![New Horizon Centre - Your place in the Community]

# Guidelines for the Development of a Communication Strategy

![WPI - Worcester Polytechnic Institute]

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## About the Guidelines

This guide has been created by the students from Worcester Polytechnic Institute that spent 14 weeks designing and implementing a communication strategy for the New Horizon Centre.  This document contains information that will help non profit organizations understand what a communication strategy is, why it is important and how to develop a communication strategy for themselves.

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# What is a Communication Strategy?

A communication strategy is "the selection of appropriate communication objectives and the identification of the specific brand awareness and brand attitude strategy" (Google Web Definition). This general strategy has to be linked to the roots of the organization and must be treated seriously. All of the employees and people involved in the organization must commit to the strategy 100%. There is no way that an organization can function well with the outside world if it does not have a sound plan for how to inform the public of what they do. A communication strategy can take on many different looks, ranging from a one-on-one interaction to a worldwide campaign.

# Factors of a Communication Strategy

A Communication Strategy has to clarify exactly what you have to get completed and it also shows what you should continue to look at Figure 1: Communication Strategy Chart, it is an overview of the important factors of a communication plan or strategy:
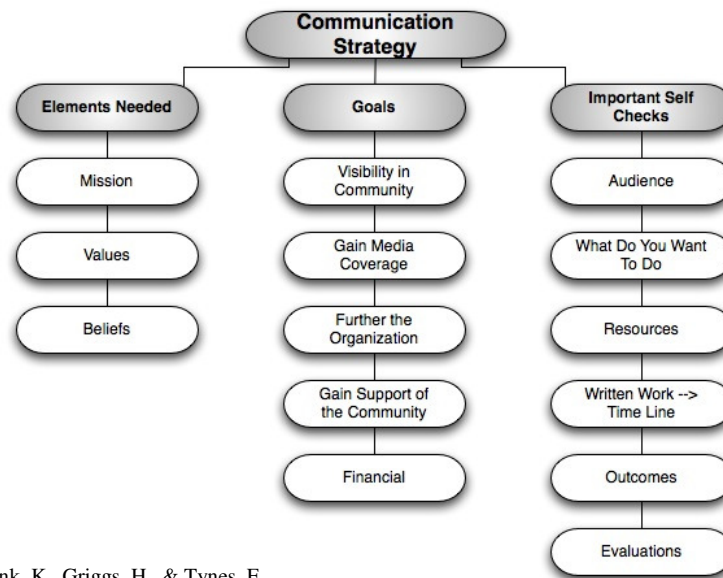


Loosely based from: Bonk, K., Griggs, H., & Tynes, E.

**Figure 1: Communication Strategy Chart**

### Elements Needed

Initially, the organization has to come up with a mission, to determine what they are going to try to do for the community. For New Horizon Centre, their mission is to

create a better family for ourselves, our families, and our community. To have a successful communication strategy, an initial process must be developed and ensure maintain a focus on the original goal. Also, people are very in tune with catchy mottos and missions that can be easily portrayed to the public. W.K. Kellogg is a great example of this with their motto of "helping people help themselves." It is short and concise but still explains what they are trying to do. A mission also consists of the organizations values and beliefs that explain the reasons why the organization exists. This is more for the internal employees to know why they are pushing so hard to get more people involved. A productive communication strategy stems from the inside out and the beliefs of the employees should follow those of the main organization.

**Goals and Important Self Checks**

The next two branches of a communication strategy, goals and important self-checks are intertwined and dependent upon each other. The goals of the organization are a set of ideas that must be checked regularly. To begin with, it has to be understood the audience that the organization is trying to reach, since it is ineffective to market to the wrong target audience. The demographics must be figured out and then proceed with a plan to reach more citizens that actually will want to come. Since all people are different and want different events there is not an economical way to reach out to everyone at once. The organization has to sit down and decide what strategy will be most economical to reach as much of the target audience as possible.

In a nonprofit organization, it is always important to know what resources you have at your disposal, be it financially or just shear mass of volunteers. To start, every organization needs to be able to have financial stability and this is extremely difficult to achieve in the case of nonprofits since most of their money comes from sponsors or the government. Even though these are great sources of income, at times they can be very stringent upon what the funds can be used to achieve. Money cannot be spent too lucratively or on a whim. When creating a communication strategy, it is necessary to think about how much the planned media campaign will cost.

