

CHAPTER III: CRAFTING CLEAR COMMUNICATIONS

Introduction

The focus of Chapter I of the Toolkit was to guide your organization through negotiating, forming, and maintaining partnerships with other organizations in your community that are key allies. Chapter II of the Toolkit provided information and resources to help your organization bolster your efforts on engaging individuals in your community through outreach. Chapter III guides your organization through the process of crafting clear communications to engage your community partners as well as individuals in your community in support of your efforts. With so much information competing for our attention, your organization needs a clear and consistent message to communicate to your target audience. If your organization's message is clear, finding partners who share your goals will be much easier. A clear and consistent message is also critical in developing strategic communications for your community outreach strategies.

This chapter will assist your organization with determining those key points that will help your audience clearly understand your mission, goals, and strategies. It will also provide steps that guide your organization through the process of creating and disseminating your message. Tools and resources provided in this chapter will supply your organization with worksheets, assessment tools, and examples to facilitate crafting clear communications.

The case study presented at the end of this chapter describes the efforts of a teenage pregnancy prevention and education outreach program that is working to change the dynamics of unhealthy relationships in a Hispanic community. The case study details the organization's process of setting their goals, identifying their target audience, and crafting and tailoring their message to fit their target audience.

At-a-Glance

This chapter contains information to:

- *Assist your organization with determining those key points that will help your audience clearly understand your mission, goals, and strategies.*
- *Provide steps that guide your organization through the process of creating and disseminating your message.*

The following index outlines the content of the chapter.

CHAPTER III: CRAFTING CLEAR COMMUNICATIONS				
Section	Topic	Tool	Page #	
Steps to Crafting Clear Communications	Identify Your Purpose			
	Choose Your Audience	Identify Your Target Audience		63
		Create a Profile for Your Target Audience		64
		Crafting Clear Communications Checklist		65
		Message Development		66
		Learning Style Inventory		67
	Craft Your Message	Suggested Messaging		70
	Tailor Your Message According To Your Medium	Communications Channels		71
		Checklist for Effective Brochures		72
		Characteristics of Quality Educational and Promotional Materials		73
	Plan for Communications Emergencies			
	Evaluate the Effectiveness of Your Message	Focusing Your Evaluation		74
Case Study III: Crafting Clear Communications			76	

Steps to Crafting Clear Communications



1. Identify your purpose.

What you want to say depends on your mission and what you are trying to accomplish with your communication strategy. There are some communication goals that may be ongoing – raising your profile in the community, informing people about your program – while others may vary, depending on circumstances. Most organizations develop several complementary but distinct messages based on target audience and purpose.

First, establish a framework for what you are trying to communicate – the “who, what, and why.”

Who is your audience?

It is important to assess the audience you are trying to reach. Your key target audiences go hand in hand with your purpose: who needs to hear what you have to say in order for your organization to achieve its intent?

What are you offering to your audience?

Think about the community you serve. What are its needs and available resources? If you are trying to reach multiple audiences, realize that each will have different answers to this question. Learn what motivates them and determine what you want them to take away about your organization.

Why does your message matter to your audience?

This is a crucial part of your message: “why” your audience should care about what you have to say. Think again about the “what” and the benefits your audience may receive. There are different kinds of benefits you may want to highlight:

- A feeling: a sense of generosity when they donate their time or money;
- A material benefit: better community economy;
- An anticipated benefit: getting school credit for community service or volunteer hours.

Both leadership and staff should work together to develop a clear message. Staff at all levels will bring a unique perspective on your community’s needs and resources.

You can engage your staff members by having them tackle important questions:

- What are the most important accomplishments of our organization? Can you describe in simple, short and clear terms what the organization does?
- How will funders/stakeholders/clients react to our message?
- How does your message help shape public perception on controversial issues?
- What statements and sound bites will be most memorable and persuasive to your key audiences?

- How does the message fit with your mission/vision and services?

Answering these questions will make it easier for your target audience to recognize your organization's unique message. With so much information competing for space, having a clearly branded message will make outreach efforts much easier. It helps to distinguish your organization from others. Once everyone in your organization understands what your message is, your organization can choose the appropriate audience and begin crafting the language in your message.

2. Choose Your Audience.

Knowing your audience makes it possible to plan your communication logically. First, choose which key audience your message will focus on. You'll need different messages for different groups and different channels and methods to reach each of those groups. Next, consider whether you should direct your communication to those whose behavior, knowledge, or condition you hope to affect, or whether your communication needs to be indirect. Sometimes, for instance, in order to influence a population, you have to aim your message at those to whom they listen – clergy, community leaders, politicians, etc. Sometimes policy makers are the appropriate target, rather than those who are directly affected. These are only a few of the many possible ways to identify your audience. Once you've done that, it will give your organization ideas about how to reach them.

