

Communicating Success: The Value of a Strategic Communications Plan

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The two most vexing problems facing most free-market organizations are: “How do we raise enough money?” and “What do we do about the media?”

Our many years of experience in the think tank trenches – with the Heritage Foundation, Pacific Research Institute, Mercatus Center at George Mason University and other market-oriented organizations – convince us that the two are intertwined and inseparable. If you raise enough money, you can put an intelligent media plan into play. If you create and implement an intelligent media plan, it will help you raise money.

Just listen to your contributors. The media is the American institution many of your supporters most love to hate (with a few notable exceptions, of course). Show your contributors you can master the media and you will help yourself immeasurably. In order to do that, you’ve got to have a plan. And the media component is just one part of such a plan.

Large organization or small, strategic communications start with a series of objectives: What do you hope to accomplish? Some objectives will involve policy: trying to convince legislators to do the right thing, or building support for a specific proposal or idea. Others will be institutional: raising your public profile; keeping your contributors encouraged and informed; creating a buzz in the capital; or building “brand” recognition. Because a different mix of markets, messages and media likely will be involved, each objective may require a different communications strategy. One size rarely fits all. So it is important to develop a strategic communications plan that includes all of your objectives, and to update that plan regularly, as circumstances change. The effort will be worth it.

Remember, you don’t have to be a multi-million-dollar organization with a large staff to have an effective communications program, you just have to “think smart” and invest your resources wisely.

Here are just a few of the many ways in which a strategic communications plan can help you achieve your institutional objectives:

It will help you focus on goals and results: If you don’t know where you are going, you will never know if you got there. The same is true with your communications program: If you are not sure what you want to accomplish, you will never know if you have accomplished it. A communications plan eliminates such ambiguities. And at the end of the year you can compare your results with your objectives, which will help you make necessary adjustments in your communications program and plan next year’s activities.

You will make better spending decisions: Having a master communications plan will force you to identify and rank your communications priorities, and allocate resources accordingly. The natural tendency in any organization is to do what is easy, what will cause the least stress. A communications plan, however, will force you to spend your money on the activities and products that promise the biggest potential payoff, even if it causes occasional heartburn.

It will help you raise money: You know it and we know it: Contributors like to see and hear your name in the news. It means our side of the story is getting out. It means you are having an impact. Some supporters may even be willing to contribute money specifically for media “outreach” efforts. Having a communications plan you can share with potential investors (or incorporate, in some form, into a grant proposal) is a big plus. And do not forget to send your contributors copies of articles mentioning – or featuring – your organization. This, too, should be part of your communications plan. We all need feedback. Those who provide you with operating capital deserve more attention than others.

A Strategic Communications Plan Checklist:

As you put together your annual communications plan, consider the following:

- 1) Make sure you clearly define your long- and short-term goals. Are you interested primarily in enhancing your institutional profile and image? Raising more money? Credentialing and building name recognition for your staff and executives? Changing the legislature’s policy agenda? How you proceed will depend on your goals.
- 2) Decide in advance who you want to reach. Different goals frequently have different target audiences. Broadly speaking, you may want to tell your story to a national audience, a statewide audience, or a regional or local audience. Within this broader context, you may want to focus specifically on opinion leaders, law makers, business executives or some other narrow, but extremely important audience. What you say, how you say it, and how the message is transmitted will depend on the nature of the audience you want to reach.
- 3) Create an outline of the publications, events, books, programs and other activities you have planned for the year. Then rank them in terms of their importance. Some of the things you have planned will be of more interest to the media than others. Everything you say and do will not be front page news (or news at all, for that matter). So be realistic – and try to evaluate which of your priority activities and publications will interest the media that reach your most important target audiences. Communications priorities and resources should flow from that calculation.
- 4) Look for ways and opportunities to multiply results (known in public relations parlance, understandably, as the “multiplier effect.”) As a general rule, a single wire- service story distributed to every news outlet in your state is more valuable

than a single local story. And it usually takes no more effort to generate a wire-service story than it does a local story. Even if it does take more effort, don't pass up the opportunity. An effective communications plan should be a plan for success. Identifying available "multipliers" – and trying to take advantage of them is the very best way to stretch a limited communications budget.

5) Include a regular schedule of (and at least a modest budget for) one-on-one meetings with and phone calls to the media, since they are the key to long-term success. Go out of your way to meet and greet, and wine and dine, if feasible, the journalists, editors, talk show hosts, producers, news directors, publishers (you name it) who are most important to your work – especially if they are big government liberals. Build a relationship -- get to know their likes and dislikes, and their spouses' likes and dislikes. Get to know both their professional and personal interests; everyone has something they like to talk about, something that really excites them. Don't wait until you need them to meet the journalists most important to your success. For the cost of an occasional sandwich or two, even the smallest organization with the tiniest budget can have an ongoing "media relations" program. State think tanks operating on the local level can make tremendous gains in their media relations by building relationships with local journalists.

Obviously, we think communications is critical to the success of any organization – no less important than any other program, and in many cases more important. We know some of our free-market friends do not enjoy dealing with the media. But that is no reason to treat communications like an unwelcome step-sister.

Sure, journalists will make you squirm at times. That is why you also need to be patient, and develop a thick skin. Success can be a slow process, and more than occasionally painful. Do not self-destruct every time there is a negative story, a mistake, or something not to your liking. It happens to every organization, and the more media coverage you get, the more it's likely to happen. But most of the mistakes are just that. Criticism can be healthy; take it in stride, accept it in good cheer, and learn from it.

If you keep your goals in mind and design your communications program to accomplish those goals, you'll have a great year.