After all the background research is done one still has to set a group of organizational goals so that the organization can stay on point. In brief, these goals must

be clear and well explained along with always trying to advance the organization publicly. A few examples would be to further gain support of the community, advance media coverage, and become more visible in the target community. Furthermore, a written timeline of events must be generated containing the goals of the organization. This timeline includes time restraints for finishing the project; do you want results within a week or can it be more long term? Also, a timeline forces all members of the organization to stay on top of things since it makes each individual responsible for a small part of the overall project. Most importantly, the timeline provides a calendar of events that can be seen by all, including the public sector. This could be one of the best-implemented ideas that could possibly be done to communicate what the organization has going on.

Finally, the last task in creating a strong communication strategy is to evaluate what has happened lately. Did all of the ideas actually work, or were they just useless? Once these questions are answered then a one can continue on the same path or create something new and improved. Therefore, a communication strategy is not a simple task to create, but something that is going to have to be refined over a rather long time period and will never be perfected, but has that room to improve and change with the world's daily changes

## Importance of a Communication Strategy

Communication strategies are very prevalent, since all organizations have some sort of method to portray their core message to the community. Without having a strategy that effectively reaches the predetermined target audiences, there is no way that the organization with influence as many people. If the organization is going to spend the time to figure out their key messages it would be best to develop a strong communication strategy. Furthermore, this would guarantee the time was not wasted and the message will reach the public sector in the easiest way.

When creating a communication strategy, there are two main elements an organization should consider: branding and the internet. Branding is an essential part of a communication strategy because it helps related your organization to an image or an idea. Once the image or idea is recognizably related to the organization, someone who sees the brand will think of that organization. Internet also plays an important role in a

communication strategy if the organization is targeting those born in the computer generation. Some nonprofit organizations only target the elderly or those who are low-income. In these situations, the use of the web as a communications tool would be not as important. These are necessary considerations to make when determining which elements to include in your communication strategy.

## The Importance of Branding

A brand is a name, logo, slogan or design that sends a message about your organization.  A brand is one of the most essential elements of communicating to the public.  A good brand is one that is widely known and recognized.  When someone sees the image they think of the mission and programs in the way that the organization portrays it.   Nonprofit branding is even more difficult considering the issues of few resources and the time restraints that most nonprofit organizations face.  Organizations must distinguish their mission and most important activities from other similar organizations.  In order to be a noteworthy brand, it must be innovative and memorable to be distinguished from the competition.   The last step of creating a brand is implementation both inside and outside the organization.  Creating a memorable brand is not an easy task.  Simply paying for advertisement is not sufficient, it requires daily attention.  "A brand that lives on in the mind of each donor must be developed through years of message layering" (Nissim, 2004).

## The Importance of the Web as a Communication Tool

The World Wide Web is quickly becoming one of the top forms of communication for companies and organizations to use both internally and externally.  Once a website is developed, it is misleading as to how much attention it should receive.  It takes constant updating, and cannot be ignored.  A study from the Public Relations Review journal, says it could easily be a full time job.  "I wish that we could hire a third person who was in charge of just the website. You know, keeping it changing constantly. Keeping it up-to-date" (Hill, White, 40, 2000).  Small nonprofit organizations could still reap all of the benefits from a website if they assign one employee to be in charge of it and that person allocates as much time as they can possibly spare on it.  Making a website low on priority lists is one of the biggest mistakes organizations with limited numbers make.  If the

organization learns to not put it on the back burner because it doesn't necessarily have to get done and treat it more like a necessary job the website will be maintained sufficiently.

Websites have become so common that the Public Relations Review study said that it was harmful for an organization not to have a site. Websites increase the users' awareness of the company's current ideas. It informs them about the active programs and reaches audiences that may not have been attainable otherwise. "It was something the organization realized it needed to do to stay current and utilize all the communication resources that were out there and all the resources that our competitors were using also" (Hill, White, 41, 2000). A website provides an inexpensive way to build a relationship with your audience and network with other organizations. If someone is perusing through the website and needs to get in touch with the organization, the e-mail function is a convenient way to do so. Funding opportunities may arise by forming a deal with a potential sponsor to link their website to yours, thus supplying the sponsor with cheap advertisement.

