

Writing a Communications Plan for Your Club

Overview

A communications plan is a document that can help guide and shape your communications activities and improve your public and external profile. A good communications plan will give you and your Club executive the focus it needs to create clear messages and communicate with your key audiences about your Club's activities. A little planning can go a long way to ensure that your limited resources are strategically focused, rather than simply responding to communications opportunities as they arise, or automatically doing what you have always done before. As a general rule, developing a communications plan should be a group activity involving the entire executive, or at least a group of executive members (e.g. a Communications Committee).

What Is a Communications Plan?

In its simplest form, a communications plan outlines who you need to communicate with, about what, how you're going to do it, and how often. A good communications plan should support your Club's overall goals.

Getting Started

There are many different ways you can approach communications planning, but some general guidelines are to undertake the following steps (or a variation):

- audit your communications resources and environment;
- develop clear objectives;
- understand your target audiences and how to reach them;
- determine key messages and key materials to be produced;
- decide on tactics, budgets and timelines;
- identify issues you might encounter; and
- establish an evaluation mechanism to measure success.

1. Audit Your Communications Resources and Environment

To help contextualize your plan, you should consider conducting an audit or inventory of Club's current communications-related resources, e.g.:

- **Does your Club have any previous communications plans** that have been developed or started in the past? You can gain insight from this information and any lessons learned.
- **Identify volunteer expertise or talent** in terms of communications, public relations, media experience, website editing, graphic design, etc.;
- **What existing communications vehicles are you using?** Are they effective? Are they meeting your needs? Don't be afraid to be critical.

It's also good to have an up-to-date picture of how your Club is perceived within your community and key audiences. For example, it would be good to know:

- How visible is your Club in the community? What is your relationship like with your local post-secondary institutions? Do you have a relationship with any student organizations?
- Are there any competitive or like organizations in your community? What are they doing?

- Do prospective members/supporters feel you offer value?
- Have you identified all of your potential audiences so you can determine their perspective on your organization? (If you're not able to do research e.g. a survey, you may have to make some assumptions)

Planning

2. Establish Objectives

Communications objectives are the beginning of any communications effort. They can be quite specific (we want our story on the front page of the local newspaper), or very broad (we would like to increase community awareness about this issue), but should be connected to your Club's overall objectives/goals as an organization.

You should think about your communications objectives in terms of your Clubs main activities and goals; for example, how will communications help you with membership recruitment and retention, fundraising for scholarships and bursaries, event organizing, and advocating for particular policy changes, or raising community awareness about issues?

Example: One of your Club's objectives might be to increase membership by 5% in 2013/2014. To accomplish this, you should set some specific communications objectives. To attract new members, one such objective might be to increase awareness about CFUW and your Club activities within your City or region. To retain current members, you might want to improve/increase the membership's knowledge of CFUW activities, and the benefits of being a member.

3. Audience Identification and Analysis

It is crucial to understand who you want to reach with your communications efforts. Start by listing all the audiences that your organization might want to contact, attempt to influence, or serve. Included on your list may be:

- Club members
- prospective members, donors and supporters (be specific about what groups you're targeting)
- internal audience – executive members, CFUW National and Provincial Council
- local politicians
- the local media
- other like-minded organizations

Each audience is different and may require specialized tactics and distribution strategies. For this, you will need to develop an understanding of what they need from you. The more clearly you can define your audience, the easier it will be to make choices about your messages and communications vehicles. When analyzing each group, consider:

- What do they already know about your Club?
- What are their communications needs?
- What is going to resonate with them?
- What are some factors influencing the audience that receives your message - for example: age or multicultural differences?

- Are there any difficulties you might have in communicating with each group?
- Where and how can you reach them?

It may not be possible to reach all of the audiences you have identified on your list due to resources, timing or other consideration. Therefore, it is important to choose the audiences that will help you most effectively meet your overall objectives and focus your communications activities on those groups. Consider listing your audiences in order of priority.

4. Develop Key Messages

Key messages are the fundamental points you would want your audiences to know about what you are doing and who you are. You should create a couple overriding messages about your Club that you want to communicate generally, then you should also think about developing some messages for your key audiences, particularly to respond to their specific concerns, issues and communications needs. This is done to ensure that your communications are relevant to them.