Knowing your audience makes it possible to plan your communication logically

Persons who create policy, fund, develop and run programs and services for teen pregnancy prevention and pregnant and parenting adolescents each brings to the table their own approach and reason for their efforts that is a reflection of how they listen to, learn from and eventually act upon messages they hear. Attention to how and why your audience listens and learn is called "andragogy" and was introduced and advanced in the United States by Malcolm Knowles ('andragogical model of learning' a model of human learning, 1990). As noted by Lawson (2009) this model is based on five assumptions that should be considered as you plan and execute your communication strategy(ies):

The *first assumption* involves a change in self-concept from total dependency to increasing *self-directedness*. Because your partners are more likely to be self-directed, and would want to take responsibility for planning, implementing, and evaluating the message, you should establish that the information provided is a collaborative effort. Throughout the communication process, you should be engaged with partners in ongoing, two-way communication that will allow them to adopt and adapt the message that best fits them and their intended audience.

The *second assumption* addresses the role of *experience*. Each partner or audience member brings a wealth of experiences that provide a base for hearing and using a targeted communication. Finding out what your audience already knows and how your communication will be perceived to help them build on their experiences will facilitate adoption. Use of the tools *Identify Your Target Audience* and *Create a Profile for Your Target Audience* on page 56 and 57, as well as your own (your team's) experience can assist you in this discovery effort.

The *third assumption* is that your audience is ready to listen and learn when they perceive they *need to know or do something* in order to perform more effectively in some aspect of the execution of their work. That is, they are more likely to listen and learn from the message if it is practical and realistic, problem-centered rather than subject-centered (e.g., just on pregnant and parenting teens or just on father involvement). The effective message helps your audience understand how integration of the message can lead to learning a particular skill or task that will help them be more successful in their work.

The *fourth assumption* is that your target audience(s) is most likely to listen to a message that has immediate, real-world applications. Practitioners are very much real time learners and users of information. They want information that can lead to obtaining skills and knowledge that will help them solve problems or complete tasks. People working in this field are motivated to listen and assimilate information when they see relevance to their real-life situations and are able to apply what they have learned as quickly as possible. Therefore, messages need to be clearly relevant to the immediate needs of the audience. Here both the *Crafting Clear Communications Checklist* on Page 58 and *Message Development* on Page 59 can be effective in assisting you in crafting just-in-time messages that emphasize how the message is going to make the audience member's jobs easier.

The *fifth and last assumption* is that audiences are motivated to listen and learn because of *internal factors* such as self-esteem, greater self-confidence in their own knowledge and skills and opportunities to improve their own worth. Messages must allow the audience member to perceive a personal benefit.

In addition, in crafting and targeting your message it is critical that you have rudimentary understanding of your audience's learning style. Learning style refers to the way in which an audience member approaches and responds to a message and learning experience. Lawson (2009) suggests there are **four types of learners**:

There are four types of learners: feelers, observers, thinkers, and doers.

a) *Feelers* are very people-oriented, expressive and focus on feelings and emotions and gravitate toward learning experiences that explore people's attitudes and emotions so they are more likely to benefit from communications that give them the opportunity to interact, share opinions and experiences;

b) *Observers* are more likely to watch and listen, be reserved and quiet and will take their time before responding to or acting upon what they hear – however, when they do respond or act they are generally right on target. They are more likely to benefit from communication experiences that allow them to consider various ideas and opinions, and they seem to thrive on messages that are more open and allow them to learn through discovery;

c) *Thinkers* are persons who rely on logic and reason as well as the opportunity to share ideas and concepts and prefer messages that challenge them to analyze and evaluate what is being communicated, so like **Feelers** they appreciate interactive communication, especially an approach that allows them to question the rationale behind what is presented. They are more likely to challenge messages they perceive to be too general or without substance; and

d) *Doers* have a learning style that is very common in this field since they are likely to be persons who want to actively be involved in the message development and delivery process, they want to take charge of the message and they are particularly interested in knowing how they are going to apply what is being communicated to their and other real world situations – so they like information that is presented clearly and concisely and will become impatient with messages that provide ‘additional’ or broad audience-focused information.

Keep in mind that no one learning style is right or even better than another. To be effective, you must design and target communication strategy to accommodate style differences.