## Communication Strategy Process

After careful research about communication strategies and their elements, a ten step communication strategy has been developed to assist nonprofit organizations. This process can be seen on the next page in Figure 1.

| 1. | **Analysis of the Big Picture** | It is important to understand what must be accomplished before starting the strategic plan. |
|---|---|---|
| 2. | **Define the Goals of the Organization** | The overall goals of your organization must be defined before the planning stage begins. Without having a set of goals, it can be difficult to formulate a successful plan. |
| 3. | **Define the Goals of the Individual Programs Within the Organization** | The program goals must be defined as well. This goes along with the overall goals, but they are more specific to individual programs. |
| 4. | **Define the Specific Means of Communication for Each Program** | The communication may be unique for each program, so the means of communication must be appropriate for different programs. |
| 5. | **Define the Target Audiences** | The specific groups of people that need to be communicated with must be defined. They must also be prioritized in a manner that portrays their importance. A way of doing this would be a 1-10 scale. |
| 6. | **Develop the Key Messages to be Portrayed** | The important messages that the organization is striving to portray must be developed. This will allow the target audience to better understand the goals of the organization. |
| 7. | **Propose a Timeline of Events** | An organized timeline of events must be created. This gives a strict guideline that will keep the organization on track and enforces that all tasks are executed in a timely manner. |
| 8. | **Develop Initial Plan** | The creation of the initial plan generates a direction for the organization to proceed in. It is the step-by-step process that will be followed. |
| 9. | **Implement Elements of the Plan** | This is where elements of the initial plan are put into action. |
| 10. | **Assess Elements of the Communication Strategy** | After the initial plan is implemented, it must be assessed to determine what is working and what must be adjusted. |

**Table 1: Self developed Communication Strategy**

**Step 1: Analysis of the Big Picture**

The organization needs to figure what needs to get done, such as realizing the organization needs to create a communication strategy, to what extent and how quickly. If the organization has nothing that it currently does as a communication strategy then it needs to start from the beginning. If the organization has a strategy that does not seem to

work then it needs to realize that it needs to be improved and probably expanded upon what it already has.

**Step 2: Define the Goals of the Organization**

A successful strategy can only be accomplished if the organization knows exactly what it wishes to achieve as a whole.  If the goal of an organization is to reach out to the community and give the less fortunate a place to turn to, then your approach to your campaign will be different than if your goal was to make the community more green.

**Step 3: Define the Goal of the Individual Programs within the Organization**

Every organization has different projects within it that will have goals that the project itself wants to accomplish outside of the actual organization's goals.  These goals need to be determined and specifically defined so when the communication strategy is being developed, there is a consistent message being portrayed for the program.  Once the breakdown of program goals comes into play, there is more chance for discrepancy for what that program's main goal is.  Getting the utmost important goal decided upon makes decisions that will need to be made in the future easier.

**Step 4: Define the Specific Means of Communication for each Program**

Similar to defining the goals of each individual program, defining the means of communication for each program needs to be decided before the initial plan is being created because it makes sure that everyone is going in the same direction with the programs.

**Step 5: Define the Target Audience**

Determining an organization's target audience is an essential part of formulating a successful communication strategy.  Without defining the proper market, it is nearly impossible to accurately devise a plan to widen an organization's reputation.  After figuring out who your target audience is, the next step is to determine the importance of each audience.  If the program targets many different groups and there is one group that is very knowledgeable and involved in the program and another group that is not knowledgeable or involved, then the group that does not know as much would be of

higher importance.  Looking at it from a different perspective, the rank of importance could be how much you need the audience as opposed to how much they know.  If part of your audience is the people who fund your programs then, even if they know a great deal about the program, they still might be very high on the importance list because they need to be continuously reminded of who you are.

**Step 6: Develop the Key Messages to be portrayed**

The development of the key messages allows the organization to inform the public about their previously determined goals. These messages help build awareness and allow for the organization to regulate how they are perceived.

**Step 7: Propose a Timeline**

A timeline of events needs to be created to keep everyone on the same page about what and when steps in the strategy are being accomplished.  A timeline can be as detailed as a step by step process of specific strategies that should be implemented and as broad as just saying how long you have to accomplish each one of these steps.

**Step 8: Develop Initial Plan**

Strategic preparation of the initial plan is important in the process of creating a new communication strategy. If the organization is looking to expand public knowledge of its programs, they must determine what types of tools to use to get this message to their audiences. The organization must also consider their time, monetary, and personnel limitations when deciding what type of communication to use.

Public polling is a good way for an organization to learn about the current knowledge of their target audience and simultaneously inform those who do not know about them. If the organization chooses to use public polling, they must choose appropriate locations to conduct the polling. Areas of high traffic containing the organization's target audiences are useful when conducting research through polls because they allow for many people to be polled in a shorter amount of time. The questions to be asked need to be determined prior to the polling and it is often helpful to create a spreadsheet with the questions to allow for easy recording of each respondents answers.

