

Communications Planning for Small, Rural and Northern Hospitals

Why do you need a communications plan?

- Many SRN hospitals have limited resources in both time and money. A communications plan will help your hospital set priorities and focus your resources on the most important tasks. Without a plan, hospitals run the risk of letting external events dictate how the hospital uses its communications resources, pulling the hospital “off mission” and “off message”.
- A good plan imposes discipline and clear thinking that will help you clarify your objectives and target audiences, sharpen your message and help you better understand the environment in which you will be delivering that message.
- Strategic planning will help your organization integrate all of its communications work on a particular issue, including media activities, government relations, grassroots organizing, fundraising, and communications with internal staff, patients and their families.
- A good plan will help ensure that everyone in your organization is on the same page when they communicate with people both outside and inside the hospital.
- A targeted strategy will also help you develop better media plans. And a well-developed media plan is important because the media is the primary source of education and information in communities; they set the public policy agenda and frame public perception on many issues (for better or worse).
- This communications planner is designed to get a plan off the ground by providing questions that, when answered, give your hospital a solid foundation upon which to launch any communications initiative. It can be used to craft an overall communications strategy, be tailored on a per-issue basis, and address both internal hospital staff and external audiences.

When you need a communications plan

You need a communications plan whenever you are communicating with the public, stakeholders and policy-makers. It's a good idea to have an overarching strategy for all hospital communications, as well smaller plans for internal communications, for events and for unforeseen incidents that crop up during day-to-day business. An overarching strategy should be developed every year.

The Elements of a Communications Plan

1. Analysis: Organizational Background
2. Analysis: External or Public Environment
3. Communication Objectives
4. Target Audiences
5. Key Messages
6. Strategies
7. Tactics
8. Timing
9. Timelines
10. Spokespeople

Analysis: Organizational Background

Whether your hospital is developing an overall communications plan or a specific campaign, it is important that you stand back and consider how your hospital is positioned within the community it serves. Considering the value of each point on this list in advance, will make it easier to convey a consistent message under pressure and in the hospital's everyday work.

- The history of your organization
- The history/facts about the issue you are addressing
- Why is it an important issue? (Include statistics if possible)
- The services your organization provides to the community
- The people who benefit from your services
- The function your organization serves
- Your mission statement, answering what function you perform, for whom, how and why you do what you do. This should go beyond the services you provide.
- Your organization's role in health care delivery in your community
- Where do you fit compared to other services in your market?
- Performance indicators

Analysis: External or Public Environment

As you know, it is important to be aware of the external threats and opportunities facing your organization. Consider those who may be opposed or (until now) indifferent to your message and gain a sense of the communications environment in which you will be making your case.

- What is the current local/provincial/national perception of your hospital, program and/or issues?
- Your credibility?
- How do you want to be positioned?
- Is there a history of media stories on you or your work? Letters to the editor, radio interviews, feature stories? In other words, how exposed is your organization?
- How has it been positioned within the media to date?

- Have any health care studies or surveys been carried out that are relevant to your region?
- Is more research required to understand attitudes and public opinion towards your organization or the issue you face?
- Is there anything currently available for free (e.g. recent opinion polls by groups like Environics?)
- Has the issue generated local debate, questions from media or questions in the legislature?
- In other words, is it on the public radar or would most people consider it to be new?
- Has there been any significant lobbying of your office, in person or through correspondence?
- Who are your allies? Who publicly supports your position?
- Do certain groups disagree with an initiative at your hospital?
- What are their messages?
- What effect are these groups' messages having on your hospital or the work you do?
- What are your opponent's strengths and weaknesses?

Communications Objectives

The answers to the following questions should reflect your organization's mission and be based on work generated from the previous sections. It is worth stressing that media coverage, as an end in itself, is not an organizational or campaign objective. Communications work of any kind is the means to an end and should develop from, and support, your organization's mission and long-term goals.

Determine your reason for launching a campaign. Ideally, objectives are concrete, measurable and specific. Consider these questions:

- What is your basic objective?
 - To get a key policy-maker to green-light funding for hospital infrastructure projects or to increase traffic for a new website?
- What reactions are you trying to provoke in your target audience? What is your call to action?
 - Do you want your audience to write a letter or make a supportive call to a decision-maker?
 - Do you want them to change a personal behaviour?
- How will you measure success?
 - What will your benchmarks be?
 - Is it that 200 people will call an MPP by certain date or that you will generate \$5,000 in new donations?
 - Is it that your event will be sold-out?
- Do you want to provide your audience with new information?
 - What do you want them to do with this information?

