

How to Build Support for Your Cause: A Strategic Communications Primer

[This Primer was adapted for Grantstation's email news bulletin from an online communications "toolkit" created by the Biodiversity Project]

Introduction

Are you “preaching to the choir” in your public outreach communications?

Many nonprofit groups—especially environmental groups—encounter substantial difficulty building broad constituencies to support and advocate for their causes and issues. One reason for this difficulty is that organizations often make the mistake of creating communications materials (from brochures to Public Service Announcements) that do not take into account the values, interests, or even the “language” of the people they are trying to reach. For ten years, Biodiversity Project has been creating values-based strategic communications plans to assist other nonprofit groups and coalitions build support and motivate target audiences to take action to protect our nation's vital natural resources.

Strategic communications is basically marketing by another name, but it's not just for the for-profit world. After all, at the heart of any good strategic communications strategy is, quite simply, a compelling argument – an argument that moves people to act. Creating an effective strategy involves identifying your goals and who you need to enlist to accomplish those goals, learning their motivations and creating a compelling message based on those motivations, and, of course, getting your message to them.

The value that a strategic communications program can bring to your work is greater today than ever before. We live in a culture increasingly saturated with sophisticated marketing appeals competing for people's time and attention. Those of us working to improve society and the environment need – now, more than ever – to be strategic in how we leverage our limited resources to gain our audiences' attention.

In this series, we will outline the basic components of a strategic communications plan that you can use to enhance your organization's effectiveness in achieving its goals.

This series is not designed for communications experts, but for grassroots and local organizations dedicated to enhancing public education and outreach efforts for a variety of good causes. As such, the series is by no means the whole story; however, with a little reflection, research, and planning you'll be well on your way.

Keep in mind, when we say “communications” we mean more than just writing a press release! We're talking about creating and carrying out a plan to reach and convince key people to take notice and take action in order to further your organization's strategic goals. The focus of your plan might be as narrow as convincing a city council member to support a certain piece of environmental or social legislation, or as broad as raising public awareness about the environmental and economic impacts of Global Warming. Whatever the scale of your communications effort, it should follow the same eight basic action steps. These steps should include:

- * Determine Your Goals
- * Determine Your Audience
- * Learn about Your Audience
- * Develop Your Message
- * Enhance Your Message

- * Choose Messengers and Pathways to the Public
- * Cultivate Media Relations
- * Evaluate and Revise Your Communications Strategy

Determine Your Goals

One of the most common mistakes nonprofits make in crafting a communications strategy is choosing a goal that is too general or elusive. Begin the process by defining specific and measurable goals. Here is an example of a goal that probably won't be helpful in crafting your communications strategy: "Increase public awareness of habitat destruction." And here's one that could be helpful: "Increase public support for wetlands protection at town meetings in St. Charles County, MD." Your goal should be specific enough that you can 1) assess whether you have adequate resources to accomplish it, and 2) make important strategic decisions, such as choosing one audience, pitch, messenger, or media outlet, over another. Your goal also should be measurable so you can judge whether you are making headway or need to revise your strategy.

This doesn't mean that you can't aim high. Indeed, believing we can achieve a very different future – a future in which, for example, the general public is more conscious of habitat destruction and, consequently, actively promotes public policy to protect valued natural places – is arguably central to effective and sustained environmental and social change work. The solution is to craft a communications strategy that accomplishes your short-term, achievable goals while moving you towards your desired long-term outcomes.

You may have more than one communications goal, and they may relate to your organization's program work and/or development. You may be working to get a new piece of legislation passed, to strengthen enforcement of an existing law, or to directly change individuals' behavior (e.g. reduce homeowners' use of pesticides, or increase boat users' sensitivity to the spread of aquatic invasive species, etc.). Perhaps you want to enhance your organization's visibility, increase your fundraising, or recruit more volunteers.

Here are a couple additional things to keep in mind when choosing your goals:

- * Recognize that some of your goals may be complimentary, while others may not. For example, if you're working in a coalition to pass a particular piece of legislation, partners may feel the work is compromised by efforts to raise your organization's visibility (and they may be right!).
- * There may be other communication campaigns addressing issues related to your own. Consider who's already in the field, and how you can capitalize on what they're doing and/or play a complimentary role.

Determine Your Audience

With limited resources and time, you've got to focus on reaching the people who can actually change things – your target audience (not "the general public").

In some instances, your target audience may be obvious and predetermined – for example, to prevent algae blooms on residential lakes you'll need to reach shoreline homeowners. But often, as is the case when shaping most public policy, you'll need to make a strategic decision about who to target. Should you target decision-makers directly or influence them via voters or key constituents (e.g. business owners, media figures, civic leaders, etc.)? If you're targeting voters or key constituents, who is most likely to be sympathetic to your cause, readily motivated to act, most influential, or easiest to reach? These are rarely questions with easy answers; many well-funded communications campaigns conduct public opinion research to identify receptive audiences – a luxury few grassroots organizations can afford. One strategy

to overcome this barrier is to make assumptions based on existing research. (See the "Great Lakes Target Audiences" example below.)

