

Creating a Stakeholder Communications Plan

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Why have a stakeholder communications plan?

"They're called stakeholders because if you don't look after them, they'll come after you with seven foot stakes!" – Rob Thomsett

In its simplest form, a stakeholder communications plan outlines who you need to communicate with, about what, how you're going to do it, and how often. There are also a few important considerations such as timing and budget.

An effective stakeholder communications plan will:

- support your organisation in achieving its stated goals and objectives
- support or improve your operational effectiveness
- support or improve your relationships with those who are important to ensuring your success (often called key stakeholders or your target audience)
- deliver measurable results to your organisation.

What a stakeholder communications plan isn't...

- It's not a marketing plan which would help you to define new products or services to offer to your audience, and how you would go about promoting these.
- It's not a sponsorship plan which would detail how you would go about winning and supporting a commercial arrangement with a sponsor.
- It's not a business plan for your organisation, though it may help you achieve some of your organisation's business goals.

What it is...

- It is primarily a public relations plan (including media relations) though it may include some wider communication tools such as advertising and direct marketing where these support your stakeholder communication objectives.

The stakeholder communications planning template

While communications planning is fairly straightforward in terms of the steps you need to go through, the biggest challenge is often ensuring the plan can actually be delivered with the human and financial resources you have available.

The eight-step communications planning framework detailed here is designed for use by those who don't have a communications background. It offers examples and prompts that aim to help you think strategically in order to develop a pragmatic communications plan.

You'll need to work through the following eight steps in sequence, to arrive at a workable plan:

1. Setting communication objectives
2. Setting key messages for your organisation
3. Defining and prioritising key stakeholders (target audiences)
4. Setting additional key messages which are relevant for each stakeholder group and their particular issues/concerns
5. Developing effective communication tactics for each target audience
6. Allocating budget and responsibilities
7. Developing the quarterly communications calendar
8. Assessing results and adapting the plan

The template below shows how the steps fit together to form a plan.

Business goals

Communications Objectives – Objective A, Objective B, Objective C, Objective D							
Overriding Key Messages – Message A, Message B, Message C, Message D							
	<i>Expectations/ Issues</i>	<i>Priority</i>	<i>Specific Key Messages</i>	<i>Communication Tactics</i>	<i>Who</i>	<i>Budget</i>	<i>Measurement</i>
<i>Stakeholder Group A</i>		1				\$	
<i>Stakeholder Group B</i>		1				\$	
<i>Stakeholder Group C</i>		1				\$	
<i>Stakeholder Group D</i>		2				\$	
<i>Stakeholder Group E</i>		2				\$	
<i>Stakeholder Group F</i>		3				\$	
<i>Stakeholder Group G</i>		3				\$	
Quarterly Calendar							

Communications planning framework

Step 1: Setting communications objectives

This first step is the most important. All communication objectives must clearly support your organisation in achieving its stated goals. If you are clear about where your organisation is going and what it needs to achieve, it becomes much simpler to work out what you need to do in terms of communications activity to support that.

Ideally, all objectives should be SMART, that is Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic and Time-bound, but this is not always possible when delivering communications to a myriad of different audiences, and often on a small budget. The best way to work out your objectives is to ask the question:

A year from now, what do we want to have achieved from a communications point of view that will support our organisation in achieving its goals?

Example

Using a fictitious organisation, Rounders NZ, we have set two key business goals for them to achieve in the following year:

1. To achieve a unified organisation which is working productively and efficiently together and which clearly understands the work plan
2. To effectively introduce the new international rules into New Zealand that satisfy the Olympic Rounders Committee

To support these business goals, your communication objectives may be:

- **By the end of the year, all rounders district organisations and clubs will fully understand and support our strategic goals and programmes for the next three years.** This is a SMART objective and can be measured – provided you think about how you are going to measure it when you put your stakeholder communications plan together at the start. You may want to introduce some checks or surveys throughout the year rather than waiting till the end of the year to find out if you've achieved your objective.
- **Build awareness and understanding about the new changes to the rules within our sporting code to increase compliance by players and referees.** The effect of any communications effort with this may be difficult to measure, unless specific measurement tools are put in place upfront. Anecdotal evidence may be just as useful in situations like this.

Objectives won't work if you make them too broad or try to achieve too much in one statement. For example, saying you want to improve relationships with your key stakeholders might be a worthy objective. However, without the **why?** it could be interpreted any number of ways when it came to developing activities to support it.

