

Communications Guide

STATEWIDE HEALTH IMPROVEMENT PARTNERSHIP

Communications Guide

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Overview

Communication happens when a message sent is received, understood and acted upon by an intended audience. Communications planning is a process that can help an organization reach those goals.

Strategic communications is both an art and science. Practitioners take an active role in shaping messages and intended outcomes. The term strategic communication is defined as “the purposeful use of communication by an organization to fulfill its mission.”¹

A communications plan is an important tool for SHIP grantees. It provides a structure to determine what grantees want to say, to whom, why, how and when.

An effective communications program can help:

- inform
- build understanding
- enhance visibility
- change behavior
- garner support
- and more!

This guide provides SHIP grantees with tools and resources to assist with communications planning.

Background

Communicating with stakeholders effectively can help organizations reach their goals. It’s also important as representatives of SHIP to help the public understand how their tax dollars are being used and how citizens can take action to become healthier and help improve the health of their community.

¹ Hallahan, K., Holtzhausen, D., van Ruler, B., et al. (2007). Defining strategic communication. *International Journal of Strategic Communication*. 1:1, 3-35.

Terms

Ask:

The specific action you want people to take.

Audience segmentation:

Building communications plans or products targeting each audience when there is more than one audience.

Branding:

A brand, as represented by a name, term, messaging, design, symbol and other features, identifies a product and differentiates it from its competitors.

Elevator pitch:

A short, preplanned summary used to quickly define a product, service or organization.

Earned media:

Unpaid media coverage gained through promotional efforts other than through advertising, typically in newspapers, and TV and radio news but also when customers discuss brands on social media and through word of mouth.

Frame:

The unspoken assumptions that influence the audience's world view.

Key message(s):

The main point(s) a communicator want to make to a target audience.

Media:

Mass communications channels. What constitutes media channels have greatly expanded in the last decade, and now includes bloggers, podcasts and online news outlets, as well as traditional outlets such as newspapers, TV and radio.

Media bite:

Also called a sound bite, it's a short, catchy comment designed to be a memorable quote.

Narrative:

In this case, the story that people remember about a topic. The narrative is individual—people take what is presented, filter it through their frames, and create a story to tell themselves and others.

Social media:

Internet-based tools that increase and enhance sharing of information (popular tools include Twitter, Facebook and YouTube).

Strategic:

Focusing on the big picture (e.g., increasing support for the grantee).

Tactics:

The tools used to communicate messages (e.g., building a website is a tactic, not the objective itself).

Take home:

The one, two or three things people will remember from a story, presentation, etc.

Talking points:

Key pieces of information communicators want people to know.

Target audience:

The specific population, group or individuals communicators want to reach with communication efforts. The more specific, the better. “Everyone” or “the general public” is NOT a target audience.

Theme:

The big picture communicators want to convey to an audience.

Vertical marketing:

Marketing up the management chain within an agency in order to build program buy-in with leadership.

Training and Technical Assistance

MDH will offer communications trainings for SHIP grantees. OSHII communications staff will also be available for phone and in-person technical assistance to consult on communications planning, tactics and execution. Watch for announcements on training opportunities in Basecamp or the Making it Better newsletter.

Grantee Requirements

- Submit at least two success stories per year (one at six months, one at year end)
- Get Basecamp access for each SHIP staff person and ensure technological capability to access the site.
- Communicate with MDH regarding product approval and ensure that communications pieces funded by SHIP conform to best practices and includes a SHIP logo and appropriate messaging on funding.
- Allow MDH to use any products and creative materials created with SHIP funds.

Basecamp: Getting Started

Request access to Basecamp by emailing your community specialist or Health.MakingitBetter@state.mn.us. Include your name, email address, title and organization. Also, indicate which team(s) you would like access to (see below for list).

Basecamp Teams

- Active Living
- Breastfeeding Friendly Recognition
- Child Care
- Communications/Media
- Community Engagement/Health Equity
- Evaluation
- Health Care
- Healthy Eating
- Schools
- SHIP Grantees
- Tobacco Prevention and Control
- Workplace Wellness

Communications Planning

Background

The best communications plans are flexible and scalable. A communications plan can be useful even for small projects – such as a brochure – providing a roadmap in one page.

Communications plans can be the result of many meetings and focus groups, setting the course for efforts over many months.

Guidance

There are many communications planning tools available. This [Communications Planning template \(http://www.health.state.mn.us/healthreform/ship/docs/ship4/Template.docx\)](http://www.health.state.mn.us/healthreform/ship/docs/ship4/Template.docx) by some grantees.

However, if grantees are familiar and comfortable with another planning process or tool, they are encouraged to use that, as long as it answers these questions: What is the goal; who is the target audience, and what are the products and activities the grantee needs to succeed?

As part of writing a communications plan, grantees should provide documentation on successes and challenges from previous efforts. What worked? What didn't? Also, grantees are encouraged to provide information on how efforts will be evaluated.