When thinking about potential target audiences, keep one question front and center: "How will reaching this audience help us achieve our goals?" Using your goals as a reference point this way will help ensure that you don't waste valuable time, energy, and resources trying to convince people who don't need convincing, or even worse, trying to "convert" people who are ideologically opposed to your cause or viewpoint.

In political parlance, there are three types of people: the "saved" (those who are already in your camp), the "save-ables" (those who are undecided but could be convinced), and the "sinners" (those who will never share your viewpoint.) One of the biggest challenges of every communications campaign is to identify who these people are.

Example

Great Lakes Target Audiences

In 2002, Biodiversity Project hired a national public opinion research firm to gain a better understanding of the public's connection to the Great Lakes. From the data, Biodiversity Project identified three target audiences with high potential for becoming "Great Lakes constituents" – individuals ready to protect the Lakes at the community and regional level.

"Responsible Citizens Who Vote"

These are the people who are actively engaged in their community, are involved in civic organizations (Rotary, PTA, neighborhood associations, etc.), and vote frequently – even in smaller elections. They are likely to be sympathetic to Great Lakes issues, but need to know more about how these issues connect to their own lives and why they should care.

"Great Lakes Lifestylers"

These people visit the Lakes on a regular basis for fishing, boating, camping, and swimming. They already care deeply about the Lakes and have a strong sense of personal responsibility, but have little sense of their personal impact on the Lakes and how their daily actions connect to the system as a whole. They don't necessarily know a lot about emerging Great Lakes issues, and may be less engaged in community affairs than other audiences.

- * Niche recreational users (hunters, anglers, sailors, boaters, etc.)
- * Lake homeowners and "cottagers"
- * Recreational users (those who visit Great Lakes beaches, parks, etc.)

"Quality of Lifers"

This group is very similar to the popularly defined "Cultural Creatives." They're concerned about health issues, and in maintaining a high quality of life. They include moms (and dads) who are concerned about the health of their families, and citizens who are active in local community issues and engaged in community service. They are careful consumers, and tend to be educated, professional, and middle- to upper-class.

Source: Belden Russonello & Stewart, Protecting the Great Lakes: Responsibility to Awareness to Action.

Learn about Your Audience

Before deciding what to communicate to your audience to advance your goal, it's extremely helpful to step back and listen to the concerns of those you want to reach. We often tend to assume our audience holds the same priorities we do, or that they care about an issue for the same reasons we do. But this is rarely the case, and such assumptions can be self-defeating. Listening can be as informal as having conversations with members of your audience to gain a more in-depth understanding of their feelings and beliefs or as scientific as hiring a professional public opinion research firm to conduct a survey or focus groups.

Start with Values

As you get to know your audience, you should be listening for the core values they bring to the issues at hand. Core values are those deeply held beliefs that form the foundation of all attitudes and behavior. By listening for values, you learn the keys to communications that will create concern and may change behavior.

In-depth research by Belden Russonello & Stewart finds that most Americans share a set of basic or primary values, as well as a set of secondary values (see below). The research also reveals Americans' most widely held reasons for caring about the environment: a responsibility to future generations, a belief that nature is God's creation, and a desire for one's family to enjoy a healthy environment. An appreciation of nature's beauty and a belief in nature's rights and intrinsic value were selected by much smaller segments of the public.

Don't assume, however, that appealing to any of these values will necessarily garner your target audience's support. These survey results reflect the values of a cross-section of American society – they don't necessarily reflect those of your target audience.

Public Opinion Research

Public opinion research can be a valuable tool in communications planning. This type of research is a more scientific form of listening to audiences and can help answer the following questions:

- * Where does the public stand on your issue? Does a majority support or oppose your objectives?
- * What are the strongest reasons for the public to care about your issue?
- * What stands in the way of increasing concern and how can you overcome these barriers?
- * Which segments of the public are most supportive of your positions; which segments are in the middle and possibly persuadable; and which segments, if any, are not persuadable?

Low-Cost Research Techniques

If you can't afford the services of a professional polling firm, here are some alternatives for learning about your audience's values and concerns.

- * Take advantage of existing research – over the last decade, many environmental groups have begun using opinion research. In addition to providing reports like *Protecting the Great Lakes: Responsibility to Awareness to Action*, Biodiversity Project shares research on Americans' attitudes about a range of environmental issues.

- * Conduct one-on-one interviews with concerned constituents – “person on the street” interviews. Think about where you might find your audience and go there. While people are often happy to share their opinions, it is important to be sensitive to the setting (e.g. don't survey in front of the post office near closing time).

* Contact your local college – many social science departments conduct opinion research and may already have useful information or be able to use your issue as a teaching tool.

* Talk to people you know who aren't already "constituents" for your cause – folks from different life experiences – and find out what they think. You may get an informative earful!

* If your organization runs a canvass (or you work with one that does), arrange a debriefing with canvassers. They'll be able to tell you how the door-to-door conversations are running, neighborhood by neighborhood.

If you do it correctly your research can tell you 1) who the people are that you need to reach; 2) how to appeal to their core values in talking about your cause; and 3) how to reach them (what papers and magazines they read, what TV shows they watch, what organizations they belong to, etc.).

Armed with this information you can develop a strategic campaign that will make best use of your time and resources and give you the best chance of success.

