

How to Create a Communications Plan for Your NGO

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What Is a Communications Plan?

A communications plan is a document that guides the external communications efforts of an organization. It helps an NGO strategically focus its communication and outreach efforts around a certain set of goals – usually the mission and objectives of an organization. A communications plan is necessary to help an NGO effectively promote its work in the public and donors eyes.

Communications plans help NGOs accomplish this in a number of ways. First, a plan assists an organization in tailoring its message towards specific audiences, and determining which outreach and marketing materials and mediums are best used to communicate with those groups. A communications plan also coordinates the creation and implementation of those materials. Finally, every good communications plan contains an evaluation rubric – a matrix used to assess what is working and what is not so you are constantly improving your communications efforts.

While a communications plan can and should be written for an entire organization, you can also develop communications plans for new projects, events, or anything else that relies on communicating with external stakeholders and audiences.

A completed communications plan should not simply sit on the shelf. It is a document that should be a resource whenever a staff member wishes to seek guidance on how to communicate about your NGO. It is a strategy that should be regularly reviewed and updated based on organizational priorities, staff capacity, and program development.

Why Does My Organization Need a Communications Plan?

An NGO without a communications plan is an organization engaging with its audience blindly.

Here's an example. Perhaps you are trying to recruit new youth participants to join your program. Without a communications plan, you may not have an informed sense of who these youth participants are, where they access information about new programs, and

the language to use with them. Thoughtful brainstorming as part of a communications plan can help better target these desired beneficiaries.

Or say you have been trying desperately to engage with a new donor over email, but have never received a response. A communications plan workshop may show that the person you are trying to reach does not check their email often and prefers introductory letters sent to their office. Perhaps someone within your organization knew this, but it was not yet institutional knowledge. A communications plan taps into the background and networks of your team to create informed choices around who you are speaking with and how.

An NGO-wide communications plan will also mean there is consistency in the way you are communicating about your organization. Rather than the Executive Director and a Project Manager referring to programs in different ways, a communications plan will help sync those messages so you do not confuse your audience.

How Do I Create a Communications Plan With My Team?

Creating a communications plan is best done step-by-step over the course of a half day. Usually brainstorming takes around three or four hours.

It is best to choose a team member to lead a communications plan workshop. This person should ideally be someone who is committed fully to the organization's communications, public relations, or marketing duties.

From there, you can work through the elements of a communications plan listed below. This process should be as interactive as possible. Include flipcharts and post-it notes so everyone has a say in what goes into the plan. This process is best done as a group effort, and all levels of the organization should be represented, including the executive team. It is especially important that those regularly communicating to external groups be present at the workshop.

Once you have filled out the elements listed in this guide, the lead staff member should compile the information and create a multi-page document that can be accessed and referred to by all members of your team.

