

Communications Strategy 101

How to create a communications strategy off the side of your desk, just like a pro, for small community foundations.

WHY SHOULD I CARE ABOUT COMMUNICATIONS

Communications are one important tool in your toolbox to advance the work of your foundation.

- Communications are a part of everything, telling your story, fundraising or fund development, outreach, and relationship building
- Communications can inspire action.
- Done well; communications build trust.

Building a culture of strategic communications requires seeing it as a holistic function that wraps around every part of a foundation's operations. For example, some people see fund development as a niche area of persuasive communications. Every blog, press release,

public speaking engagement, and even an informal email is a communications opportunity. Anyone who performs these functions on behalf of the foundation is a part of the communications team.

As you read through this guide, you will complete a series of exercises that are, in essence, empathy exercises. Effective communications require putting yourself in someone else's shoes to consider how they will interpret something. Using your imagination in this way is a creative skill that anyone can develop and strengthen over time.

CREATING A COMMUNICATIONS STRATEGY

Here are the six parts that make up this template communications strategy. Throughout this guide, we will walk through each of the parts.

1. Audience
2. Objectives
3. Strategic Pillars
4. Key Messages
5. Implementation Timeline
6. Evaluation and Learning

DEFINE YOUR AUDIENCE

Start by asking yourself:

- Who are my stakeholders?
- What do they do? What do they like?

Common stakeholders for community foundations can include: fundholders, grantees, prospective fundholders, volunteers, community organizations, government and elected officials, press media, and the public.

A good communications strategy has a defined, specific audience. The more specific your messaging can be, the more impactful. By this virtue, not everyone will be included. If you have more than one audience for a strategy, consider different key messages and tactics for reaching each one.



EXERCISE: Map your audience

This is a great way to visualize all of your stakeholders with whom you communicate.

Step 1: Use sticky notes or a digital platform to write down every stakeholder you communicate with - fund holders, recipients, media - anything you can think of.

Step 2: Move around the sticky notes to group the audiences based on similarities. Use this map to make it clear who are deciding to communicate with.

Protip: You can do this same exercise to map your messengers (people who communicate for the foundation) and your channels (where you communicate).



EXERCISE: Create an audience 'avatar'

This is a great exercise to go through with your board or a communications committee. You can break out the team into groups and assign them a different target audience.

Step 1: Pick a target audience

Step 2: Create a typical profile of someone in that audience

- Where do they work?
- What do they use to read news?
- What's the best way to reach them?
- How do they relate to you?
- Why would they visit your website?
- Or, click to read an article about you?

Step 3: Identify challenges or areas of strength and opportunity in your existing communications with this avatar.

SET OBJECTIVES

Start by asking yourself these questions:

- **What's the purpose of this communications product?**
- **What do you want your audience to come away with, or learn?**
- **How do you want your audience to feel?**
- **Is there an action you want them to take?**
- **Is there a measure of success?**

Objectives can be very creative, and asking these questions can be a great empathy exercise. They can be as simple as to share information, such as the announcement of a new board member, or can range from having local press write a story to raise awareness, inspire donations to a crisis fund, and more.

Strategic Pillars – EAST

Start by asking yourself: How do I make this easy, attractive, social and timely?

EASY to understand

Language and platform should be accessible and free from sector-jargon, or with clear definitions provided

ATTRACTIVE

This means interesting! You do not have to spend a lot of time or resources on design when the content itself is relevant, practical, and easy to understand.

SOCIAL

The best communications are personal, and centre the audience member as the reader, listener, or viewer. We are naturally social creatures, want to be part of a community, and are inspired by the actions of others.

TIMELY

Information that is relevant to the intended audience

DRAFT KEY MESSAGES

Start by asking yourself these questions:

- **What is your why?**
- **What is the what and how?**
- **What language will resonate with your audience?**
- **What is the tone? Do you want to inspire, provoke thought, invite, or encourage?**

Starting with ‘the why’ is important to be clear to yourself and your team before thinking about the external audience’s interpretation. It is also important not to write key messages with the assumption that the audience will already know ‘the why’.

Writing direct, accessible and informational copy is important to getting the message across. Combining this with inspiring, thought-provoking copy is important to an effective call to action. Key messages should include both.

Community Foundations of Canada creates key messages for our programs, shared openly through 'Amplification Packages' with participating community foundations. These are tools and key messages you are welcome to copy and adapt for your own audiences at any time.

TOP TIPS: Grammar and Composition

- 1) Simple sentences – avoid subordinate clauses.
- 2) Use active voice for clarity.
- 3) Use language and terminology that anyone can understand.
- 4) Use concrete/visual language.
- 5) Avoid filler phrases. For example, replace "gave consideration to" with "considered".



EXERCISE: Community foundation key messages

Step 1: Pick one of your audience avatars, and one program, topic or fund you want to tell them about.

Step 2: Draft three key messages, one sentence each.

Step 3: Take a break, then share them with a colleague. Reflect on their clarity, and whether or not they will resonate with your audience.

IMPLEMENTATION TIMELINE

Start by asking yourself these questions:

- **What is realistic? What are my priorities?**
- **How do I reach my audience where they are, physically and digitally?**
- **What platforms or mediums reach my audience best?**
- **How should my key messages be adapted for each platform?**
- **Who will do what?**

CONSIDERATIONS

Writing for different platforms

Web copy will be different from social media posts, different from press releases, or even an introductory phone call with a prospective fundholder. Once you have your key messages, feel free to adapt them. You may also receive feedback from your audience, key messages can be dynamic and adjust as you learn what resonates most with your audience.

Messengers

Consider who is best to deliver the key messages. Is it the board chair, a grantee, or a fundholder? Peer-to-peer communication, especially when it's a learning opportunity or call to action, is particularly effective. People are more open to hearing people they identify with.

Storytelling considerations

Community foundations are excellent relationship builders. Prioritize telling stories about your relationships so your communications lead with both your 'heart and head'. The 'hook' of a story will always be more compelling if it starts with the heart. It is important to gather stories with consent and transparency, and where the outcomes will be mutually beneficial.

PROCESSES TO IMPLEMENT

Clear and realistic timeline of all the tasks

Brainstorm all the steps that need to take place to make your dream a reality. Break them down into small manageable tasks and include time for review, editing and any approvals. If you are working with translation, make sure to provide the space for translators to do their job well.

Communications Calendar

Create a calendar for each of your tactics. Consider the cadence: a website should go live before a press release is sent, so journalists can link to it, and social media can be scheduled with the press release and website links in advance. People often need to be reminded of something three times before they take action. Consider this for invitations or other calls to action.

Clear approvals and responsibilities

This can be more important on larger teams where everyone may not have access to all the relevant context and information. It is always helpful to have a second set of eyes on content. We each have our blind spots.

EVALUATION AND LEARNING

Communications takes time and effort and community foundations have limited resources. Spending time on evaluation and learning may feel like a luxury but will ensure that you are using your resources in a worthwhile way in the longterm. Slow down to speed up.

Data and Analytics

The digital nature of communications has made it easier to gather data on how effective your communications is. Most social media platforms and email campaign tools have analytics built in and you can use a service like Google Analytics to measure the analytics on your website for free.

Debrief Sessions

Some evaluation will be qualitative and anecdotal. Debrief sessions are a great opportunity to gather this type of feedback. After major milestones or on a regular basis, such as quarterly, to take pause and reflect on what's working, what's not and what steps you want to take to make adjustments.