American Values

Primary Values:

- * Responsibility to care for one's family;
- * Responsibility to care for oneself;
- * Personal Liberty;
- * Work;
- * Spirituality/Belief in God;
- * Honesty/integrity; and,
- * Fairness/equality.

Secondary Values:

- * Responsibility to care for others;
- * Respect for authority; and,
- * Love of country or culture.

Environmental Values:

- * Responsibility to future generations;
- * Nature is God's creation; and,
- * A desire for one's family to enjoy a healthy environment.

Source: Belden Russonello & Stewart, Human Values and Nature's Future: Americans Attitudes on Biological Diversity.

Develop Your Message

Your message is a paragraph that provides the basic template for all your specific communications. Your message paragraph should be clear, compelling, and short. Imagine you're at a neighbor's door and you have about one minute to engage and inform him or her about your cause. What do you say?

Your message should do four basic things, illustrated below by message components from Biodiversity Project's Great Lakes Forever public education initiative:

- * Give your audience a reason to care about your issue by appealing to values.

These are your audience's values, not your own. Don't get hung up on winning for the "right" reasons, as you define them. Remember, you are making an emotional argument – don't be afraid of being a bit effusive. Always put values first, facts second.

The Great Lakes are one of the natural wonders of the world and it is our responsibility to protect them. They are a place we call home and a resource for us to use and protect – they are the heart of the ecosystems that we rely on for life. They are a gift of nature whose beauty and bounty enrich our lives and identify our region.

- * Describe a threat and who is responsible for the problem.

What's the problem? Why does this put what your audience values at stake?

Careless and excessive land development and poor land management are rapidly destroying wetlands, shorelines, and other critical habitats that are vital to the health of our local water resources and the Great Lakes. When we lose this habitat, we lose critical homes for native plants and wildlife, and places for our families to fish, boat, hike, and enjoy.

- * Provide a solution.

Stress benefits and show how the solution addresses the threat. As embattled or pessimistic as you may feel, lend your audience faith in the solution's potential.

Fortunately, solutions are available for us to make a difference for the Lakes and our communities today. Incentives for well-planned, "smart" growth initiatives, urban re-development, and protection or expansion of existing urban green space can go a long way toward controlling unchecked growth.

- * Describe what action will help solve the problem.

Be specific about the action. For example, rather than asking your audience to reduce polluted runoff from their homes, let them know how they can do it (e.g. bury pet waste, plant native grasses that thrive without pesticides, etc.).

Attend a public hearing on the Responsible Growth Initiative this Wednesday, April 18th at select locations throughout the state. Bring a friend! Visit <http://www.greatlakesforever.org> for more details.

Make sure your message speaks to the way people sort through problems. Does it appeal to their values and their emotions? Does it provide them with information? Does it offer a solution? Does it give them something to do in response to the threat?

A slogan and a sound bite can be lifted easily from your message. A slogan might be: "Development – but at what cost?" A sound bite might be: "We must protect our families' quality of life. If Smith Marsh is destroyed, it will be gone forever." These are shorthand applications of your message that can be useful as a tag line in communications, but they are not a substitute for a thoughtful, well-constructed message paragraph.

Enhance Your Message

Be Ready with Anecdotes

Having a human story that illustrates and amplifies your message is absolutely critical to a successful communications effort. Often, the side that presents the most compelling human story wins, because the other side never recovers. So, it is essential that the human story be lined up before you begin communicating.

Here are some story angles that you can use to illustrate problems and solutions, show how to take effective action, and reinforce the value of taking action. Stories like these can make environmental issues “real,” local, and personally important for people – and they’re likely to appeal to feature editors across a variety of mediums.

- * Local hero – Is there a local leader who is making a difference for habitat protection, environmental quality, or a particular species? Stories of courage, conviction, and personal passion can make great features while raising the profile of the issue.

- * People coming together in unusual ways – When unusual allies come together to achieve something good for the community – a prairie restoration, a stream clean-up, a citizen inventory of species – it is newsworthy. The “new and different allies” angle illustrates the way common values can unite different community groups toward the goal of protecting habitat and environmental quality for all.

- * Family affairs – “The three generations of Smiths who have been farming without chemicals because they care about Smith Creek” tells a story about family values and commitment to the community when it comes to environmental quality.

- * Charismatic, weird, and otherwise interesting critters and plants – If the flora and fauna are unique and distinctive, they can provide compelling stories. For instance, the “world’s largest fungus” story was a way to describe the critical role that mycorrhizae play in forest and prairie ecosystems.

- * Alien invaders in our midst – Likewise, “alien invasions” can provide potent copy, especially when accompanied by good visuals illustrating what all those species with long Latin names look like and how they are taking over. For example, the airborne leaps of big-headed carp provided rich fodder for news cameras; the photos raised significant public alarm and led to emergency measures to control the carp’s spread toward the Great Lakes.

Use Compelling Images

Pictures tell a story, evoke emotions, and appeal to values. They are instrumental in any communications effort on the environment and should be chosen very carefully. An image that is too harsh may offend your audience or be seen as extreme. One that evokes only beauty may send a message that all is well and no action is needed.