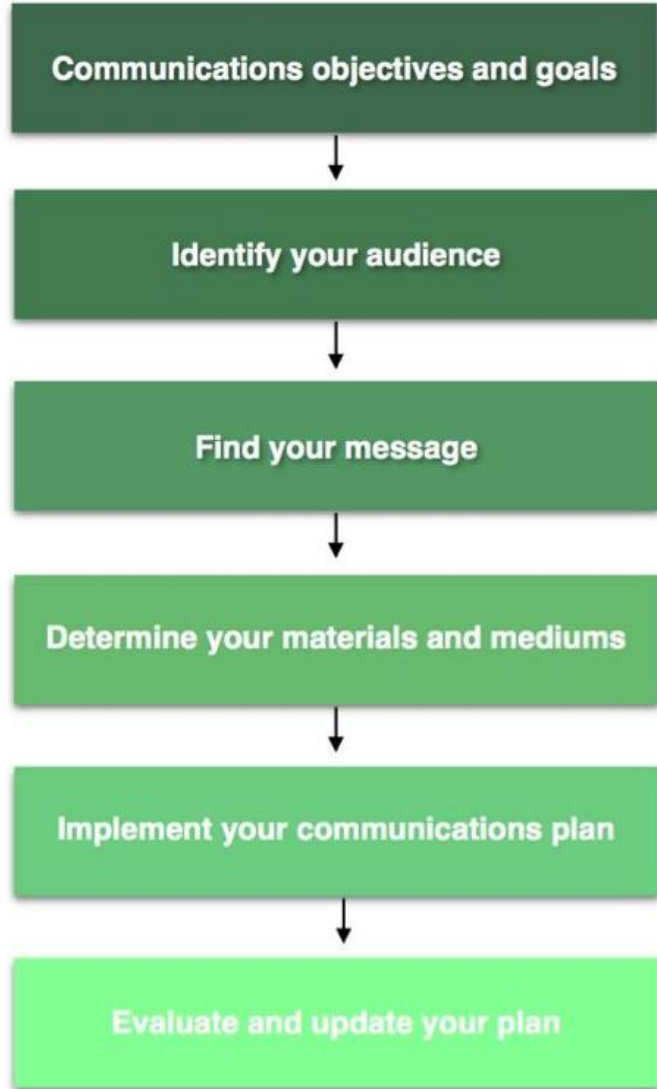
Considerations Before You Get Started

Before you create your communications plan, there are a few considerations to take into account:

- **Budget**: Despite there being a variety of free communications channels on the market, the reality is this: it often takes money to communicate effectively with large audiences. From printing costs to mediahouse stipends to sponsored social media ads, it is essential you have a sense of your communications and marketing budget before dreaming big with your communications efforts.
- **Capacity**: Does your NGO have the staffing ability to create, maintain, and use a communications plan? While a communications strategy is an essential part of any organization no matter its size, you must have a champion on your team to lead this process in the long-run.
- **Executive will**: Does your NGO's executive team believe in the value of a communications plan? Often these are the people communicating to the widest group of people about the organization. It is necessary to ensure they are on board before getting started with any workshop or planning.

What Are the Elements of a Communications Plan?

A communications plan has six key elements. These half dozen steps are closely intertwined, and the information included in one is used to determine the information in the next.



1. Identify Your Organizational Objectives and Communication Goals

Your objectives are the big picture, pie-in-the-sky ambitions you have for your organization and the results of effective communication efforts. Ideally your communications objectives align with the objectives of the organization as a whole – values usually listed in an NGO’s mission statement.

Your goals, on the other hand, are the tangible steps that help you achieve those ambitious objectives. Your communications goals should be SMART: specific, measurable, achievable, results-focused, and time bound.

There is a metaphor you can use to differentiate between your NGO’s communications objectives and the communication goals. You can liken an objective to a big picture action such as running a marathon. Your goals are then nested within that objective. In this case, your goals would be the smaller steps it takes to reach that greater objective. So if your objective is to run a marathon, the goals leading up to that could be “to train five times a week, to eat healthier, and to do strength workouts in the gym.”

Likewise, if your objective is “we want to become the forefront agri-business NGO in Malawi,” your communications goals could be “to raise the profile of your NGO with the local agricultural college, to create flyers for an upcoming cattle and poultry fair, and to have one or two key government officials briefed on the work of your organization.” Each of these three steps can help attain the larger objective.

Here is a sample template you can use to list your objectives and the corresponding goals.

Our Organization’s Objectives & Goals	
Communication Objectives	Communications Goals
1. Objective 1 2. Objective 2 3. Objective 3	<i>Include a few goals to achieve the specific objective listed in the left column</i>

What are your organizational assets?

Organizational assets are what make your NGO special. These are unique, one-line aspects of programming that will appeal to your audience. Use a bullet list to think of as many assets as you can. You can always add to this list later.

What are your organizational values?

Organizational values are the central beliefs that should drive the design, facilitation, and scaling of your NGO. All communications and organization decisions should take these core values into consideration. Make a bullet list of a few short statements.