Please note: These five assumptions and understanding of how your audience learns are also true as you plan your outreach strategy.^{xi}

The worksheets titled *Learning Style Inventory* on page 60 can guide you through this process.

3. Craft Your Message.

Your message may be one of inspiration, pure information, education, persuasion, request, and/or explanation. It can vary in content, mood, language, and design. The possibilities are:

a) *Content*. Planning the content of your message is necessary to making it effective. Your message will be very different if you are recruiting participants than if you are trying to rally the public, or if you are trying to convince a population at risk to change their habits.

The *Suggested Messaging* tool on page 63 in the Tools and Resources can guide your organization through the process of crafting your message.

b) *Mood*. Consider what emotions do you want to appeal to? Your message may be upbeat – “Look at all the wonderful things our participants have accomplished!” Your message may be angry – “We’re tired of seeing our community’s educational attainment decline, and we’re not going to stand for it anymore.” Your message may be determined – “It’s time to roll up our sleeves and make teen pregnancy a thing of the past in our community.”

The mood of your message will determine how people react to it. In general, if the mood is too extreme (too negative, too frightening, or tries to make your audience feel too guilty), people will not pay much attention to it. It may take some experience to learn how to strike the right balance.

Recently, foundations, government agencies, and public officials have been making use of research and outcomes measurement to determine the effectiveness of programs. This has led to a shift in targeting funds and support toward effective programs and organizations that are measurably improving the communities they serve. Therefore, it would be prudent to include evidence-based goals and outcomes in your organization’s messaging (i.e., “70% of program graduates complete their high school degree compared to 25% of adolescent mothers nationally.”)

Focusing your message to potential funders, community influencers and other stakeholders on the negative perceptions related to adolescent pregnancy is risky. Rather, consider approaching your message from a positive angle and highlight solutions that such partners can help you achieve. Recognize the potential, capabilities, and contributions of pregnant and parenting adolescents in the community instead of overemphasizing their liabilities, deficits and needs; this is a much more effective way to mobilize them into action.

Consider using personal stories, case studies and real-life examples. Support these with facts and data to help your intended audience see how you are making a difference in the community. Clients who have successfully completed your program can also be great communicators of your message. Training them with some basic public speaking skills can benefit you and also give them a leg up for the future.

c) *Language and styles of communication.* Different audiences will require different communication styles. It is important for your organization to consider your audience's perception of your motives.

There are two aspects to language: one is the actual language – English, Spanish, Korean, etc. – that your intended audience speaks; the other is the *kind* of language you use – formal or informal, simple or complex, referring to popular figures and ideas or to obscure ones. You can address the language people speak by presenting your communications in both the official language (English in the U.S.) and the spoken language(s) of the population(s) you are hoping to reach.

The second aspect, the *kind* of language you use in your messaging, can be more complicated. If your message is too informal, your audience might feel you are talking down to them, or, worse, that you are making an insincere attempt to get close to them by communicating in a way that is clearly not normal for you. If your message is too formal – too stiff, too many “educated” words – your audience might feel you are not really talking to them at all. You will usually do best by using plain, straightforward language that says what you want to say simply and clearly.^{xii}

When developing your message, consider the following:

- What is the primary language of the community? If English is not the primary language, how is communication translated?
- How does your target audience receive its information (Internet, newspapers, radio)? Where do they access such information (libraries, schools, etc.)? How often is this information accessed?
- How do they share information with each other?
- How does the community discuss adolescent pregnancy issues? Do they discuss the issues at all?
- What are cultural norms that need to be considered? Would a certain phrase be offensive?

Language and communication styles are especially important to consider as your organization reaches out to increasingly diverse communities. Translating and pilot testing materials intended for non-English speakers is a good first step, but it is important that the staff also mirrors the population's cultural diversity. It is essential that your organization have staff members who understand the language and cultural environment of each ethnic group in your target population, as well as the cultural skills to relate to your audience. Especially as issues of sex

and sexuality are considered taboo in many cultures, it is crucial that there are as few barriers between your organization and your intended audience as possible.

d) **Consistency.** To ensure a consistent message, review your organization's strategy and goals. If these are unclear, it will be more difficult to determine the right audience(s) to engage. Both leadership and staff should work together to develop a clear and consistent message.