Choose images that appeal to your audience’s values.

Images should reflect the message, and include both a positive appeal to values and a description of the problem. A mix of positive images about what is worth protecting combined with disturbing images of the problem is often a winning formula.

When Using Facts, Be Specific

Your message and images must be backed by specific facts. Journalists and the public have become increasingly skeptical of information presented by advocates; so facts should be specific, not general, in order to have the most credibility.

For example, it is better to provide the number of acres of forest that will be lost due to a certain action by government or industry, rather than to simply say “vast amounts of forest.” Rather than alluding to the “high costs” of aquatic invasive species, note that U.S. and Canadian taxpayers pay \$15 million annually to keep sea lamprey populations under control, or that the monitoring and maintenance of zebra mussels are estimated to have cost the United States \$750 million to \$1 billion from 1989 to 2000.

Simplify statistics: Use “3 out of 4” instead of 75%. Package facts so your audience easily grasps them.

Use facts that relate to people’s daily lives or experience, such as “the water we drink every day,” “the lakes we fish,” and “the view from our windows.”

Repeat! Repeat! Repeat!

Once a message is decided, make it the mantra that is repeated over and over again. Do not assume anyone has heard the message, even if you are quoted in the media two or three times. Most audiences – public, media, legislators – have things to think about other than your issue. If your core message is different from one week to the next, your audience will not comprehend any one thing. You must have one core message and stay with it.

Communication is not effective if it presents a variety of arguments in the hope that one resonates. A diversity of messages results in a lack of clarity. Instead, you need to decide on the most effective message and repeat it until it makes you crazy.

Choose Your Messenger

To most effectively get your message to your target audience, you should choose a messenger who complements your message and carries weight with your audience. It’s quite possible this messenger won’t be you!

Your choice of messenger for a communications effort must depend on what message you want to convey and whom you are addressing. All three elements – message, audience, and messenger – must complement one another. The biggest mistake organizations can make is choosing a messenger before knowing the message or identifying the audience.

Messages are typically most credible when they come from people affected by an issue or problem rather than those far removed. For example:

- * Environmental organizations supporting tougher EPA clean air standards to curb smog and surface level ozone worked with physicians and asthma sufferers. Doctors and patients were the best messengers for a story about health threats.

- * When communicating a spiritual message about biodiversity to religious Americans, clergy are far more likely to be persuasive messengers than executive directors of environmental organizations.

- * When paper companies want to send a message to families that they care about the future by planting trees, they use six- and seven-year-olds to carry their message instead of corporate CEOs.

For your base – members of your organization and other affiliated or similar organizations – you can be your own messenger. But, this is not likely to work for other audiences, most of whom can only name Greenpeace or the Sierra Club when asked to identify environmental groups.

Alternative messengers might include scientists within the region's prestigious universities, but the climate change battles have proven to us that "my scientist vs. your scientist" may just confuse the public.

You might also consider the following messengers for your cause:

- * Nurses (often trusted more than doctors) who can speak to issues impacting health.
- * A local well driller who can talk about how tough it is to get good water these days.
- * Older residents talking about how much things have changed.
- * Farmers doing the right thing about run-off.
- * Community leaders who are ahead of the curve on your issue.
- * Homeowners "just like me" who are installing rain barrels to reduce storm run-off, finding alternatives for toxic lawn chemicals, or otherwise doing something positive for local action.
- * Children, who can appeal to concerns for future generations.
- * Parents concerned about the health and well-being of their families.

Choosing the right messenger is one of the most important decisions you will make. Take the time to find the best person for the job.

Exploring Pathways to the Public

Once you've settled on your goals, your target audience, your core message, and your messenger you can begin to think about the best pathways – or methods – you should use to reach your audience. We're all familiar with a variety of communications pathways – from magazine, radio, and television advertising, to direct mail, the Web, email, and signs or billboards. Indeed, there are pathways to communication all around us everyday, but you'll need to determine the most effective method to reach your target audience and to achieve your desired outcomes or goals. You'll want to be thoughtful in your choices and be prepared to pre-test and evaluate the success in each case. In this part of the series, we'll review the most common pathways to the public and provide some inspiration for thinking creatively.

The News Media

The news media – including newspapers, magazines, television, the Web, and radio – is one of the most common pathways to increase public awareness. A thoughtful strategy, patience, and a sense of humor will help you find the media coverage your issue deserves. Traditional news outlets, like your local newspaper or nightly news, still enjoy a level of credibility not found through advertising. Further, beyond the work of getting a story into the news, there is no cost for news coverage, which is especially attractive to those of us with limited communications budgets. However, the audience share and demographics that most news pathways reach is somewhat limited.

The national trend is for print newspapers and television news to reach more seniors and families without children. The audience tends to be made up of educated, financially stable people who vote. This might be your target audience, but it makes sense to research demographic data of major newspapers in your target area before deciding how much time to spend on story placement – this includes Web-based news. Demographic data for most media outlets is available through the advertising sales division. In general, it's advisable to include the news media in your pathway plans, but don't make the mistake of betting the farm on just one pathway.