Create a SWOT chart

The acronym “SWOT” stands for four headings: strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats. These items are important to consider in your plan as they may impact an NGO’s communications efforts. Strengths and weaknesses are factors internal to your

NGO and team, while opportunities and threats are impacted by external forces and parties.

Here is a template to inspire your SWOT chart:

Strengths	Weaknesses
A strength is a resource or a capacity that can help accomplish a communications objective. To identify strengths, ask: what are our advantages in a situation? What do we do well? What is unique about our organization?	A weakness is a limitation or fault within an organization that could impact communications. To identify weaknesses, ask: what could we improve on? What do we do poorly? What should be avoid? By identifying weaknesses you can strategically plan your communications to minimize or avoid these issues.
Opportunities	Threats
An opportunity is a favorable situation in your organization: contacts, networks, or events you can tap into in order to communicate positively about your NGO. To identify opportunities, ask: what does the local government think of our NGO? Where are there areas for collaboration? Where does our team hold connections?	A threat is a danger to your organization. To identify threats, ask: what obstacles does our NGO face? Who is our competition? How could changing demand or government policy affect our programs?

Determining the bullet points that go under each of the SWOT headings is just a start. The next step is to determine how to minimize the weaknesses and threats and best take advantage of the strengths and opportunities.

For the first, come up with solutions to move past each of the weaknesses and threats you identified. For example, if a weakness is identified as “we don’t have enough publicity in the regions where we work,” a solution could be to “work to expand our networks of media contacts to raise our NGO’s profile in the community.

For the second, list ways you can take advantage of the strengths and opportunities. For example, if one of your opportunities is that you have an eager and talented photographer on your team, an advantage is that you could use their talent to create multimedia material to promote your NGO.

2. Determine Your Audience Groups

This is the part of the communications plan where you determine with whom your organization wishes to communicate. Whether it's youth, government officials, potential donors, or partner organizations, this is the chance to brainstorm what you know about each of these groups.

The idea is this: if you understand who your audience groups are and what motivates them, you are better able to tailor your message to achieve the goals and objectives listed in part one of your communications plan.

As part of determining your audience groups, you will want to list the broad assumptions that can be made about each of those target groups. That can include:

- **Age:** What is the average age of a person in this audience group? For example, if you are communicating with youth, your answer will likely be “18 to 29-years-old.” If the audience group is donors, perhaps the average age is someone in their 40's or 50's. The age of your audience will affect the message that will have the most impact and the materials they are most likely to use.
 - **For example:** Millennials do not communicate using the same language as elders. Even if both groups are speaking Amharic in Ethiopia, the words they choose to describe their thoughts will likely be dramatically different. By determining the average age of your audience, you can determine which tone to use. There are very specific cultural references linked to different age groups. You best know the age of your audience before using those references in communications. Age can also help determine whether you should be using a more formal or conversational tone with a group.
- **Language:** What language does this audience group speak? This is especially important in countries where there are several official languages and dialects.
 - **For example:** Perhaps you're a Nepalese speaking organization, but your donors speak primarily English. By identifying that English is the language used

to communicate by that audience group, you can make sure the communications tools and materials you develop are in that language.

- **Access to technology:** What technology does an audience group realistically have access to? Is it a simple mobile phone? A smart phone? A personal computer or a work computer? Identifying the assumptions about each audience group's level of technology access and digital literacy will help your NGO narrow in on which communications materials may best reach that audience.
 - **For example:** Say you are trying to communicate with beneficiaries living in a rural village. It does not make sense to communicate through Facebook, Twitter, and email newsletters if those people only have access to mobile phones.
- **Location:** Where does your audience live and where in the community do they go to access programming and information?
 - **For example:** If the beneficiaries you are trying to reach are primarily university students, you will want to promote the program on campus and in community and school meeting spots that are important to them.
- **Education level:** How much formal schooling has the average person within your audience group completed? What is their literacy level, including their ability to read and write?
 - **For example:** Let's say your NGO is starting a project targeting urban youth who have only completed primary school. These beneficiaries may not have the highest literacy level, and may only be able to read the most basic of text. In this case, you may wish to use very simple language, or perhaps instead rely on illustrations or word of mouth to inform them about your project. If writing is

an issue, than you know that registration should be done in person rather than through a registration form.