Another useful form of communication an organization should consider is a leaflet. Organizations should use leaflets when they want to inform their audiences about themselves in a simple, but yet descriptive way. Leaflets are inexpensive to create and are easily distributed to the target audience. For example, if an organization chooses to poll their target audiences, they can hand out a leaflet at the end of the questions. This allows for the organization to send the person off with information to take home. Leaflets also do not require a lot of updating, making them easy for an organization to maintain.

A third form of communication that is useful to many organizations is a newsletter. A newsletter allows for a lot of information to be distributed to the organization's target audience and is a low cost form of communication. On the newsletter, there should be a story about something that has occurred that was important to the organization. Stories like this help create interest in the target audience because they can gain a better understanding about the organization. It is also useful to include the organization's mission on the newsletter to be informative to the public. The newsletter should contain pictures of different happenings within the organization. This adds color and personality to the newsletter.

Holding a large event is a good way to bring a lot of people together under the name of the organization. The event does not necessarily have to be something directly related to the organization. One example of a large event is a concert where a local band plays. By advertising for the concert, the name of the organization will be introduced to the public. At the event the organization can have an information table so those who are interested in learning more about the organization hosting the event. The cost of this event would be higher than communicating through a newsletter, but the increase in public knowledge would also be much higher by hosting an event.

Finally, an organization should consider maintaining an up-to-date website. Internet plays an important role in communication so it is important for every organization to consider having one. The organization should consider their target audiences before spending the money to develop or maintain a website. For example, if the organization works with many older people, a website would not be as important to them as it would be for an organization aiming towards teenagers. Websites take time to maintain, so it may be necessary for an organization to hire outside help to complete this

task. In this situation, the organization would have to determine how much money they can allot for the website maintenance.

**Step 9: Implement Elements of the Plan**

After an organization has developed a list of ideas for their communication strategy, they must choose the best options for their organization and implement them. The implementation should follow the timeline created in step 7. For polling, the organization should determine an amount of time they will spend polling the public, and also the number of people they are looking to poll. To do this, they must consider the population of their target audience(s) and the amount of time the organization can spend conducting the polling. A sample size can be chosen using the following equation:

$$ss = \frac{Z^2 * (P) * (1 - P)}{c^2}$$

Where ss is the sample size, Z is a confidence level of 95% (1.96), P is the predicted percentage that the sample will pick a particular answer (0.5) and c is the confidence interval.

Once the sample size and time have been determined, the organization can begin polling. The results acquired through polling should be listed in a fashion that will be useful to the organization for analysis. For example, recording the answers in an Excel file to keep the answers together and organized.

The leaflets and newsletters can either be created within the organization or through an outside source. If they are created within the organization they will be less expensive, but it depends on whether or not the organization has enough personnel to assign the task to someone. Once they are created, the organization should begin distributing them during polling and events. The newsletters can be mailed to people within the organization's target audience.

The large event requires a lot of preparation. If an organization chooses to use this form of communication, they must determine what the event will be, how much it will cost, and how to advertise. Some useful forms of advertisement are posters, advertisements in newspapers, and invitations. Posters and invitations can be created

within the organization, helping to keep the cost down. The organization needs to consider where to hold the event. Two possibilities are holding it outside or in a large hall. Holding it outside would most likely be less expensive, but the organization would need to consider weather conditions and space. Holding a large event would require close attention from the personnel to keep the details organized and have the event run smoothly.

Maintaining an updated website is an ongoing process that can be very useful to an organization. If the organization determines that their target audiences would benefit from a website, they should make sure it is maintained properly. If none of the personnel can maintain the website, the organization should determine how much money they can afford to allot to the website. Once this has been determined, the organization can begin looking for an outside source to maintain their website. A static website can be found as uninteresting to the public and will not benefit the organization. Therefore website maintenance is something that should be done regularly.

**Step 10: Assess Elements of the Communication Strategy**

Assessment of the implemented communication strategy is the only way to make sure that the target audiences are being reached. In this stage the methods of communication should already be set and have been given enough time to influence the public. The way that the organization should assess the strategy is to first remember what it was trying to do in the first place, for example bringing in more people or how well the key message is understood by the public. Polling is a great way to get a feel for the public's views, since any question may be asked.

After all of this there is one detail that must not be skipped, a thorough evaluation must be done to make sure that there are no loose ends or skipped details. The more time that is spent finding out information about what the public knows the better you will be able to adapt you strategy later. So, assess, assess, assess.

Finally, after you have assessed every possible way that the strategy has gone; the organization should go back and check its core values and then proceed back to Step 8 to advance their strategy even more.