Cultivating Media Relationships

Relationship-building with the media is really no different than relationship building in other aspects of life: listening, compassion, honesty, and respect will take you a long way. And, as you might guess, a sense of humor and a smile never hurt.

Listening

You'll save yourself a lot of trouble if you research your prospective media outlets before contacting them. You'll want to think about the story you're telling and your target audience. Which outlet is likely to reach your audience? Is television coverage better than newspaper coverage? Which editor or reporter is most likely to be sympathetic to your cause? The initial answers to these questions require some familiarity with your intended media outlets.

Compassion

Although it might seem like a glamorous life, being a reporter is not unlike working for a nonprofit cause. Declining profits in the newspaper trade have required smaller numbers of reporters to carry more of the burden. The result can be overworked journalists facing difficult deadlines. The more work you can do for the reporter, the more likely he or she is to run your story.

Spend time on your press releases and reporters will notice. Make sure your press releases are well written, timely, and accurate. Here are some pointers.

- * Editors are trained to look at the opening and closing paragraphs – these are where you should concentrate your efforts. Try to “hook” the reader with an inspiring, humorous, or somewhat surprising opening.
- * Provide plenty of quotations that reporters can use to shape their own stories.
- * Make sure the contact information on your release is accurate, including email addresses and Web links for additional information.
- * If you're awaiting a vote or another time-sensitive decision, have most of your press release written in advance and you'll save time getting your story out when the news breaks. Sometimes this means writing two different versions: one to run if the bill passes, one to run if it fails. This is common practice for groups working on policy issues.
- * Indicate if images and interviews are available for the story and be prepared to provide print-ready/pre-formatted images and contact information for interviews.
- * If you write the story to read like a news story, some small town editors will actually run your press release without changing a single word (don't expect a by-line though.)

Some reporters prefer to be contacted by telephone, others prefer email, and many still like to receive faxes. Be certain to provide your press releases and additional story information in a variety of formats. You might want to create a special “For the Media” section on your organization's website. Regardless of what you decide to do, keep the reporters' interests in mind.

Honesty

Honesty is crucial to developing a relationship with a reporter or media outlet. Being proactive about integrity requires a higher level of honesty than you might expect. Here are a few tips to keep in mind when speaking to reporters:

- * Make sure your facts are accurate – double-check them and provide sources so reporters can follow up on their own.

* Unless you're an expert, don't claim to be one. Make arrangements with sympathetic experts, perhaps local business people or university professors, before sending out your press release. When reporters call, provide all the information you can, but refer them to your experts on questions for which you don't know the answer.

* Don't speak for the opposition. When reporters ask why some people oppose your position, let them know when you're speculating about others concerns and encourage them to contact opponents for their side of the story.

* If you don't know the answer to a question, volunteer to track down the information from a credible source.

* When making promises to reporters about returning phone calls, arranging interviews, or providing graphics and photos – keep them. Always try to exceed their expectations for reliability.

Respect

In this case, respect means accepting that reporters are paid to probe an issue and to present more than one side (your side) of the story. We all occasionally face opposing views in our society, and we should expect to find reporters who doubt or don't share our concerns. Although the media aspires to objectivity, biased reporting does occur. Some reporters might seem hostile, but don't allow yourself to react too strongly. Stay on message and assure the reporter that you respect a difference of opinions and hope your opinions will receive fair and equal coverage. You can avoid reporting that is biased against you by avoiding strong emotional statements and accusations. You'll find more friends in the press and the public by thoughtfully choosing the public face for your cause – be strong, but not belligerent.

Smile

Don't underestimate the importance of friendliness and patience. Media and press work can be extremely stressful. Activists have a reputation for being humorless, something we should acknowledge with humor. If you expect reporters to be interested in your cause, take some time to learn about their interests. It never hurts to compliment a reporter on a recent story of theirs that you read and enjoyed. Let them know that you're ready and willing to help them find the resources they need to tell the story. And finally, thank them for covering the story and let them know you're available for future stories as needed.

In addition to honing your relationship-building skills, you may encounter other media situations. Tips about how to deal with two of the most common ones follow:

What to Do About Interviews

If you're contacted for an interview, ask the reporter what kind of story he or she is writing and what information you can provide to help shape the story. Of course, it's important to stay on message. Most newspaper interviews are conducted via telephone, so don't be afraid to grab your press release and read statements right from it.

If a longer television or radio interview is scheduled, then you can prepare concise message statements – also called “soundbites” – in advance. You might want to call affected citizens or local experts and ask them for quotations or stories that can reinforce your message. In some cases, radio and television producers will ask you to submit a list of topics and questions that the host might ask you on air. This saves their staff a lot of work and allows you to shape the interview to suit your strengths. As you prepare questions, be certain to write your answers (on a separate document, of course.)

Often you'll be lucky to get just one sentence quoted so you'll want to put your best foot forward. It's okay to ask the reporter, “Can I give you a quote?” and then give a one-sentence quote that best captures the point you want the public to see.

Finally, don't ever expect reporters to ignore something you tell them "off the record." They are, after all, reporters. Professionalism is crucial and silly jokes or unkind words about an issue, the opposition's view point, or political figures may come back to bite you – hard.

