

COMMUNICATIONS PLANNING

By Thomas Williams

Leaders must be effective communicators. This is true in a crisis or during everyday operations.

In your job you may deal with:

- Educating the community about who you are and what you do
- Talking about new initiatives
- Rumors, misinformation, or bad press

First, recognize that “communications” are not about what you say, but about what your audience understands. It’s an on-going process that involves message delivery and feedback.

It’s also not just about the spoken or written word. What people understand is often about perception. In other words, how you are saying something might be just as important as what you are saying. It’s not always fair, but it is reality.

Fortunately, you’re not the first leader to wrestle with this problem, and there are some simple yet proven techniques to help you do well.

In this pamphlet you’ll find:

- A model for communications planning
- Non-Verbal Cues
- Five rules to live by

The Model

Whether talking to the media, or members of the community, this seven-step model is a great tool as it forces you to consider all aspects of the process.

There’s nothing in this primer that isn’t self-evident in some way. After all, you communicate everyday and (consciously or unconsciously) do everything noted here. What this tip sheet does is deconstruct the process so you can become more aware of what you’re doing, and why you’re doing it.

The seven-steps are:

- Consider the Source
- Determine your goals
- Analyze your audiences
- Evaluate the environment
- Craft your messages
- Choose your media
- Assess Feedback

Step One: Source

You are the source. Knowing who you are and how the public will see and perceive you is important to getting your message out properly.

Ask yourself how well known you are in the community. Do people trust you, or are you an unknown quantity? Does your organization enjoy a great reputation, or are you untested? Be honest and don’t rely on what you hope it to be. Rely on what is.

Step Two: Goals

Next, determine your goal or goals. How you craft your messages (step five) may vary depending upon your audience, but your goals really don’t change.

Are you trying to simply inform or persuade, perhaps allay fears and establish calm? Maybe you are seeking assistance. Regardless, don’t start sending stuff out there until you know what you’re trying to do.

Sometimes what people really need is just a calming presence. (Think Mayor Giuliani on September 11, 2001.)

Step Three: Audience

Who are you addressing? Your primary audience may be obvious, such as people in key positions, or others whose support you need to move forward. Secondary and tertiary audiences include the people who may or may not be directly affected by your actions, but exert influence on the key players.

For emergency responders, for example, the primary audience may not be the gathering crowd, or the press at a press conference. It may be the people who will hear what you have to say on the television, or radio. Or, it may be your on-site volunteers.

List who you think comprises your primary, secondary, and tertiary audiences. Now, if you can, decipher their disposition. Are they supportive, neutral or hostile? Are they informed? Do they know the facts, or have they bought into an ugly rumor or two?

Don't forget about self-interest. We all want to believe that politics won't play a role in crisis management, but we all know they do. When you're working with a diverse community (including your emergency responders and management team) you are dealing with very specific points of view and self-interests. This includes rivalries, and the fear of not "looking good" in the eyes of the taxpayer.

Step Four: Environment

Then take stock of your environment. And again, be honest! If things look out of control and you're fighting negative perceptions, don't ignore this and bury your head in the sand.

Are the people with whom you are dealing rational, or hysterical? Are you already countering rumors?

Has this issue been brewing for quite some time, or is it a sudden emergency or true accident?

Knowing the lay of the land is essential because next you must work out what to say within this context to achieve your goals. You need to develop your key messages.

Step Five: Messages

These are what you want each of your audiences (primary, secondary and tertiary) to remember at the end of the day. For example:

- Emergency personnel are on site, and the situation is under control.
- We apologize for any delay in getting more details, but we won't speculate.
- Our mission here is to provide comfort and shelter to any displaced person.

You may not please everyone. Just be clear about your goal (what you're trying to do) and whether your talking points will resonate with the *intended* audience.

From these messages, you should work out your 30 second sound-bite. Think of it as telling your best friend what happened in an elevator between the first and second floors; it should be clear, concise, and understandable.

That 30 second "elevator" speech will help you frame the debate the way you want it framed. Be ready to use it – reporters love to start off interviews with open ended questions such as, "So, what's the latest?" to get you rambling.

Forming the structure of your argument

Simply having and reporting on the facts is not enough to get your message out. Remember, it's not about what you say that's important -- it's what's heard and understood.

Go back to the work you did in your audience analysis for a moment. If your audience is hostile or worried, you would not do well to simply *inform them* about what's going on and expect that you've communicated. They'll want to have someone persuade them, allay their fears – talk with them.

For example, when an audience is uninformed, or hostile, it's better to structure your argument this way:

- Communicate your messages, but offer both sides of the story, explaining disagreements and differing perspectives. In some cases it might be necessary to address these contrary points before you introduce your messages.
- Provide detailed facts up front -- build your argument slowly -- and conclude with your main points.

When your audience is well informed, or tends to be supportive, you might structure your argument differently:

- Focus on your messages. You're not ignoring other perspectives, but you're also not giving them credibility by offering them on equal terms.

- Provide your conclusions and main points up front, and offer facts and details only as supporting evidence.

Step Six: Media

This is not *News Media*. It's the method by which you will carry your messages to your audiences. Finding the right media is not always easy and may require combinations of programs.

Some examples of media:

- Meetings (large, small or one-on-one)
- Email and web pages
- Letters and Newsletters
- Videos and Podcasts
- Press Conferences and interviews

Just realize that “sending a memo” is seldom the answer. An effective communications plan is a process, not a singular event.

Step Seven: Feedback

Communications is a continuous process, and part of that process is when the audience gets your message and interprets it according to their own points of view, biases, pre-disposition to you as the source, and their perception of the environment. You may find yourself with a more hostile audience when you're done despite your best intentions. If so, rethink the process and try again.

Keep in mind your own disposition. In other words, don't become so rigid that you are unable to accept feedback as it comes in from the internal or external audience.



Since it's your job to help shape public opinion and perception, you want to remain positive and not allow emotions, such as fear and pessimism, to overwhelm you. Yet, you also don't want to appear aloof, indifferent, or uniformed, as in “putting your head in the sand.”

Here it pays to listen to your gut – rely on the instincts that you've spent years honing. You might also consider appointing someone (a trusted and steady member of your team) to act as your reality check, ready to whisper in your ear when they think it's time to change tactics.