Program Branding

Background

Branding is the art of creating an image for an activity or product that supports the narrative you want people to know. Branding reflects the needs, education, values and culture of the target audience. Branding must be consistently applied.

Common branding elements include:

Messaging

- Program name
- Tag line
- Elevator speech
- Talking points
- Key messages
- Domain name for website

Design elements

- Logo
- Color pallet
- Font
- Presentation template
- Printed/electronic material template
- Web design

Grantees with their own brand

As part of SHIP communications planning, grantees should update or revise their branding efforts based on evaluation of previous branding work. Effective branding can help gain visibility and buy-in for local efforts, especially with vertical marketing, community engagement and CLT recruitment.

SHIP funding credit on communications pieces

All publicity releases, informational brochures, public reports, publications and other public information relating to approved projects must acknowledge funding assistance from the Statewide Health Improvement Partnership. This can be accomplished by including the statewide SHIP logo on the communications piece and using the statement “Supported by the Statewide Health Improvement Partnership, Minnesota Department of Health.” Grantees should work with their partners, including those who’ve received mini-grants, to ensure that SHIP is appropriately mentioned in media materials, including news releases. One way to set expectations is to add language in grant agreements, requiring that mini-grant recipients include SHIP funding credit language in outreach materials.

Community Engagement

Background

Community engagement is critical to the development of any SHIP program or strategy and effective communications plays a vital role in successful engagement. Communications planning can reveal where community engagement efforts are most needed and most effective.

Guidance

As the grantee considers communications activities and messengers, community engagement may be the best answer. Strategic communications planning can help grantees be more effective and successful in their community engagement efforts. Grantees can learn more in the [Community Engagement Guide \(PDF\)](http://www.health.state.mn.us/healthreform/ship/docs/ship4/Community-Engagement.pdf) (<http://www.health.state.mn.us/healthreform/ship/docs/ship4/Community-Engagement.pdf>).

Earned Media

Background

Earned media is unpaid placement or content in media outlets such as newspapers, on radio, in blogs and on TV. Earned media can also take place on social media when followers talk about a brand on Twitter or Facebook.

Guidance

Grantees should consider strategies to gain earned media as part of their communications plans. Well-timed media releases, letters to the editor, commentaries in the local newspaper, and appearances on radio or TV shows, for instance, can be effective in getting the word out about local SHIP efforts. Relationship building can help in media relations efforts, too. Getting to know a local newspaper editor or reporter, radio news directors or reporters, and their deadlines and interests can help foster relationships.

Success Stories

Background

Success stories are the currency of trade in communications. Stories help grantees explain their work in a way that has impact and is understandable. Stories are much more likely to be remembered and retold than facts or statistics. Putting a human face on PSE work is essential in building continued support for SHIP efforts.

Guidance

SHIP grantees are required to submit at least two success stories per year.

Qualities of a good story

- Know the audience—what do they care about?
- Use appropriate language—when in doubt, default to an 8th-grade reading level.
- Have a clear message—For example, “Kids love Farm to School!”
- Use quotes to add color to a story.
- Include photos. Note: All photos that contain recognizable people must have a photo release form completed and signed. Get the [MDH photograph, video and audio release form \(PDF\)](http://www.health.state.mn.us/healthreform/ship/docs/photorelease.pdf) (<http://www.health.state.mn.us/healthreform/ship/docs/photorelease.pdf>)

Fact Sheets

Background

Fact sheets can be a powerful way for grantees to communicate their work to key stakeholders. Fact sheets are meant for a quick glance; colorful illustrations/graphics, an interesting format and an active title help capture a reader's attention.

What are some elements of an effective fact sheet? A fact sheet should:

- Be written in plain language
- Focus on outcomes, not process
- Include graphics and photos that help tell a story
- Include a local point of contact, grantee branding/logo, website address and phone number for more information

Social Media

OSHII communications staff encourage use of social media to advance SHIP efforts. To help elevate SHIP as a statewide brand, use the hashtag #MNSHIP in content. Tagging Minnesota Department of Health in posts (@mnhealth) will increase the likelihood that social media messages will be share by MDH social media staff.

Talking Points

Background

Effective talking points—including an elevator pitch and key messages—are important elements to any successful communications effort. Talking points ensure that messages are:

- Accurate
- Uniform
- Appropriate to the audience
- Well thought-out

Guidance

OSHII recommends that grantees develop talking points for their specific programs. It's also best practice to develop talking points prior to a media interview or special event.

The elevator pitch

Why prepare an elevator pitch? An elevator pitch (or sometimes called an elevator speech or stairwell speech) is a well-crafted, approximately one-minute speech. It should answer questions like “What is SHIP?” or “Why is SHIP needed?” An elevator pitch should be easily understood and focus on one or two key facts. For best results, use key messages and your “after all” message in your elevator speech.

Key messages

Think about the issue from an audience’s perspective. The most effective messages are designed to meet an audience where they are and move them toward understanding a grantee’s point of view.

What makes a good key message?

