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A Strategic Approach to Communications and Dissemination

Five Steps to Strategic Communications and Dissemination

1. Set clearly defined **Objectives**.
2. Identify, prioritize and get to know your **Audiences**.
3. Create strong, clear **Messages**.
4. Develop leveraged, high-impact **Vehicles** (that take your messages to your audiences).
5. Design and implement **Evaluation** mechanisms.

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Strategic Communications Planning Worksheet

1. Set clearly defined Objectives.

Concentrate on setting out one or two (certainly no more than three) objectives for the challenge at hand. The following questions may help you think about these objectives.

- What do you hope your communications and dissemination efforts will achieve?
- What will be different as a result of your communications and dissemination work?
- How will it change people's awareness, knowledge, attitudes or behaviors about the issue you are talking about?

Once you have clearly defined an objective, try to refine it so that you can measure whether or not you have achieved it. For example:

General objective

Build awareness about the cost effectiveness of social work interventions for patients with depression.

Measurable objective

Persuade the local health system to adopt changes in its reimbursements for social work interventions for patients with depression in 2004-05.

Strategic Communications Objectives

1.

2.

2. **Identify, prioritize and get to know your Audiences.**

In order to achieve your objectives, to whom do you need to speak or communicate? Often, this is relatively clear from the objectives, but make an effort to define the audience as precisely as possible. For example, nursing faculty might be an audience you identify. But do you really mean all nursing faculty? Do you really mean gerontological nursing faculty? Or even better, do you mean 12 key gerontological nursing faculty members at top graduate schools around the country?

Once you have your list of audiences, which are the most important? Remember your limited resources. You must prioritize. If you hope to achieve your objective(s), which audiences are most critical? Which audiences will have the most powerful impact on your ultimate goal? Be discriminating.

When your list is pared down, then try to understand your audiences. What are their biases and backgrounds? What are their values? Importantly, how do they perceive you or your issue? Are there other related issues that they are interested in? If you do not know the answer to these kinds of questions, chances are you should do some additional research on these priority audiences before you actually implement your plan.

Key audiences and how they perceive your project or issue.

1.

2.

3. **Create strong, clear Messages.**

A message is a statement that describes what a person or organization is, does or, most importantly, believes. A message or set of messages can serve as a building block for all of your communications (e.g., speeches, testimony, presentations, even work with the media.).

Think about your objectives and audiences. What is it that you want to say to these audiences to convince them, to move them to action in the service of your objectives? It is often helpful to develop an overarching message, appropriate for many or all audiences. Then, you can add sub-messages needed to influence particular groups. For example:

Overarching message

Aging research is critical to developing the knowledge we all need to live healthier, longer lives.

Specific message to elected officials

Pay now, not later.

Supporting aging research is a sound investment. The cost of research today is modest compared to the huge cost-savings this research will yield in the future.

Finally, if possible, test these messages with sub-sets of your target audience. This does not require formal focus groups, but using the messages in informal conversations, social/professional settings, etc. can give you some feedback on whether the language makes sense to people and whether it has a chance of educating or influencing your intended audiences.

Overarching message

Audience-specific message 1

Audience-specific message 2

4. **Develop leveraged, high-impact Vehicles (that take your messages to your audiences).**

Communications vehicles represent a wide range of vehicles or mechanisms that carry what you want to say to whom you want to say it. Vehicles include, but are not limited to one-on-one conversations, small group presentations, speeches, academic articles, e-mails, newsletters, Web sites, op-eds and letters to the editor in the local media or in other publications, and more general media outreach as well. Vehicles can also include meetings, symposia and other activities that convene your target audiences.

You can no doubt identify a plethora of useful vehicles. Again, think hard about your relatively limited resources. Which vehicles are the most influential on your target audiences? Which are most leveraged across audiences? What activities are you already doing that might be amplified for greater impact? Which activities might you be able to find outside funding to implement (e.g., a symposium)?

Vehicle 1

Vehicle 2

Vehicle 3

Vehicle 4

Vehicle 5

5. Design and implement Evaluation mechanisms.

Too often in communications, people do not assign sufficient rigor to evaluating what is working and how. Just as if you were testing some kind of program intervention or even new product launch, ask yourself, how will I know my communications work is successful? Setting measurable objectives is an important first step. Also important is matching the resources required to measure your progress with the scope and size of the project at hand. Randomized, double-blind studies to measure changes in attitudes or behaviors are probably not called for. Exhaustive qualitative evaluation may be overkill as well. However, strategic, systematic, and low-impact data collection (e.g, through phone conversations, evaluations at meetings, brief e-mail surveys) can provide both a baseline understanding of an audience's awareness or understanding of your work or concerns about the older adult population, as well as any changes in that understanding over time.

Evaluation Plan

For More Information

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