Step 2: Setting key messages for the organisation

Conflicting messages create confusion and for this reason it is helpful to define what key messages your organisation wants to communicate. These will be the most important things you want people to know or understand about you, in order to achieve your communications objectives and support your business goals.

These key messages should be used repeatedly in all your communications, and to all stakeholders. They need to be well understood by your board, your staff and anyone else likely to be communicating about you to others.

“It helps if you all sing from the same song sheet.”

Generally you will have two sets of key messages – one overriding set of messages that are applicable to all your audiences, and a second set of key messages that are specific and relevant to one or more of your target audiences. This section deals with the organisation’s overriding key messages. Specific messages addressing the issues and concerns of each stakeholder group are covered under Step 4.

Example

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

- What are the most important things you want people to understand about your organisation? **e.g. Rounders NZ is the new national body that represents the interests of all rounder bodies in New Zealand.**
- What is your organisation aiming to achieve in the year or years ahead? **e.g. Rounders NZ is working to gain international accreditation this year, which will allow New Zealand players to participate in international events and series.**
- What projects, initiatives or events are going to be the focus for you this year? **Rounders NZ is working to secure sponsorship to fund its first-ever national team to the world championships.**

These messages should be used repeatedly in your communications throughout the year, and used in conjunction with the very specific messages you decide on for each stakeholder group.

Step 3: Defining and prioritising your key stakeholders

Those individuals, groups or organisations who are most critical to your ongoing success, and who you can have some manageable contact with, are the stakeholders you want to include in your communications plan.

Everyone will have a different reason for being involved with you and you need to put yourself in their shoes and understand what it is they want from you, what expectations or issues they have that can influence the relationship. Once you have listed each stakeholder (or target audience) group, and identified the issues and expectations, you can then determine how important each one is, relative to each other.

If you can, try and assess where each stakeholder group is, in terms of its level of satisfaction with your organisation. Try and rate each of them on a satisfaction scale of 1-10 (where 1 is they don't like you at all and 10 means they love you). This rating, combined with each stakeholder's influence, will help you decide where you put them on your priority list.

For example, a group of coaches who are very dissatisfied may be a small group, but may have the power to disrupt your entire operation and prevent you from achieving your goals. You would rate them a 2 in terms of their satisfaction. When combined with their influence, you may decide to give them the highest communications priority – a '1' – on your priority plan for the year.

The rating used in the example below shows a communications priority order from 1-4, where;

- 1 = Highest priority – most likely to receive time, resources and budget from communications plan
- 2 = Strong priority – will need to give attention to their communication needs
- 3 = Lesser priority – still need to communicate but less attention than 1 and 2
- 4 = Low priority – may get some general communications that are more designed for higher priority groups

Carrying out some simple research with your stakeholders is a great way to determine their satisfaction. It will also provide you with a benchmark for the future to see if you are improving on the things that are most important to them. Information on carrying out this type of research is covered under Step 8.

Example – Stakeholder priority for Rounders NZ

Target audience	Priority	Expectations/issues
<i>Rounders NZ board</i>	1	Wants Rounders NZ to deliver effective and efficient services Wants excellent communication with all stakeholders Wants to see improved financial management and better income from regions Current satisfaction rating: 7
<i>Sports media</i>	1	Don't view rounders as a serious sport and don't see need to cover it Don't have a working relationship with Rounders NZ Current satisfaction rating: not applicable

<i>District coaches</i>	1	<p>Want more support and recognition from Rounders NZ.</p> <p>Want opportunities to network and upskill</p> <p>Want to see more recognition of the sport by sports media</p> <p>Want input into national team selection</p> <p>Current satisfaction rating: 2</p>
<i>Rounders NZ District Associations</i>	2	<p>Want to be given a share of member fees to deliver local coaching services</p> <p>Want to see better communication from national body (tired of multitude of emails and notices from different people within Rounders HQ)</p> <p>Want input into national team selection</p> <p>Want to see the sport's profile lifted</p> <p>Current satisfaction rating: 5</p>
<i>Rounders NZ members</i>	3	<p>Not sure what the role of Rounders NZ actually is and where the money goes</p> <p>Want to see more regional and national events introduced</p> <p>Want to see more recognition of the sport by sports media</p> <p>Current satisfaction rating: 7</p>
<i>Sponsors</i>	3	<p>Want clear reporting about what is delivered</p> <p>Want to see good media coverage about sponsored events</p> <p>Want quality control of events and sponsored clothing</p> <p>Current satisfaction rating: 7–8</p>
<i>Charitable trusts</i>	3	<p>Want bullet-proof accounting in terms of how money is accounted for</p> <p>Want to see proof of purchase</p> <p>Want profile by association</p> <p>Current satisfaction rating: 7</p>
<i>SPARC</i>	3	<p>Wants to see professional management of the sport</p> <p>Wants to see proven participation figures</p> <p>Is keeping a watching brief about its potential as a future Olympic sport</p> <p>Current satisfaction rating: 5</p>