- **Attitudes and beliefs:** This assumption is more abstract and difficult to identify. Attitudes and beliefs are factors that could affect the way you communicate with any one group. This can be especially pertinent in countries and contexts where there are long-standing cultural norms around concepts such as gender.

- **For example:** Imagine you are an organization trying to get government support for a women's business program your NGO operates. It is important to recognize whether the government officials you may be communicating with have preconceived stereotypes about women and their roles. Do they think women do not have the skills and experience to start businesses? Do they think women are lazy? Identifying these assumptions will help your organization

highlight misconceptions your communications may have to work to overcome. At a minimum, consider the assumptions listed above. Add any other information you think may help your NGO communicate with a specific group.

Here is a sample template you can use to list information about each audience group. Copy and paste this chart for every one of your organization's intended audience segments.

Audience segment: Rural youth in Iringa County, Tanzania	
Assumptions about audience	Assets that will appeal to this audience
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● 18 to 35-years-old; ● Speak Kiswahili; ● Communicate with one another using basic mobile phones and SMS; ● Primarily meet at the local church; ● Have only completed primary education and as such half are illiterate; ● Believe that young people cannot become entrepreneurs. 	<p><i>Draw from the list of assets you brainstormed during step one.</i></p>

3. Find Your Message

Your message is a call to action. Now that you have identified each of your audience groups, what do you want them to do?

Messages are most effective when they include no more than three main points. Here are three components that should guide the creation of your message:

- **Needs statement:** What need is your NGO, program, or project addressing? Why is it important?
- **Program strategy:** How is your NGO, program, or project filling that need?
- **Call to action:** Now that you've identified the need and how your organization is the solution, ask your audience to do something. Do you want them to donate funds? Sign up for your program? Come to an event? Be clear on your call to action and state it explicitly in your message.

You should come up with a message for each of the audience groups identified in step two. Remember to take into consideration the assumptions you made about each of those groups. Develop a four to five line paragraph of messaging and let it serve as the inspiration and elevator pitch for future communication.

Identify credible messengers

Credible messengers are people who serve as ambassadors for your organization, promoting its mission, programs, and projects to a wider audience. It is important to find these people once your organization has defined its different messages.

Credible messengers do not always need to be people external to an organization. For example, a Country Manager or Project Lead can – and hopefully will – serve as an effective ambassador for your organization. Credible messengers external to your organization can be anyone from a community leader to an official at a partner organization to a particularly engaged beneficiary. Anyone you think will be able to ignite interest and excitement around your organization.

Here are some elements that make for a successful credible messenger:

- He/she is engaged and enthusiastic about your organization and its mission;

- He/she is well connected within the audience group you are trying to reach;
- He/she has been briefed about the organization and its programs so they can speak accurately to others;
- He/she has a contact to direct people towards should they wish to find out more information.

Once you have identified your credible messengers, be sure they are constantly kept informed about changes or developments within the organization. Ensure they know their role is appreciated.

Develop your boilerplate text

A boilerplate text is a single paragraph that describes your organization. Boilerplate paragraphs are often found at the end of press releases, partner letters, and other documents that are released to the public.

Here are some suggested elements to include in your NGO's boilerplate text:

- A one or two sentence description of the main mission of your NGO;
- Your NGO's goal: what impact are you hoping to make through your work;
- Where your NGO is based and how long the project is for (if applicable);
- Whether there are any partner organizations involved;
- When the organization was established.

If your organization already has a boilerplate paragraph, consider reviewing and updating it as you see fit based on what has been identified in your new communications plan.