Tracking Down a Lead: Finding the Right Outlet

Thanks to the Web, it's easier than ever to track down editors, reporters, and outlets for media stories you're trying to place. Most media outlets, from newspapers to radio and television stations, have websites with contact information regarding their reporters' duties.

Don't assume, though, that a reporter with a certain title is the best or only person able to cover your story. For instance, only major newspapers have dedicated environmental reporters, so you may find that the best match for you is someone who covers local issues, someone who writes "human interest" stories for the lifestyle section, or a columnist who happens to share your particular environmental concern.

Several professional services offer media lists for sale – in print and online. The largest of these are available through Bacon's or Vocus, but the cost can be prohibitive. If you're only looking for local media coverage, check your yellow pages and gather names and information through local websites.

If your organization has a small communications budget, you might investigate a nonprofit media resource designed for environmental groups. This online service is called Green Media Toolshed and is available on a sliding-scale annual fee (learn more online at www.greenmediatoolshed.org.)

Paid Advertising

Paid advertising, with the exception of face-to-face communications, is probably the most prevalent communications pathway we encounter on a daily basis. Everywhere we turn we find paid advertising. Perhaps one of the strangest ad campaigns was in the late 1990's when the ABC television network advertised its new fall programs with stickers on bananas at the supermarket. It sounds crazy, but as environmentalists, we should appreciate the fact that the advertisement was biodegradable.

Don't assume that you can't afford paid advertising – radio spots and even television can be surprisingly affordable in small and medium-sized markets. And, with some creative controls, production costs for print or broadcast ads can be reasonable.

To decide whether paid advertising is right for you, consider your goals and audience first. Paid advertising can provide exceptional exposure to specific targeted audiences. Unlike the "free" media you try to get through press releases, paid advertising guarantees exposure. Sometimes, as in the case of the "Swift Boat Veterans for Bush" campaign of the 2004 presidential election, the advertising can become a story on its own and be highly successful at earning "free" media. But, as with the Swift Boat campaign, controversy may not be the best vehicle for raising the profile of your cause.

Many sectors of the public have a great dislike of advertising – something you'll want to consider as part of your audience targeting. Print, radio, and television ads seem to have increased over the decades, and the public has a certain tolerance for these more traditional advertising methods. Perhaps less tolerated are billboards, electric signs, packaging, and other public forms of advertising that are often accused of "polluting" the public space. Direct mail can be problematic – so consider your options carefully. If your group is interested in paid advertising, consider consulting a professional agency that specializes in nonprofit causes. Some communities have associations for advertising professionals that provide consultation to nonprofits for reduced or no fees.

Don't limit your potential pathways to the public

You can explore newer and non-traditional pathways here. Learn more about the role of news conferences and public events in your strategy.

New, Unusual, and Alternative Pathways to the Public

Public Signs and Point-of-Experience Products

Public signs and other “point-of-experience” communications products can be an effective way to target an audience at a specific resource, such as a state park, a beach, or on a trail or dock. Unlike billboards designed for high-speed viewing, smaller signs and related products can be designed for close inspection and reading. Some signs are educational – providing historical or scientific information – or instructional – encouraging specific behaviors that can benefit the resource. Classic educational signs are found in museums and zoos and on trails and roadsides throughout the world. Instructional signs are found nearly everywhere, telling us “Buckle Up,” “Don't Litter,” and “Slow Down for Children.”

The effectiveness of these kinds of communications can be hard to evaluate, but you may want to consider them in your communications strategy. Try to keep messages on the signs clear and graphically compelling. Place your signs where people will see them, but not someplace where they'll have to compete with – or even spoil – a view. Signs on docks, beaches, and other points of recreation often go ignored because visitors are there to play, not to read signs. However, nearby restrooms, picnic areas, and campsites can be effective locations.

In recent years, signs in restrooms, near the sinks or above the urinals, have become more commonplace. Of course, you'll want to consider the location as it relates to your message – signs about water conservation could be great in public restrooms, but you might not want to use bathroom stalls to educate folks about organic produce. You don't have to limit yourself to signs either. Messages on menus or placemats at area restaurants or brochures in local hotel rooms might find a captive audience that is visiting the very landscape you're working to protect.

The Web and Email

The Internet – including the Web and email – is your friend. As a source of instant information and two-way communications, there is no more powerful medium. Web-based communications have the advantage of being environmentally friendly – no paper – and you can update and change text as your issue or organization evolves. Email communications can be tied to your website, personalized, and targeted to subscriber interests, and can result in instant citizen action on timely issues.

Although the costs for a professionally designed site can seem daunting, the technology is surprisingly accessible. Websites can be designed by skilled amateurs, student volunteers, or agencies that specialize in nonprofit contracts. Hosting fees – for the service that “puts” your site on the Web – are usually less than twenty dollars a month. Groups with smaller budgets can produce pages and pages of full-color content on the Web for a tiny fraction of what they would pay for a printed brochure or glossy newsletter. You can ensure the greatest possible exposure for your site by choosing an address with a clear connection to your cause and placing it on all of your communications – from business cards, to emails, to letterhead, newsletters, press releases, etc. Make sure to provide donation information and a sign-up for your email list if you have one. PayPal and other similar services have gotten a lot better over the years and can provide a low-cost way of letting donors give on-line with a credit card.

