venture partner
- Get volunteers to help your local transportation companies about free advertising on their vehicles
- Ask various businesses that mail out circulars or bills to include a message about your project...