Note that the 'general public' has not been included as a target group in this particular list of stakeholders. They have no direct influence over the organisation's success, funding or direction – and the organisation cannot directly communicate with them – only via the media or through players, coaches etc. 'General public' is too broad an audience, but you might want to include a group called 'potential players' which is a sub-set of the general audience but can generally be reached more easily via your existing stakeholders or networks.

Step 4: Key messages for each stakeholder group

Once you have determined who your key stakeholders are, and prioritised them, there will be some key messages you need to develop to address their specific concerns and issues. This is done to ensure that your communications are particularly relevant to them and they get a sense that you understand their point of view.

Where the overriding key messages fit in...

Please note that all stakeholder groups also need to receive the overriding key messages you have set out in Step 2. It is necessary to keep up the repetition of these messages throughout all your communications to all audiences – so they support you in achieving your organisation’s business goals.

Example

Stakeholder		Issues/Expectations	Key messages
<i>Sports media</i>	1	<p>Don't view rounders as a serious sport and don't see need to cover it.</p> <p>Don't have a working relationship with Rounders NZ.</p> <p>Current satisfaction rating: not applicable</p>	<p>Specific Rounders is a fast-growing sport with a playing membership of 7,000.</p> <p>For any media enquiries, please contact the Rounders NZ sports manager, Sue Thomson.</p> <p>Overriding Rounders NZ is the new national body that represents the interests of all rounder bodies in New Zealand.</p> <p>Rounders NZ is working to gain international accreditation to allow Kiwi participation at international events.</p> <p>Rounders NZ is on the hunt for sponsors so it can take the first ever national team to the world championships.</p>
<i>Rounders NZ District coaches</i>	1	<p>Want to be given a share of member fees to deliver local coaching services.</p> <p>Want to see better communication from national body (tired of multitude of emails and notices from different people within Rounders HQ).</p> <p>Want input into national team selection.</p> <p>Want to see the sport's profile lifted.</p> <p>Current satisfaction rating: 2</p>	<p>Specific 40% of membership fees are retained by the districts to administer the sport locally. This includes coaching support.</p> <p>All coaching communications are posted in the coaches section of the Rounders NZ website. Only urgent information is now being sent via email or posted.</p> <p>The Rounders NZ national selectors include a coaching representative who will be consulting with you about your recommendations.</p> <p>We have a media plan in place to raise our profile.</p> <p>Plus the organisation's overriding key messages.</p>

Step 5: Developing communications tactics for each stakeholder group

The next column in your communications plan defines exactly how you will communicate the key messages to each priority stakeholder group. At this point, you must keep very firmly in mind what you can realistically do given your budget and the skills and resources of your team.

This is also an opportunity to be creative, to look at your stakeholders and ask, 'Where is the best place or what is the best time to engage with you?' For example, it might be that you decide to ask for a speaking slot at a coaching conference to communicate what you want, or host a function to get all your key stakeholders in one room together. You may also have the budget to carry out some advertising in a key publication read by your stakeholders, if you think that is the best way to ensure your message gets through in a cost-effective manner.