Many Web and email services offer a variety of tools to help you evaluate the effectiveness of your electronic communications. In addition to counting the number of visitors your site records, you can track

which pages they visited, how much time they spent there, and how they found your site. Some email services such as Constant Contact allow you to track the success of your mailing campaigns – recording the number of emails sent, the number actually opened, clicked through, links followed, and forwards to friends. Compared to traditional postal communications, this is a remarkable tool.

Finally, it's important to note new federal anti-spam laws and privacy concerns. Consider your organization's philosophy and either adopt or write tough privacy rules. This includes collection and sharing of email addresses, frequency and content of emailings, and the ability to "unsubscribe" from lists. Remember, high communication standards – electronic and otherwise – are most appreciated when they are actually enforced.

Novelty Items and Unexpected Pathways

Bumper stickers, key chains, and people in chicken suits all fall under a category we're calling "novelty items." In some cases these are relatively traditional pathways, like bumper stickers, t-shirts, coffee mugs, and key chains. But, in other cases, they are rather unusual, like bar coasters, skywriting, and stickers on bananas. Novelty pathways give your organization the opportunity to be creative and express its message in its own particular style. Greenpeace is an excellent example of an organization that has garnered tremendous attention and done some excellent work using unexpected communications pathways – such as mountain climbers unfurling "no nukes" messages in prominent public locations.

The cost of such communications varies widely. Giveaway items, from traditional t-shirts and bumper stickers to original spins like the AIDS ribbon and the "Live Strong" yellow bracelets, can have tremendous fad appeal. Good design, the appropriate tone, and a reasonable distribution plan can make a simple "penny item" really stand out.

Do News Conferences Still Matter?

News conferences seem glamorous, especially if you've never held one. Most of us are familiar with presidential press conferences, where important treaties are announced while reporters shout provocative questions and cameras whirl all around. While we may feel our issues are worthy of such attention, few reporters are likely to drop everything for information that could best be shared via email or a standard press release.

However, if your organization has some especially strong news – perhaps a large corporate donation or an unusual announcement involving a major political figure – press conferences can be effective. Nothing draws a crowd better than big money and celebrity – even if that celebrity is your town's mayor. So, here are a few tips for organizing a news conference:

- * Don't take more than 5-10 minutes to make your point. After that you're probably repeating yourself, or gratuitously allowing every coalition member a turn at the mic.

- * Designate a moderator or lead speaker. Limit the number of speakers and the length of their remarks. Remember, your best messenger may not be your highest ranking staffer, but someone directly affected by your issue, an expert, or someone else with newsworthy value.

- * Choose a site that offers something visual for the TV cameras: a forest or lake, the site of flood damage, an urban garden or city park, etc. If you can't hold your news conference on location, use large charts or blown-up pictures, invite children or affected neighbors. Be careful, however, that the site is easily

* Allow reporters to question individual participants after the formal presentation is done. Reporters will often take individuals aside to get quotes or pictures that will be exclusive to their station or newspaper.

* It's important that all of the participants understand and stay with your message, so rehearse with them.

* Free food and refreshments aren't usually expected, but reporters will appreciate them.

If you decide to hold a press conference, it's also a good idea to have someone from your organization take photographs. You might want to use these in your organization's newsletter or website, especially if there is a celebrity involved.

Public Events

Public events can be wonderful communications opportunities. Although this category traditionally suggests fundraising and membership-oriented functions, public events can almost always include some form of "media friendly" component. Events have the advantage of drawing resources together – giving staff, board members, and volunteers an opportunity to collaborate and celebrate the mission of the organization in a very tangible way.

In order to draw the media, you'll want to offer them something unique. Local or national celebrities can be a wonderful draw, but so can citizen and volunteer actions – such as BioBlitzes, Beach or Neighborhood Clean-up Days, or restoration programs. Make sure that a staff member is assigned to host any media that show up for your events and be certain to have extra copies of media kits to give away. (Your media kit should contain a press release about the event, background, etc.) Likewise, events can create "photo ops" for local newspapers and television stations, so be prepared to usher them towards images that reflect your core message – perhaps children planting a tree or learning to identify insects. And, when considering funding, always ask local newspapers and broadcasting stations if they're interested in sponsoring your event – doing so guarantees at least some coverage of your program.

The downside of such events is that they can be a drain on finances and staff time. In addition, if expected outcomes aren't achieved – such as attendance numbers – morale can suffer. Unexpected weather, political events, or high profile competition (such as a big sporting event) can make events a bit more risky as a communications tool. Therefore, in a communications campaign, public events might best be used as part of the effort, rather than the whole effort.

Using Multiple Pathways to Increase Success

Communications campaigns are most effective when you are able to get your message out through multiple pathways at the same time.

Biodiversity Project's Great Lakes Forever (GLF) initiative registered the most activity when the most communications pathways were engaged. Activity on the GLF website and with the media peaked in late July and August 2004 while the following pathways were running simultaneously:

- * website online;
- * media kit and press releases in the hands of reporters;
- * magazine ads running;
- * radio ads running;
- * public participation events running;

- * beer coasters in restaurants;
- * educational signs in coastal state parks;
- * policy awareness postcards direct mailed to citizens;
- * coverage in partner newsletters; and,
- * coverage in Biodiversity Project newsletters.