Some tips on maintaining consistency:

- Select one or two messages and keep them simple (e.g., a message for clients and a message for funders). Make sure they do not contradict each other.
- If you tailor the message to a specific audience, ensure that staff, board members and others working with your organization are promoting the same messages.
- Use the messages in all materials including: e-mail signatures, web sites, printed materials, etc.^{xiii}

4. Tailor Your Message According To Your Medium.

Channels of communication relate to the medium through which you convey your key messages. There are numerous channels to choose from in order to reach your target audience depending on what the members of your audience read, listen to, watch, and engage in. It is critical that your organization understand what works effectively with different audiences. The *Communications Channels* worksheet on page 64 will help you brainstorm and provide ideas for potential communications channels.

The individuals that can help you spread your message can vary and include community leaders, elected officials, CEOs of local businesses, clergy, community activists and ordinary people who are nonetheless respected and listened to by their neighbors. Institutions and organizations, such as colleges, hospitals, service clubs, faith communities, and other health and community organizations all have access to groups of community members who might need to hear your message.

As mentioned in Chapters I and II, developing ways of contacting and establishing relationships with influential individuals and institutions in the community and/or the population you are trying to reach is an important part of your outreach plan. You have to make personal contacts, give the media and others reasons to want to help you, and follow through over time to sustain those relationships in order to keep communication channels open.

The *Checklist for Effective Brochures* tool on page 65 and *Characteristics of Quality Educational and Promotional Materials* tools on page 68 will help your organization ensure that the materials being produced are effective. Remember that your organization offers a unique benefit to the community that no other organization can claim. If you keep this in the front of your mind as you develop your message, you will have great success in reaching those who can help you fulfill your mission.

5. Plan for Communications Emergencies.

Any number of things can happen in the course of a communication effort. Someone can forget to e-mail a press release, or can e-mail the wrong information. A crucial word on your posters or in your brochure can be

misspelled, or the phone number or e-mail address of your organization might be incorrect. A reporter may misunderstand important information, or simply get it wrong. Worse, you might have to deal with a real disaster involving the organization that has the potential to discredit everything you do.

It is important to try to anticipate these kinds of problems, and to create a plan to deal with them. Crisis planning should be part of any communication plan, so you will know exactly what to do when a problem or crisis occurs. Crisis plans should include who takes responsibility for what – dealing with the media, correcting errors, deciding when something has to be redone rather than fixed. It should cover as many situations, and as many aspects of each situation, as you can think of, so that you will not be too surprised and upset to do the right thing when one of them comes up.^{xiv}

Some tips for managing controversy include:

- Before taking action, define the real problem: Obtain copies of the article, television transcript, information from the state or federal agency or other documents that describe the situation. Follow-up with telephone calls to the original source to verify the facts and get more detailed information.
- Determine the scope of the problem: Assess whether the problem is a local, regional or national concern. This will entail anticipating the extent of the media coverage and evaluating whether an issue, such as an allegation about a policy, is national or confined to one area.
- Determine the potential impact on your organization: Assess if the problem can be isolated to one department or issue, or if it will affect your entire agency. Assess if the problem has "staying power" or is limited to a "one-time" story.
- Mobilize your issues management team: When a controversy develops, these individuals should be allowed to devote themselves entirely to the situation. An issues management plan should be in place and ready to go.
- Centralize the control of information: Make sure your messages are consistent and clear.

Appoint only one spokesperson, backed up by experts as appropriate.

- Communicate with internal audiences: Besides the media, be sure to communicate with your employees, local officials, service recipients and other government agencies throughout the controversy. By providing information quickly, it will be possible to speak "with one voice" and avoid confusion.
- Be flexible: Try to accommodate journalists, reporters and producers by providing timely and accurate information. Local media do not treat stories in the same way as national reporters. Make sure your spokesperson understands the different needs of these media and can anticipate the kinds of information they are seeking.^{xv}

6. Evaluate the Effectiveness of Your Message.

As a health or community service organization, evaluation should be part of any initiatives undertaken. The evaluation methodology can employ focus groups, key informant interviews, SurveyMonkey and Facebook polls, surveys, and/or street interviews. The *Focusing Your Evaluation* tool on page 67 can guide your organization through an evaluation. If you evaluate your communication plan in terms of both how well you carry it out and how well it works, you will be able to make changes to improve it. It will keep getting more effective each time

you implement it. No plan is ever perfect, but you can make yours as effective as possible if you monitor and evaluate it continually.

As with just about every phase of health and community work, your organization must continually adjust its communications plan. Memories are short and your organization must keep reminding the community of its key messages, that your organization performs important and successful work, and that the problems and issues in question have not gone away.^{xvi}