4. Identify and Create Your Materials

Now that you have messages for each of your audience groups, it is time to figure out how to communicate them.

Go through your audience groups one by one. Make a bulleted list of every material and medium you think you may need.

- **Materials** are items such as brochures, briefing notes, flyers, press releases, and other documents you may need to communicate.
- **Mediums** are the technology and non-technology tools you are using to share those materials. Examples of technology mediums are social media, email, and SMS bursts. Non-technology mediums would involve newspapers, newsletters, and community center bulletin boards.

Here is a sample template you can use to expand on each communications tool or material. Copy and paste this chart for every one of the materials and mediums you listed.

Communications tool: One-page briefing note	
Audience	High-level government partners and donors (draw this from the audience segments listed earlier in your workshop)
Description	A high-level organizational overview that will include information about each of the NGO's programs, partners, and projected impact numbers.
Intended use	Brought to meetings with government and donor officials – meant to provide a quick and comprehensive look into the benefits of the NGO.

5. Implementation of Your Communications Plan

Your entire communications plan is in aid of implementation. This step involves combining everything you've learned about your audience, the message that is most effective in communicating with them, and the materials you've developed. Now it's time to put those tools into practice.

A good way to manage the implementation of your communications plan is to create a content calendar. A content calendar is a document (or physical calendar) that tracks each upcoming communication need, when it's needed, and who will be overseeing each task.

Here is a sample content calendar template. Repeat the following chart to match each material or upcoming communications need.

Upcoming communications need: Recruitment for program training		
Material(s)	Timeline	Team member in charge
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Creation of a WhatsApp group and SMS bursts to reach prospective beneficiaries ● Flyer to promote training ● Brochure and poster to promote training 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Jan. 1: Draft SMS bursts ● Starting Jan. 7: Send SMS messages to desired beneficiaries every week ● Jan. 10: Create first draft of recruitment flyer and brochure ● Jan. 20: Review and approve flyer and brochure for printing 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Michael, communications officer ● Michael, with the aid of Sonia, the ICT officer ● Michael and Cecile, the graphic designer ● Samuel, Country Manager

In addition to the chart listed above, a number of online tools can be used to create your content calendar. [Google Calendar](#) allows you to create a calendar that can be shared among your team. [Trello](#) is a free project management platform that allows you to create task boards where you can list different communications materials, add a deadline date, and assign them to another team member's board for completion.

6. Evaluate Your Communications

This is one part of the communications plan workshop that is not completed at the same time as the other elements. A major evaluation and overhaul of your communications plan should be conducted annually. Otherwise, minor updates should be made as the NGO changes or a new program is launched.

Here are a few questions you can ask to determine whether your communications and communications plan have been impactful:

- Were your communications activities adequately planned?
- Did the recipients of the messages understand them? Did they follow your call to action?
- Were all staff involved in the planning and delivery of your communications?
- How could the communications strategy have been more effective?
- Were the desired organizational objectives reached?

- Were you on track with the timeline and budget for materials?

Sit down as a team and critically discuss these questions and others. Adapt your communications plan based on what is determined to be going well and what could be improved.

What Comes Next?

Run your workshop! As mentioned earlier, that is just the start in the communications strategy development. Once you have brainstormed as a team, one or two people should review that information and extrapolate the key points into a comprehensive communications plan using the six elements mentioned earlier in this guide.

Once the first draft is complete, the communications plan should be reviewed by the team and stored in a shared computer drive or location where all members of the team can refer at any point.

Remember that a successful communications plan impacts all aspects of your organization, from outreach to program operations to fundraising. Now that you know the components of a communications plan and how to tailor those elements to your NGO, we wish you the best of luck in moving forward in a more coordinated and effective way.

Further Information

- [How marketing and communications strategies can help NGOs achieve fundraising success](#)
- [How to develop a communications policy for an NGO](#)
- [Communications policy for NGO office management](#)