

Effective Public Engagement through Strategic Communication

Strategic communication is an essential tool for effective public engagement. This tip sheet offers advice on communication strategies before, during and after the agency's public engagement effort.

The Public Engagement Process



I. Before the Agency Begins a Public Engagement Effort:

Understand the Audiences

In order to effectively communicate about a public process or program, the starting point is to understand who the agency seeks to engage.

- Identify key audiences and stakeholders. What are their interests? How do they connect to the project or policy?
- Identify the community values, commonly held principles or valued qualities, such as personal safety, freedom or fairness. Understanding this can help you craft your message.
- Ask stakeholders about their preferences regarding communication. What communications channels work best for them? Getting this perspective during planning both enhances understanding of these key audiences and creates a valuable communication channel for further engagement.
- Understand connections and relationships among audiences and individuals. Who are their trusted advisors? How willing are these influencers to act? Understanding these dynamics can help the agency broaden the impact of its engagement effort.

With the above information in mind, the agency can identify and prioritize communication channels that align with the needs, opportunities and resources of both the project or policy and the audiences that the agency seeks to engage.

Consider Both the Message and the Messenger

In developing a message for a policy or project, succinctly and clearly articulate the message.

- What is at stake for the community.
- Why the audience should care. Explain how the decision could affect what different people value.
- The action the agency wants the audience to take. For example, is the goal to help inform people, help them analyze and weigh in on different solutions to a problem, or take a specific step?
- What will happen if audience members do take action. Consider the choice of messenger and how it will affect the way in which people will receive the agency's message.
- Identify and support community champions who can speak with authenticity and power to the issue or need being addressed.
- Consider developing an outreach working group to help extend the agency's ability to reach into different audiences in the community.
- Empower community members as storytellers. Personal perspective on a proposed policy or project can be compelling to broader audiences and the media. Tie the agency's communication plan to the policy or project consideration process.
- What are the policy or project decision-making milestones?
- How will the agency communicate progress towards key decision-making milestones?
- How will the agency communicate how public input influenced the final outcomes of the decision-making process? Tie the agency's communication plan to the policy or project consideration process.
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- How will the agency communicate progress towards key decision-making milestones?
- How will the agency communicate how public input influenced the final outcomes of the decision-making process?

Create a Media Plan that Integrates Both Traditional (Print, Radio and Television) and Online Outlets

- Develop key story themes and messengers.
 - Find the right community partners and champions to help spread the agency's information and messages.
 - Develop a sequence of messages that tie to key milestones in the policy or project.
 - Scale the level of media activity to fit the time frames and capacities of the media outlets and contacts in the area.
- Create a list of media, reporters, key bloggers and online journalists who reach priority audiences.
 - Identify both larger and smaller community-based publications and outlets, including radio. Be sure to include the newsletters, blogs and events of key community partners.
 - Consider the different types of reporters and outlets who might cover various angles of the story (health, real estate, living, local agency beat, ethnic media, etc.).
- Create a planning calendar for the decision-making process on the policy or project.
 - Include key milestones, events, news happenings and announcements that can engage the public.

- Plug into other activities related to the policy or project topic locally, nationally and even internationally.
 - Brainstorm different ways to slice the story to ensure ongoing coverage.
 - List the different news opportunities (for example, at launch, when funding is secured, when a proposal is made, when success is achieved). Find the other relevant angles (for example, health, sustainability, education). Identify submission opportunities for opinion pieces and who are the right spokespeople and storytellers.
- Monitor the media for opportunities to respond to other related stories with information about your policy or project.

II. During the Public Engagement Process:

Create opportunities for Sustaining Communication

Public engagement efforts are most successful when spokespeople consider context, content and commitment in relation to the audiences they seek to reach.

- Create opportunities for engagement through channels and events both within and outside of the public agency.
- Offer multiple opportunities for the public to communicate back to the agency (surveys, online forums and meetings) to reflect that different groups will have different preferences in terms of communications channels.
- Show progress, new information or actions as proactively and quickly as possible.
- Follow up on commitments made (for example, to get answers to questions) and (when possible) immediately ask for feedback about the agency's communications and engagement efforts.
- Recognize and thank partners and collaborating stakeholders for their efforts during the engagement process.

Expand Opportunities for Sustained Interaction with the Media to Maximize Strategic Communication and Public Engagement

- Train spokespeople on the needs and tendencies of media representatives.
- Develop relationships with key reporters and outlets:
 - Be respectful of deadlines.
 - Provide them with only story ideas their audiences will care about.
 - Understand which outlets do and do not have reporters who routinely cover your topic, and adjust the background material you provide accordingly.
 - Don't ask to review a quote or the story.
 - Ask for corrections only if there are grave factual errors.
 - Give them information they ask for even if it is not relevant to the policy or project.
- Pitch news stories and submit opinion pieces consistent with the agency's planning calendar. Consider an editorial board meeting with the local daily newspaper at the beginning of the effort. Another possibility is an "educational" news briefing with background information for outlets that do not have a reporter on that beat (such as ethnic media, recently downsized local papers, radio, etc.)
- Communicate progress points and/or key lessons along the way to support champions and demonstrate that the community conversation is influencing the decision-making process.
- Invite media to all community meetings and make spokespeople available for interviews.

- Be prepared to take advantage of opportunities to react to news events. Have drafts of op-eds and letters to the editor that the right community member or other stakeholder can review, sign and submit quickly.
- Share media coverage with priority audiences (for example, provide printouts at community meetings, post on the agency's website and share through other online tools).

III. After the Public Engagement Process:

Measure and Evaluate the Engagement

At the conclusion of an engagement process, use quantitative and qualitative metrics to evaluate, adjust and improve your strategy. Lessons learned from both successful and unsuccessful strategies can help to refine the agency's understanding of the values, interests and concerns of audiences and stakeholders. This will benefit future engagement efforts.

- Gather qualitative data through surveys, interviews, focus groups or informal channels.
- Use process measures to assess what you did including:
 - Materials distributed,
 - Outreach conducted,
 - Media engaged, and
 - Staff, friends, partners and others reached.
- Use outcome measures to assess what happened:
 - Did you achieve the goals?
 - How many new people did you reach?
 - Did you receive positive media coverage?
 - Who used the key messages?
 - Did you earn endorsements?
 - Who got involved and what did they do?
- Ask for feedback and advice from stakeholders.

Additional Information

To learn more about measuring public engagement success, visit the Institute for Local Government's public engagement resources at (www.ca-ilg.org/public-engagement)

Create Opportunities for Ongoing Communication and Concentrate on Maintaining the Relationships with Stakeholders

As with any relationship, maintaining communication after an engagement effort has been completed will ensure that audiences and stakeholders stay informed-making them more likely to participate in future efforts.

- Share findings and lessons learned from debriefing and performance assessments.
- Circle back to stakeholders with information that shows how their efforts made a difference. Thank them for their involvement.
- Use existing venues (governing body meetings, public events) and resources (website, e-mail newsletters) to celebrate new approaches, new relationships or specific successful outcomes that highlight partners or collaborating stakeholders.
- Create an ongoing network for information sharing with stakeholders and community groups.
- Look for ways to support or connect with stakeholders during the periods between major engagement efforts.

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About the Institute for Local Government

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For more information and to access the Institute's resources on public engagement, visit www.ca-ilg.org/public-engagement.

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