Target audiences: Who do you want to reach?

Hospitals communicate with many different audiences, including policy makers, patients and their families, media, academics, the health care industry, Aboriginal peoples and community groups. Listing individuals or groups that have an interest in or an influence on the hospital is key to delivering a focused communications plan. Getting hospital staff up-to-date and “onside” with new hospital initiatives often requires an internal communications strategy.

Articulating the effect you hope your plan will have on hospital staff and on the greater public will help you tailor your messages in the next section.

Sample internal ‘audience’ goals

- Build staff awareness and understanding of the hospital’s future goals, its current situation and perhaps even the case for change, based on the organization’s values and evolving strategic directions
- Ensure managers understand and accept their role in the communications process
- Ensure employees understand they are valued, have the information needed to do their jobs, are willing to serve as ambassadors for the hospital and will help build the hospital’s reputation
- Ensure available technology is fully levered as a business and communications tool

Sample external audience goals

- Build awareness and understanding of the hospital’s desired future, its current situation and the case for change as defined by organization values and strategic directions
- Build awareness of the hospital’s role and services offered to the communities it serves as well as its role in promoting, supporting and participating in ongoing community development
- Manage and protect the hospital’s reputation with key stakeholders – build trust, support and community pride for the hospital
- Ensure available technology is fully levered as a business and communications tool

A Communications ‘Roles & Goals’ Breakdown of Hospital Staff:

Hospital Board	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Leverage their individual community network, serve as community ambassadors, and highlight how the hospital is meeting the health care needs of the community with the resources available.
CEO and Leadership Team <ul style="list-style-type: none"> VP, Nursing Director, Finance 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Designate a de-facto Chief Communications Officer if one does not exist (often the CEO). The CCO is the communicator of the hospital’s overall business strategy. The behaviours and actions of the leadership team must create a culture that fosters two-way communication.
Managers/Supervisors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Understand that communication is a management role that, done well, increases overall hospital effectiveness. Respected front-line managers build credibility for new initiatives with other employees.
Medical Staff/Hospital Staff/Hospital Foundation/Volunteers/Hospital Auxiliary	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Serve as community ambassadors, highlighting how the hospital is meeting the health care needs of the community with the resources available. Understand the work underway to ensure the hospital’s long-term viability and sustainability. Understand the hospital’s success is dependant on the recruitment and retention of qualified staff – the fact that they are valued needs to be communicated to them
Internal Champions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Identify communicators, opinion leaders in the workplace to help mobilize employees and other stakeholders. Once selected, ensure they are equipped with the skills to deliver tailored messages, prompt open discussion and provide timely and honest feedback Acknowledge their role in the communications process

A Communications ‘Roles & Goals’ Breakdown of External Stakeholders:

Patients and their families	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Understand that the work underway aims to ensure the hospital’s long-term viability and sustainability in the community. How access to services is provided by the hospital
Hospital Foundation Donors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Know that their support is valued and is making a tangible difference in delivery of care at the hospital. Understand the work underway aims to ensure the hospital’s long-term viability and sustainability on the community.

Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care Minister of Health Regional Team Deputy Ministers and Bureaucrats Results Team LHIN Municipality and County MPP Premier Various Ministers MP Non-governing party health critics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Most funding is dependent on the MOHLTC (and soon LHINs) Need to create an awareness that the hospital: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is the point of excellent care within its mandate • Serves the needs of the community • Is efficient, provides good outcomes and is able to meet the targets for performance indicators • Is collaborating with other hospitals and health care providers • Will use high cost services in the most efficient and cost effective way • Will provide services while focusing on the core business of the hospital and will not try to be everything to everyone
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‘A’ List, Primary Audience Checklist

- Who do you ultimately want to influence? Name names: George Smitherman, the Minister of Health and Long-Term Care rather than ‘politicians.’
- Who are the advisors, support staff or gatekeepers that will grant you access? List them in order of priority to reaching your goal.
- Consider whether patients and their families are part of your target audience and if they are not, how they would respond if and when they hear about your project.

