



Communications are all written, spoken, and electronic interactions with your audience. A communication plan aims for consistency in your communications format and content. It should include some or all of these outgoing ways of communicating:

- Website
- Taglines on your email signature block
- Meeting and conference materials
- Electronic newsletters
- Fliers and other hard copy documents
- Legal and legislative documents
- Incoming communications, including reception procedures and voice mail content
- Committee and board communiqués
- Association materials including letterhead, logo, and envelopes
- Surveys
- Registration process
- Certificates and awards
- annual reports
- Signage
- Periodic print publications
- Media relations and public relations materials
- Speeches

WAIT! Don't go any further without contemplating how you will gather feedback from members, float new ideas, and improve your viral communications. These include:

- Association blogs
- *Specific functional* surveys
- Focus or advisory groups

What Is a Communication Plan?

A communication plan is a written document that answers five key questions:

1. What are your association's overall goals?

2. What do you want to accomplish with your communications?

3. What audiences do you want to reach out to, and hear back from?
#1 _____
#2 _____
#3 _____
4. What system of delivery will you use to accomplish your communication objectives (from #2 above), when, and how often?

5. How you will evaluate the success of your plan?

When to develop the plan? Develop your plan anytime, but ideally in advance of your annual budgeting or and planning process when you have leeway to try one new idea.

Where to get information? Content and background for the plan generally comes from five sources:

1. Your association mission statement
2. [Communications audit](#)
3. [Membership surveys](#) and focus groups, blogs, and forums
4. Committee and leadership input
5. Discussions with other staff and departments.

How do you develop the plan?

1. **Conduct a research-communications audit.** Evaluate your current communications. Some associations hire firms to do this, but with the right focus you can do this yourself. To conduct your own audit, find out:
 - Key communications for each staff person
 - What each communication activity is designed to achieve
 - Effectiveness of each activity (to the association's goals)





2. Firm up your year's Objectives. Before undertaking a communications plan, the CEO must be clear your association's vital *few* objectives. Then you must *train the messengers!* Build your plan to satisfy the objective and to meet the goal you want to achieve. Be as specific as possible. Three or four objectives are plenty. They might include:

- Engage young members in the association for retention and to build future leaders
- Raise member understanding of Legislative Affairs to hit the annual RPAC goal
- Streamline communications to achieve higher member satisfaction
- Increase educational revenues or R-store revenues to improve non-dues revenue contribution.

3. Define your audiences. List all the groups of members or other segments that your association serves. They could include:

- Members (define them specifically)
- Non-members
- Related associations
- Regional, and local governments
- The media

4. Outline how you will accomplish your goals. With the objectives understood and considering your available staff and financial resources, create a plan for each objective. The plan should include programs, products, or services that you will use to achieve the association's goals.

- For example, if the objective is to improve member service, plans might include improved training for the member-service function, special communications directed at first-time members, a reference manual for handling complaints, and regular distribution of information to new and existing members.

5. What mechanics/outlets will you use? These tools can be anything from a simple flyer to an online magazine. Don't overlook less obvious tools such as posters, report covers, your web sites, even your association lobby countertop and television. Brainstorm ideas with your staff and the communications committee if you have one.

6. When will you deploy each of these activities? Once you have completed steps 1-5, build yourself a calendar that outlines roughly what projects will be accomplished and when. Separate them into logical time periods (monthly, weekly, etc.).

7. Evaluate the result. Build results into your plan. How will you determine if more of your audience is reading, listening, and responding? Your evaluation might include one or more of the following:

- Track readership statistics (for example, open rates) from your newsletter program/service – tracked over time
- Collect trends from hits on your website over time
- Collect results from call-to-action pieces, such as registration numbers, feedback sent, email replies, etc.
- Compile a quarterly or semi-annual report with the attendance results or responses by tactic
- Present communications departmental reports at staff meetings
- Conduct an outside audit one time per year to assess your progress.

With input and support at the leadership level you stand to see a valid return from your investment in good communications.

To get the answers you need to develop your plan, don't even think about dreaming it up yourself:

- Brainstorm with communication staff
- Talk to other departments
- Interview the CEO
- Interview board members
- Talk to communication committee members
- Survey the membership, or
- Coordinate focus groups.