Some questions to consider when determining your overall key messages could be:

- **What are the most important things you want people to understand about your Club/organisation?**
 - Annually our Club distributes X amount of \$ in scholarship and bursary funding to young women. On a national level, CFUW raises over \$1 million in funding for post-secondary education each year.
 - Our Club offers valuable leadership training and lifelong learning opportunities to members
 - We work with local politicians to make legislative/policy changes that will benefit our community
 - We are part of a national federation that advocates for gender equality and the advancement of women.
- **What is your organisation aiming to achieve in the year or years ahead?**
- **What projects, initiatives or events are going to be the focus for you this year?**

One of your target audiences might be prospective members, in which case you should develop some key messages aimed at attracting new people to your Club. For example:

- Women of retirement age
 - Our Club offers an intellectually stimulating program, inviting a range of speakers and organizing events on topical issues of interest to members.
 - The Club offers many opportunities to meet and socialize with women of similar interests.
- Working women/women with children
 - CFUW members offers an important social support network to working women
 - Our Club is kid friendly!
- Recent graduates and/or current students
 - Our Club offers valuable leadership and training opportunities
 - Learn about public policy and interact with local politicians
 - We work on a variety of community service projects that benefit vulnerable populations in the region.
 - Network with well-established community members

At the same time you can think about the tactics and tools you would select to best deliver those messages. For example, if you want to attract more students to your Club, consider contacting the student association/union at your local university or colleges to find out ways you can get your messages out to students. Do they have a newsletter you could post information in, or could you have a table at an event?

5. Decide on Tactics, Materials, Timelines and Budget

Once objectives, audiences and key messages have been established you can decide **how** you will reach the audience —what tactics and materials you will use, what will be the budget and what your timelines will be. Some tactics and materials might include:

- internal newsletter
- online communications (emails, website, and social media)
- direct messages to key individuals (ex. send a periodic updates to CFUW National about your Club's activities)
- media releases and advisories (Are you hosting upcoming events? Plan to send a media advisory to local new sources one week before)
- letters to the editor or op-eds
- meeting with politicians
- tabling at community events

Establishing a timeline for your communications plan is also important. If you want media attention for example, try to avoid peak media times when large events or announcements are made such as Government budget or elections. Your timeline should also include all of the internal steps and approvals you will require before releasing your information publicly.

Finally, budgeting is important for all communications projects. There may be costs associated with producing materials, with setting up brochures, updating websites, among others. But don't let a limited budget discourage you. There are many inexpensive communication vehicles, and even some that are free, such as social media sites, and blogging sites. Establishing a budget though, will help you understand the full range of requirements for sustaining your communications activities. You should also think about how much volunteer time will be required and who will carry out your various communications activities.

6. Identify Potential Issues

Don't be afraid to discuss/outline some of the obstacle that might hinder the implementation of your plan/strategy. Try to anticipate what problems you might have to address, and then think about how you might overcome these obstacles. For example, you might want to set up an attractive website for your Club but don't have the funds or expertise to do it. One way you might overcome this issue is by enlisting the help of a student or two with some expertise in using free webhosting sites, like WordPress.

7. Evaluate and Amend

With those other elements established, you should consider measuring your success. Your evaluation might take the form of a survey of your members; are Club communications meeting their expectations and requirements? You may also want to analyze membership growth; did

membership increase after a particular communications effort? Has your media exposure grown? Has the number of visits to your website grown?

The key is to understand that evaluation helps you know what worked and what did not in your communications activities, and helps you decide what you might want to do differently.

Sources and other resources:

- <http://www.wildapricot.com/membership-articles/communication-planning/>
- <http://www.omafr.gov.on.ca/english/rural/facts/03-033.htm#Step1>
- <http://www.ic.gc.ca/eic/site/oca-bc.nsf/eng/ca02489.html>

Template to lay out your plan:

List your Club's main objectives/goals for the year					
List corresponding communications objectives					
Audience	Expectations/Issues	Key messages	Tactics/Materials	Who	Budget
List other issues or obstacles you may encounter					
List your plans for evaluation					