



Writing a PR or communications plan

Where are you now? (situation analysis)

Any PR or communications plan has to ask the fundamental questions, "Why does this organisation exist?", "What is it trying to achieve?", "What are the key objectives?". This will provide the grounding to enable you to construct your plan.

Having done this you need to ask yourself how aware the public are of your work and what their opinion of it is. In order to get an objective view, some research will probably be required – often a quick questionnaire or phone call to a reasonable selection of people will do. This will help identify your 'position' in people's minds.

Take an environmental group as an example. Draw a straight line across a page. At one end write Greenpeace, at the other National Trust. Ask people to put a cross where they think your organisation is between the two extremes in your field. This can be applied to almost any field.

Where do you want to go? (your objective)

Where do you want your organisation to be seen within a certain time frame, say a year, three years or perhaps by the end of a campaign? Do you want more people to know about you, and if so, why? Do you have the capacity to handle larger numbers of users/clients/visitors?

Who do you want to talk to? (your target audience)

Which section(s) of the community are you trying to reach? Examples may be local opinion-leaders, such as the local MP or newspaper editor, parents of children under five, or those who care for the elderly. The 'general public', or 'everybody' is too vague. The more you narrow this target down the more effective you will be. Targeting does not mean excluding everybody else, it just means knowing a smaller group of people better.

Find out how your target audience gets its information. What papers do they read? Do they listen to local radio? Are they part of another network? Do they think the local paper is a waste of time? This will all help with implementing your strategy.

What do you want to say? (your key message)

Narrow down what you want to say as much as possible. Key messages are usually very simple and rarely involve policy statements. You should ask yourself "why should our target audience come to us?" The answer "because we are good" is not good enough. Why are we good? "We are trustworthy", "we know what we are talking about", are both key messages.

You need not always spell out a key message in actual words. For example, it may be incorporated into the design of your newsletter. A leaflet from your bank about a new mortgage, for example, will look very different from a leaflet about a youth scheme in your area.

What methods will you use?

How best can you reach your audience with your message? This is based on what you know about them. Think beyond media relations. If word of mouth is best then use it. Conferences, meetings and site visits can all be part of a PR plan. How about shop window displays, direct mail, or exhibitions? Your methods should be based as much as possible on what you know about your target audience. For example, there is no point in putting a great effort into getting



coverage in the Western Mail if very few of your target audience read that particular paper. The local weekly may be much more use to you.

Strategy timetables

In other words your plan of action. Do you want a big blast of publicity or a steady flow? Give yourself targets and a timetable – magazines, even local ones, may need a story or feature three months before they appear in print. If your strategy is to spread the word through attending various meetings, for example, then set yourself a target of attending X number of meetings over the next six months. Each method or way of communicating you have identified will have its own time restraints or limits. If you don't set yourself some targets you will probably forget your good intentions.

Budget

What is this all going to cost you? In an ideal world your budget would simply be set at what it would cost to implement the strategy. In the voluntary sector this is where you start to narrow down your options. You are unlikely to be able to do it all, so target your resources at the methods you think will be most effective, even if they are not the most glamorous ones.

Some elements in your strategy may not start for several months, in which case you might have time to try and raise some money. Funders are far more likely to give for a specific item if it is clearly part of a general communications strategy than an item on its own.

Evaluation

We know this is an ongoing pain to keep up, but how else can you judge whether your efforts have been a success? Plan time in for this on a regular basis, even if it is simply a matter of keeping press cuttings and a record of the number of inquiries you receive. Done regularly you will start to notice if things are not working as you hoped. It's a great early warning system that enables you to change your strategy rather than bang your head against a brick wall.

Remember - the best strategy is one that is flexible and changes over time.