Example – Sports media

Stakeholder		Issues/Expectations	Key messages	Tactics
<i>Sports media</i>	1	<p>Don't view rounders as a serious sport and don't see need to cover it.</p> <p>Don't have a working relationship with Rounders NZ.</p> <p>Current satisfaction ratings: not applicable.</p>	<p>Specific Rounders NZ is a fast-growing sport with a playing membership of 7,000.</p> <p>For any media enquiries, please contact the Rounders NZ sports manager, Sue Thomson.</p> <p>Overriding Rounders NZ is the new national body that represents the interests of all rounders bodies in New Zealand.</p> <p>Rounders NZ is working to gain international accreditation to allow Kiwi participation at international events.</p> <p>Rounders NZ is on the hunt for sponsors so it can take the first ever national team to the world championships.</p>	<p>Develop list of influential sports media and general sports media contacts. Identify if anyone in districts has existing relationships with them.</p> <p>CEO to make appointment to visit key sports journalists and introduce herself, in tandem with local contact person.</p> <p>Include sports journalists on distribution list for your magazine.</p> <p>Send media releases and follow up with phone calls re new sponsors, international accreditation, naming of national team etc.</p> <p>Invite sports journalists to have a go at celebrity rounders competition held at nationals in Auckland.</p> <p>Encourage sponsors to include news on Rounders in their own magazines.</p> <p>Gain media coverage for well-known New Zealanders who are playing rounders or whose kids are playing.</p>

Step 6: Allocating budget and responsibilities

You know what you're going to do and when. To ensure it all happens, you need to make sure that there are owners for each communications activity, preferably someone who is able and experienced at dealing with the task you have allocated them.

In the case of a conference or event, there may be multiple members of your organisation working on it, but there should only be one clear 'owner' who has overall responsibility and accountability for ensuring it all happens. In a large organisation, the communications plan and associated activity may work to support the event, but not necessarily organise it.

The next two columns in the communications template – one to identify the person responsible for implementing the communications tactic, and the second for indicating what budget you anticipate might be needed for this – need to be completed. When you add it all up, you may find that you have to revisit the plan to either remove some items or find a more cost-effective way of achieving what you want.

Stakeholder		Issues/Expectations	Key messages	Tactics	Who	Budget
Sports media	1	Don't view Rounders as a serious sport and don't see need to cover it.	Specific Rounders is a fast-growing sport with a playing membership of 7,000.	Develop list of influential sports media and general sports media contacts. Identify if anyone in districts has existing relationships with them.	JB	0
		Don't have a working relationship with Rounders NZ.	For any media enquiries, please contact the Rounders NZ sports manager, Sue Thomson.	CEO to make appointment to visit key sports journalists and introduce herself, in tandem with local contact person.	ST	\$4,000
		Current satisfaction: not applicable	Overriding Rounders NZ is the new national body that represents the interests of all rounder bodies in New Zealand.	Include sports journalists on distribution list for your magazine.	JB	\$50
			Rounders NZ is working to gain international accreditation to allow Kiwi participation at international events.	Send media releases and follow up with phone calls when announcements are made about new sponsors, international accreditation, naming of national team etc.		0
			Rounders NZ is on the hunt for sponsors so it can take the first-ever national team to the world championships.	Invite sports journalists to have a go at celebrity rounders competition held at nationals in Auckland.		0
				Encourage sponsors to include news on rounders in their own magazines.		0
		Gain media coverage for well-known New Zealanders who are playing rounders or whose kids are playing.		0		

Step 8: Assessing results and adapting the plan

Once a plan is implemented, you need to know if it is working to achieve the objectives you set. Armed with that information, you can then review and change your key messages, communications tactics and timing to be more effective.

With small organisations and small budgets, it's likely that anecdotal feedback and a general 'sense that things are working' might be as much as you'll get. However, it isn't too difficult or time-consuming to build in some measures at the start.

Some simple things you can do to check how things are working might include:

- Conduct some in-person interviews with your top stakeholders to get a real feel for how they view you and what the issues are. Have they noticed a difference with your communications and do they feel it is working for you and for them? What suggestions do they have to improve it?
- If you have key stakeholders together for a conference, forum or session, give them a written questionnaire to fill out, asking them for feedback on the things you want to measure.
- Monitor and collect all the news clippings that mention your organisation or issues of relevance to you. You can either ask your regional and local representatives to keep a watching brief over the media and send you the clippings, or else pay for a professional media monitoring agency to monitor and despatch clips to you electronically.
- If you have objectives around compliance (e.g. new rules), it may be that some reporting from referees is introduced at the start of the season, if this is feasible.
- Include a small survey in your regular newsletter and ask stakeholders to send it back. These often work best if you provide some form of incentive to improve the response rate – e.g. a gift or something sport-related to an agreed value.
- An online survey with your key stakeholders asking them to give you a rating in terms of your performance across a number of key measures. There are some great online tools available that cost little to set up (around \$300) and where you pay around 5 cents per response. This will only be useful if the questions are asked in the right way and it may be worthwhile seeking advice from someone who has experience in research and question design. This information also provides you with a benchmark to measure yourself against in future years.

