

How to write a communication plan

By Matt Eliason

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Matt Eliason
matt@plusone.com.au

PlusOne Marketing, Media, Communication <http://www.plusone.com.au>

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-Ensuring your business sends the right messages-

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Like a business plan and a marketing plan, a communication plan is a key business tool. In fact, like a marketing plan, a communication plan should be included in every business plan and be subject to the same annual review to measure its effectiveness and ensure it's relevance to the business.

The benefit of a well-considered and implemented communications plan is all audience segments will receive information that is relevant to them, that helps build trust and helps build business.

A communication plan can be as simple or complex as you wish; but consists of several key aspects:

1. The strategy
2. The action plan

Let's look at each of these in a little more detail.

- STRATEGY -

The Strategy refers to the the audiences, key message/s, overarching aims and objectives of the communication activity.

Part of the strategic planning involves identifying your audiences. The list below provides an indication, but certainly not an exhaustive list of audience segments. Many can be sub-categorised even further.

1. Staff
2. Management
3. Customers
4. Interest groups
5. Stakeholder groups
6. Media
7. Government (local/state/federal)
8. Community organisations

9. Collaborative organisations/businesses
10. Suppliers
11. Distributors

The Key Messages will be influenced by the key issues facing the business. For instance, a competitor may have encroached into your market share. This may require your business to reassess its Unique Selling Points. These in turn may provide ideas for key messages. Key messages will be influenced by your audience. A key message might be that your business is a leader in the industry, or that you can meet customers needs, rather than just sell them products.

The Aims of the communication plan will be centered around ensuring that the key messages are being heard. For instance an aim could be "To ensure distributors are aware of all our services through the production and distribution of a monthly newsletter (or email, or other communication method). Or perhaps "To keep customers informed of benefits of doing business with us - via publication of case studies and new product information" (most customers don't know the full breadth of activities most business undertake). Maybe it could be communicating outcomes to key stakeholders (such as the bank, other funders, shareholders or interest groups) on a regular basis.

The Objectives refers to how the Aims will be made actionable. For instance the Aim could be to "Be proactive in the use of the media" and one of the objectives could be "To establish which media best suits our needs and develop relationships with the relevant contacts".

Finally there needs to be a system of measurement of success.

- ACTION PLAN -

A communication strategy needs to be supported by an action plan. The action plan details the timing and costs of the various activities identified in the strategy. Typically an action plan is constructed as a matrix, addressing the aims, objectives. Using the above scenarios

Aim - Be proactive in the use of the media

Objective 1 - To establish which media best suits our needs and develop relationships with the relevant contacts

Action - Undertake a survey of all media that relates to our business, area of operations or community and contact them to determine what sort of information they would be prepared to use the best method of getting that information to them in their preferred form.

- BEFORE YOU START -

Before you start writing your strategy, you should identify your audiences and conduct audience surveys to determine what they want to know. While your communications may not be limited to the subjects they nominate, it is essential that their primary needs are addressed. Additional material will come as a bonus for them.

This audience survey will be part of your situation analysis or communications audit. This activity simply identifies where you are at, what newsletters or other communication means are you currently using, are they working etc. Results can be surprising. For instance you may find that staff seem not to be as well informed as senior management would like, or that there is none, or at best a fragmented approach to communication. On occasions communications may be seen as purely a marketing role, but often the need is far broader than this.

How and what people think about your business is shaped and influenced by the messages your business communicates to the market, whether they are intentional or unintentional s. Ideally

everyone should be saying the same things to the same people, constantly reinforcing the key messages. Different messages confuse people, and they will naturally gravitate to business or organisations that provide consistency and perceived reliability.

RESOURCE BOX

Matt Eliason has provided communication plans for large and small businesses and government departments.

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