



## Communications Planning Getting the Right Messages Across in the Right Way

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Have you ever received a memo and felt the sender really wasn't thinking about what you needed to know or hear? Maybe you have attended corporate presentations that have simply left you cold? Or perhaps you've even delivered communications yourself and realized, in retrospect, that you really hadn't got the measure of your audience and their needs.

This is at best frustrating. At worst it is such a huge "turn off" that it can have a negative effect, or even produce an effect that is the exact opposite of the one you had intended.

Whether you need to communicate general day-to-day information or "big news" about major changes in your organization, the best communications start with some good planning.

The first step is to put yourself in the shoes of your audience. What do they need to know, and want to hear? What's their preferred way of receiving information? What will stop them listening to what you have to say? And how will you know that they have got the message?

So there's quite a bit more to good communications than preparing a good memo or presentation! This tool will help you through the preparation steps and so help you create an audience-focused communication plan that's sure to get your message heard.

### Market Your Message!

Good corporate communications is very much like good marketing. You have a message (product) that you need to 'sell' to your audience (customers). If they are going to 'buy it', you must package the message so that they can understand it and pay attention to it. You must make sure the value and benefit outweigh any downsides (the 'price' you are asking them to pay). And you must reach the audience through the right communication channels. Then, following the communications (promotion), you must be able to measure the effectiveness and how well the message is 'bought'.

### How to Use the Tool

Use the following steps to create a good communication plan for your company or project. Record your plan on a communications planning worksheet, such as the free Mind Tools one you can download [here](#).

### Understand Your Objectives

**Step 1.** Be clear about your overall communication objectives. What do you want to achieve, when and why? Record your overall objectives in your plan.

### Figure 1: Communications Planning Template

**Communications Plan For.....**

## Overall Communication Objective:

**Audience Objectives** **Communication Objectives** **Message** **Channel** **Timing**

### Understand Your Audiences

**Step 2.** Now identify and list your different audiences. This can initially seem quite difficult: For all but the simplest communications plan, it's good to use Stakeholder Analysis to help you do this. **Stakeholder Analysis** helps you identify who to communicate with and why.

#### Example: Audience Groups

Think of "audiences" as groups that you need to communicate with. Any one person may be a member of several audiences. As an example, consider a project communications plan that has four audiences:

- All people working in New Jersey Office.
- All people working in Sydney Office.
- Customer Services Teams.
- HR Managers.

Joe is an HR manager working in Sydney and is therefore a member of 2 audiences, as is Sue who is a customer services team manager in New Jersey. Whereas Lee, an IT consultant in New Jersey, is a member of just one audience: "All people working in New Jersey Office".

**Step 3.** Now drill down into your communication objectives and clarify specific objectives for each audience. A good way to do this is to think about the audience's needs – what do they need and want to know from you? List all the objectives (there may be several) for each audience in your plan.

### Plan Communications Messages and Channels

Once you have clarified your objectives and got a full understanding of the different audiences you need to communicate with, it's time to plan the communications – that means working out the messages needed to meet your objectives and when and how these will be delivered.

**Step 4.** Before starting on the detail of your plan, first jot down all the possible communications channels you could use. Think broadly and creatively! You probably already use lots of great ways to communicate in your company, and some new ones may help get your message across. Here is a list to get you started:

- Email
- Newsletter
- Teleconference
- Notice boards
- CEO briefing
- Posters
- Lunchtime meeting
- Intranet article
- Launch event
- Team meeting
- Podcast on intranet

### **Tip: Remember to Use Existing Channels**

Big corporate news often gets announced at big corporate events. But don't forget to use existing channels too, such as staff newsletters, the intranet and team meetings. Using existing channels with the right message at the right time is an effective and familiar way to reach your audience.

**Step 5.** To plan out the message for each audience, start by thinking about the broadest audience groups first. In our example, the broadest audience might be "All people working in New Jersey Office" and "All people working in Sydney Office".

As you consider each audience in turn, ask the following questions:

- What does the audience need and want to know?
- When do we need to communicate?
- What is the regular or preferred channel for reaching this audience?
- For this specific audience and message, what is the most effective way to get your message across?

Several messages over time may be required to meet the objectives of each audience. Make sure the messages you plan "add up" to meet the audience's objectives.

## Tip:

Earlier in this article we compared Communications Planning with marketing. One saying in marketing is that "prospects need to see your message seven times before they buy." While this may be over-precise, you may need to give your message many times over before it sinks in.

On the other hand, as you plan for each audience, remember also that members of one audience may also be part of another audience, and so may receive several messages. Try to plan your communications so that individuals receive the right information and are not inundated, or worse, confused by the different messages they receive.

## Monitor Effectiveness

**Step 6.** It's good to get feedback on the communications you have planned and implemented. Ask people from different audiences how you are doing. Check they understand the messages you need them to hear. By getting timely feedback, you can tune any future communications that you have planned to better meet people's needs or fill any gaps so far.

## Example

Rather than provide a fully worked example here (which would take up too much space!) here's an example for you to work on to get a better understanding of how to write communications plans.

Let's consider planning the communications for the implementation of new security passes in your office. The overall objective is to "Ensure a smooth transition from the current security pass system to the new one".

Who are the audiences and what do they need? First consider the universal audience "All Office-Based Staff". Everyone will need to know that the change is scheduled, what to expect and when. If people at each site need to receive different instructions about how to get a new pass and so on, each site needs to be listed as a separate audience ("Staff at site A" etc.) And what about the people who manage security? They are a further audience group as they have specific needs including more detailed information (possibly training) on how to manage the new system.

Now consider the specific messages for each audience. As well as receiving all-staff announcements about the new system, "Staff at site A" must know when and where at Site A to get their new pass photos taken. This information must be communicated several days ahead of time. The day before the change over, people may need to be reminded to have their new passes at the ready, perhaps by leafleting everyone's desk throughout the office.

## Download Worksheet

For more tools that can help you plan and manage change, see our **[Project Management](#)** section. In particular, look at the articles on **[Stakeholder Analysis](#)** and **[Stakeholder Planning](#)** (if you haven't already done so.)

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