A communications plan is not a static thing. It should always be reviewed and amended with a view to making it as effective as possible. Ensuring success is a matter of keeping it manageable and working to the eight - steps outlined above.

Communication

tactics cheat sheet

The following table aims to provide some guidance about some common communication tactics and what to take into account when choosing them.

Tactic	Positives	Things to note
<i>Website</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Great information resource • Excellent for breaking news and announcements • Accessible 24/7 to everyone • Can have secure sections to provide information to members or to select groups • Can run surveys, competitions, and full transaction services over the web • Excellent at building your brand if it is designed consistently with the rest of your brochures, reports etc 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can be expensive for initial set-up. Good design and navigation are essential to make it work well • Need a website you can update easily yourself • Can be time-intensive if you have lots of information to load and update regularly • Does need promoting so people know how to find it • If you want people to visit it more than once, you do need to make an effort to keep updating content
<i>Online newsletters</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fast and easy despatch of news to stakeholders' desktop • Much cheaper than printing and posting newsletters • Recipients can easily forward on to others who might be interested 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can be viewed as spam if you don't seek permission from stakeholders to receive information in this way • Limited ability to use pictures or graphics as these can cause newsletter to be blocked or else take too long to download • Need to keep email lists up to date to be effective • Needs to be short and well written, preferably with list of contents at top to save readers' time • Have to print it out if you want to take it somewhere aside from your desk to read
<i>Printed newsletters and magazines</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have longer shelf life than online newsletters because they sit around on desks and tables • Easier to take home and read • Great if you want to use lots of pictures and graphics • Excellent for in-depth articles, commentary and longer information pieces • Good means of including inserts such as surveys or promotions • May be able to sell advertising space to sponsors or those wanting to reach your audience • Great for showing that you are a 'solid' organisation and building your brand (if designed well) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Much longer production times with layout and printing involved • Much more expensive to produce including design costs, layout, printing, postage and despatch costs • Need to ensure you can keep your mailing list current to avoid wastage • Do you have sufficient resources to produce on a regular basis?

Tactic	Positives	Things to note
<i>Functions</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Good way of relationship building and getting key stakeholders together • Good way of informally networking, influencing views of others and seeking feedback • If managed well, can engender a lot of goodwill toward your organisation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can be expensive to manage by the time you account for invitations, catering and any associated costs • Need to ensure there is a compelling reason for invitees to attend – perhaps a launch or major announcement, or a celebration
<i>Media releases</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The most cost-effective way of gaining publicity • Can gain excellent coverage across a variety of media if the news is strong enough • Can help you develop productive working relationships with key sports journalists • Providing a backgrounder with your media release is a useful way of educating the journalist about your organisation • Providing a written release gives you more control than a phone interview where you are relying on the journalist writing things accurately 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Need to ensure releases are well written and do have something 'newsy' rather than just information you want to give out • Can't control how the final story will appear or how the media may 'twist' the story to their own views or agenda • For controversial news, you will need to prepare for media enquiries and know how to answer the hard questions – preparing some questions and answers in advance is recommended • Still need to follow up release with a call to the journalist to ensure they received it, and to check if they have any queries
<i>Advertising</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gives you total control over the message, the timing and the branding • Often useful if you are having your message blocked by journalists • You get to choose which magazine or paper (or radio/tv) you want 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can be expensive • Unless you have professional help, a badly written or designed ad will not be noticed and will affect how you are perceived
<i>Brochures</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Great for providing all manner of information to your stakeholders, whether it be to do with new member recruitment, explaining who you are and how you operate, or promoting a specific event • A great opportunity to build visibility for your organisation, but you need to ensure consistent design between all your brochures so that people begin to recognise them as coming from you, even without seeing your organisation's logo • You can have brochures inserted into magazines targeting your stakeholders, mailed out with another existing newsletter to save costs, or given out at events 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If you try and cram too much information into a brochure, it will lessen readability. Either take some copy out or make the brochure bigger. Bad design will hurt your image and the uptake of the brochure • It can be expensive to print only a small amount – you may find it more cost-effective to do a bigger print run if the brochure can be used on other occasions • Finally, please make sure you get someone to proofread the copy very carefully before you have it printed. It can make you look shoddy and unprofessional if you produce something full of mistakes



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