With all of these media in place, it's conceivable that a member of GLF's target audience could receive the GLF message in the following fashion:

While on vacation on Lake Superior, Jane Doe purchases a copy of Wisconsin Trails magazine – where she sees the GLF print ad. That day, she hears the GLF radio ad three times while driving in her car to the state park. At the park she notices the educational signs about protecting the Great Lakes. That evening, at a local restaurant, she's served a drink on a GLF beer coaster. Upon returning home from vacation, she finds a GLF postcard in the mail informing her of important public hearings. Curious, she visits the website and sends in her postcard. The next morning, she reads a story in her local paper about a Great Lakes BioBlitz and decides to attend. Little does she know, she's become a Great Lakes advocate.

With thoughtful planning, your communications pathways – even if you are running just two or three – will all converge on your target audience at the same time. Map your communications products and pathways in a calendar to be certain you are taking advantage of overlapping coverage.

Evaluate and Revise Your Communications Strategy

Why Communications Evaluation?

Communications and public education campaigns can't be called a success unless they're evaluated. Sounds obvious, right? You might be surprised how seldom organizations – even those with large budgets, like the government – design evaluations into their communications efforts. Those of us with limited resources can ensure that funds are used most efficiently by making evaluation a part of every communications program we pursue.

How Do I Get Started?

You may already be conducting some form of evaluation on your communications or education work. If your group solicits donations through an annual mailing campaign, each reply you receive helps you gauge the success of your efforts. Your organization's Website service may allow you to count how many visitors you receive – this is also a simple kind of evaluation.

However, an effective evaluation won't just give you raw data suggesting “success” or “failure.” Instead, an effective evaluation will help you pin point why certain strategies worked or didn't work. After receiving a tremendous response on a request for donations, who wouldn't want to know exactly why that campaign worked better than others? Even when things don't go as you'd hoped, evaluations can help you avoid repeating mistakes that lead to disappointment.

Overarching Evaluation Principles

The Communications Consortium Media Center (CCMC) has provided the following recommendations on communications evaluation. These overarching principles are based on their research and the real experiences of nonprofit organizations engaged in public education and communications campaigns throughout the United States. These principles should guide all your program planning, implementation, and evaluation efforts.

1. There's no "right" or "wrong" way to evaluate communications campaigns. There should be both recognition and acceptance of the fact that different evaluation needs and capabilities require different evaluation designs. The evaluation's design, focus, and methods should fit the information needs and available resources of stakeholders in the communications effort.

2. Funders tend to focus on results. But evaluation for purposes of learning and continuous improvement is equally important.

3. Evaluations, like communications campaigns, need to identify up front their purpose and intended audiences. For example, is the evaluation intended to measure the impact of a campaign? Or is it to provide feedback so the campaign can learn over time from experience? Also, is the target audience for the evaluation the sponsoring foundation, the nonprofit(s) implementing the campaign, or both?

4. It's best to design the evaluation early and in conjunction with the campaign. This will maximize opportunities to use the evaluation for both learning and impact assessment.

5. Campaign staff members should participate whenever possible in the evaluation's design as well as its implementation. Campaigners and evaluators both need to understand the existing challenges and opportunities. For example, is the campaign seeking to change public opinion and then induce action by policymakers? Or is the campaign building upon existing favorable opinion and then mobilizing people to a particular action? Obviously, campaigns to change public opinion are more difficult from the start.

6. Different evaluation designs have different interpretive boundaries. It's important to understand those boundaries and avoid the temptation to make broad claims of success based on limited data or designs that do not warrant such claims.

7. It's important to be realistic about impact. In commercial marketing campaigns, attitude improvements of one-tenth of one percent are deemed important because they can represent millions of dollars. But sometimes funders of communications campaigns want to see attitudinal shifts of ten to thirty percent. In response, nonprofits sometimes make promises to funders that they can't possibly fulfill.

8. Sometimes simple things like developing a good press list or establishing ongoing professional relationships with key reporters are the most significant measures of success, especially for locality-specific or small-budget efforts.

9. Typically, nonprofit communications efforts put forth information to achieve either behavioral or societal change. However, widely held and deeply entrenched values often trump information (e.g., values about the meaning of words like family, community, independence, or self-sufficiency). Successful communications campaigns must acknowledge the "values vs. information" dichotomy, and evaluation must take this dichotomy into account when judging impact.

10. Evaluation can respond to hard-to-answer questions about the value and effectiveness of communication campaigns (e.g., whether information alone can lead to behavior change or whether attention to the social and policy context is also a necessary ingredient).

These principals come from the final Working Paper in a series of papers prepared for the Communications Consortium Media Center's (CCMC) Media Evaluation Project. To read the full paper and learn more about CCMC, visit their Website: www.ccmc.org. Also see the CoEvolution Institute Website – www.coevolution.org – to learn more about environmental education theory and evaluation.

Biodiversity Project welcomes your interest and questions. Please visit us at www.biodiversityproject.org, or call 608-250-9876.