‘B’ List, Secondary Audiences

- Who supports your work?
- Who is critical of your work or your stance on a particular issue?
- Are critics talking to your key audience as well? What they are saying and how will you respond to the criticism?
- How has each media outlet represented your issue?
- Who are the fair/sympathetic reporters? Know when their articles/columns/shows run. Follow their work.
- Who are the oppositional reporters? Know when their articles/columns/shows run. Follow their work, too.
- Are your organization’s staff, volunteers, donors and friends an audience?

Messages: What do you want to say?

There are many ways of communicating about the same issue. It is important to choose words that resonate with your audience and frame ideas in ways the public will embrace.

- What is your “hook”?
- What are the specific phrases and words that capture your message most clearly and simply?
- Can you state your message in a bumper sticker? State your message in a single sentence.

Strategies

Although it may be tempting, do not start developing your Communications Plan by identifying strategies. Go through the planning process to first develop or identify goals, objectives, clear messages and target audiences. You will ultimately develop much more effective strategies in this way. Media relations are only one kind of strategy, and may not be the most effective one for your particular issue. Your issue may be advanced more effectively, for example, through a single briefing with a key decision-maker. The strategy you select depends entirely on the situation, objectives, and a clear understanding of who constitutes your target audience, and what will move them to act. Consider the following questions when developing your strategies:

- Is your strategy proactive or reactive?
- Low profile or high profile?
- Local jurisdiction or province-wide?
- What are the major communications opportunities?
- What are the major communications impediments?
- What communications strengths are available in your organization?
 - Clipping files, strong public speakers, and staff who are well connected in the community, etc.?
- What alliances does your organization have?
- Does your approach warrant paid advertising through print, radio and/or TV (assuming you have the resources)?
- How creative can you be?
- What kind of media coverage will result in the greatest impact on decision-makers?
- Is the issue big enough, newsworthy enough to warrant a press conference? An exclusive? With whom?
- Should your story be delivered in a media briefing with specific reporters invited or in an editorial board meeting with one media outlet?
- Can your story be made visual? Are there ways in which your story could be staged, presented and/or supported by visual materials?
- When should your release be timed? How does it fit with other current events?
- If a government official could be asked by the media to respond to your release, should you inform that official? How much time will you give them? Remember that government has communications staff and they may find it in their interest to undermine your message.
- What are the various ways you can reach your target audiences?

- Can the OHA help?

Tactics

There are dozens of methods to reach an audience. In choosing and prioritizing tactics, consider these questions:

- How big is your budget?
- What personnel resources are available to you?
- How much time will they be required to spend on communications efforts?
- Is this reasonable considering their current work expectations?
- In brief, how do you plan to deliver your key messages to your target audiences? Decide on an approach to addressing a particular issue and then make a list of activities that support it.
- Activities could include: news releases, press conferences, town hall meetings, Op-ed articles, events: breakfasts,

For example, if your strategy is to inform the reporter of your issue in more detail, your tactics could include the preparation and delivery of a briefing session, backed up by a briefing kit. Steps could include:

- Preparing a Question & Answer document;
- Doing background research on the political environment around your issue;
- Knowing when major decisions about your issue or policies related to your issue will be made.

Timing

Timing refers to the natural links onto which you can hook your communications. For example, if the government will be making budget decisions that will impact your issue area, be prepared to respond. Be proactive and contact media and assistants to the Minister before the decision and announcements are made. Does your issue have natural links to stories around specific holidays? Plan out your activities well in advance of the holiday you are hooking your campaign to.

Timeline

Develop an internal timeline based on notes in your Timing section. Be as specific as possible. If you are going to produce a briefing kit to educate your target audience, put every element of its research and production in a timeline. If you skip this step, you may find yourself amazed at how quickly the meeting you needed your briefing kit for came up...or, you may realize that you don't have time to prepare a full briefing kit, but could manage to pull together an informative Question & Answer sheet.

Spokespeople

Determine who within your group will project the most credible voice to your key audiences. You may want to train one person to address the government and editorial boards, and another to share your message with stakeholders. If you are dealing with a variety of issues, you may also want more than one spokesperson.

Now use the plan!

Don't let the plan languish – use it immediately. Refer back to your workplan on a regular basis. Build an evaluation process into the project timeline. The greatest benefit in having built your strategic communications plan, is that the next time you decide to mount a campaign, a large chunk of the work will already be done. And tracking your successes, challenges and failures will help you adapt.