- Short: One brief, memorable sentence or phrase.
- Concise: No jargon and acronyms.
- Active: Use active verbs.
- Positive: Talk about what people can do, not what they can't.
- Specific: Address a particular challenge and audience.

Crafting key messages

- Determine the audience.
- Reinforce with facts.
- Reinforce the facts with stories, when possible.
- Prepare the “after all” message. That’s the overarching message summing everything up.

Product Approval Process

Background

Communications product approval helps ensure that branding requirements are met, messaging is clear and products reflect the best in SHIP communications and marketing efforts. This is important because as funders, OSHII has a responsibility to ensure that tax money is spent wisely and that its image is not damaged in the public eye.

Guidance

Communications products must be approved by OSHII communications. Products should be emailed to the grantee's community specialist (with a clear deadline) and copied to the OSHII communications associate. OSHII communications will try to turn requests around as soon as possible, commonly the same day and often within a few hours. The general guideline for approvals is a 48-hour turnaround.

Products that need approval are all those that are funded by SHIP and seen by the public, such as:

- print and electronic materials (posters, fliers, direct mail, brochures, fact sheets, newsletters)
- advertisements
- letters that are part of a larger outreach effort
- scripts for radio spots/TV programming
- media releases/media advisories/letters to the editor
- permanent signs

Contracting with Communications Vendors

SHIP grantees may determine that their communications efforts could use some support from an outside contractor. Grantees must get MDH approval for any contracts or mini-grants of \$3,000 or more, including communications contracts. OSHII communications staff can help grantees determine project goals and what to expect when working with a contractor. Best practice is to include OSHII communications staff before proposals are released to contractors.

Common questions for communications proposals

- Are deliverables clearly identified and detailed?
- Does the proposal include timelines?
- Is there an hourly rate or is the cost estimated by project?

- Does the communications work include ongoing costs (for example, ad placement or printing) not detailed in the proposal?
- How many rounds of edits or reviews are allowed?
- Does the proposal include a method for evaluating success?

Resources

Communications Planning

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. [Gateway to Health Communications & Social Marketing Practice \(http://www.cdc.gov/healthcommunication/index.html\)](http://www.cdc.gov/healthcommunication/index.html)

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. [Soundbites: A Webinar Series on Earned Media. \(http://www.cdc.gov/dhds/pubs/podcasts_soundbites.htm\)](http://www.cdc.gov/dhds/pubs/podcasts_soundbites.htm)

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. [Workplace Health Promotion-Communications \(http://www.cdc.gov/workplacehealthpromotion/planning/communications.html\)](http://www.cdc.gov/workplacehealthpromotion/planning/communications.html)

Public Relations Society of America (<http://www.prsa.org/>) Resources on planning, research, tactics and more (click on the Intelligence tab at the top).

University of Washington Northwest Center for Public Health Practice. [More Than Words: Public Health Communication Series \(http://www.nwcphp.org/communications/news/more-than-words-public-health-communication-series\)](http://www.nwcphp.org/communications/news/more-than-words-public-health-communication-series)

Accessibility

Minnesota IT Services. [Making electronic document accessible \(https://mn.gov/mnit/programs/accessibility/electronic-documents.jsp\)](https://mn.gov/mnit/programs/accessibility/electronic-documents.jsp)

Social Media

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention:

[CDC Social Media Tools, Guidelines & Best Practices \(https://www.cdc.gov/socialmedia/tools/guidelines/socialmediatoolkit.html\)](https://www.cdc.gov/socialmedia/tools/guidelines/socialmediatoolkit.html)

[CDC Guide to Writing for Social Media \(https://www.cdc.gov/socialmedia/tools/guidelines/guideforwriting.html\)](https://www.cdc.gov/socialmedia/tools/guidelines/guideforwriting.html)

Mashable Social Media 101 Series (<http://mashable.com/category/social-media-101-series/>)

The University of Kansas. [Social Media 101 \(http://connect.ku.edu/social-media-101\)](http://connect.ku.edu/social-media-101)

Plain Language

Plain Language Action and Information Network (<http://www.plainlanguage.gov/>)

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. [Simply Put: a guide for creating easy-to-understand materials \(PDF\) \(http://www.cdc.gov/healthliteracy/pdf/simple_put.pdf\)](http://www.cdc.gov/healthliteracy/pdf/simple_put.pdf)

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. [Plain Language Materials & Resources](http://www.cdc.gov/healthliteracy/developmaterials/PlainLanguage.html)
(<http://www.cdc.gov/healthliteracy/developmaterials/PlainLanguage.html>)

Stephen Wilbers. [Writing tips and exercises](http://wilbers.com/) (<http://wilbers.com/>)

Design

Simply Put (<http://www.simplyput.ie/document-design-tips>)

Five tips for improving the design of documents (<http://www.techrepublic.com/blog/five-apps/five-tips-for-avoiding-ugly-document-syndrome/>)

Maddison Designs. [The five basic principles of design](http://maddisondesigns.com/2009/03/the-5-basic-principles-of-design/)
(<http://maddisondesigns.com/2009/03/the-5-basic-principles-of-design/>)