



HOW TO CREATE
A CHURCH
COMMUNICATION
PLAN

A GUIDE TO
AMPLIFY YOUR
VOICE

“In the beginning was the Word...” Words are foundational to our faith. We use them to communicate the gospel, to disciple believers, to connect the disconnected and to reach out in our communities. And although most churches see communication as an important part of their success, they do not necessarily view it as a strength within their organization. Church communication, like anything else, can be improved with a simple plan and the establishment of basic guidelines.

Communications planning is commonly used in the business world. It is a method used to direct an organization to reach their target market most effectively. It is concerned with whom to target, when to contact them, with what message, and how messages will be disseminated. In the past, many churches have thought this strategy was too worldly and have been apprehensive in adapting it. Today, with an overabundance of communication channels, churches realize the necessity of communicating more effectively. For the church, a strategic communications plan serves as a guide to spread the church’s vision and live out its values. It explains how to convey the right message, from the right communicator, to the right audience, at the right time and in the right way. A good plan will help evaluate current communication and guide in creating a more effective communications approach. The most successful strategy will address six elements: receiver/decoder (*who*), message/content (*what*), time frame (*when*), desired outcome/feedback mechanism (*why*), communication channel (*how*) and sender/encoder (*by whom*).

WHO

When church leaders are asked who their church is targeting, they almost always answer “everyone.” The church is absolutely called to bring the ‘Good News’ to everyone, however whether we realize it or not, most churches draw from one group of people more than others. In the marketing world, we call this a *target market*. Defining a target market is a process of describing a particular demographic that an organization will focus their marketing efforts toward. The point of defining a target market is to focus your efforts clearly at one point of a community so you use your resources as wisely as possible and to their maximum capacity. It is imperative you know who you are talking to before you know what to say and how to say it. Developing a rapport is the key to any successful relationship.

Once you establish your target market, it is equally important to learn as much about them as possible. When researching your target audience consider demographic, psychographic, geographic and behavioral attributes.

Demographic characteristics include: age, gender, family size, income, education, ethnicity/race and marital status.

Psychographic traits relate to their unique values, attitudes, interests and lifestyles. What do they do in their free time? What do they value most? Least?

Geographic attributes are more general but will take into account whether your target audience is from an urban, suburban or rural area. Are they comfortable with being in a dense crowd or prefer wide open spaces?

Finally, *behavioral* characteristics reflect how a person responds to a specific set of conditions. This will help reveal what situations or environments might prompt a particular action.

The answers to all these questions will help you understand more intimately what makes your target audience tick. Who are they? What is going on in their lives? Where are they spending their free time? The more you know about them, the better you will be able to communicate. For instance, busy professionals are most likely to communicate through texting. Sending out an E-Newsletter or a postcard to this group is not the best way to get information in their hands. Short and to the point, instant communication is what they prefer.

Did you know the fastest growing demographic for Facebook are persons 50 years of age and older?¹ Many people from this generation are keeping connected with their children and grandchildren through this social network. It isn't surprising if you think about the fact that they typically have more leisure time, coupled with the desire to connect with people they care about. Baby Boomers are becoming increasingly more comfortable using the Internet. An E-Newsletter or posting on a church Facebook page might be the best communication method for this computer-savvy group.

WHAT

The next step in a strategic communications plan is one that many churches skip – determining the key message or messages. What are you trying to express? What is the purpose of each of your communication efforts? Do you send a monthly newsletter? Why – what is the PURPOSE? Articulate it – write it down. It will help you in your overall communications plan.

In addition, when writing content for your communication, following the 4C's will help you create the most effective message.

Be Clear – Be Concise – Be Consistent – Be Compelling

- *Be Clear*
Think about who is listening and write for them. Choose your words carefully. Will people unfamiliar with the specific subject understand what you are saying? “The Zone is having a car wash.” The Zone? Don't assume people know. Also, don't speak “Christianese.” Insider language excludes people and often causes confusion. Choose your words carefully.
- *Be Concise*
Start with the basics: who, what, when where, why and how? Make sure all the details are included but get to the point. Simplicity is best. Excessive and overdone communication will cause people to disengage, tune out and discard all communication, regardless of its pertinence. Sort out what's important and focus on that. As Vincent Van Gogh once said, “How difficult it is to be simple.” Ask yourself, “Can I say it in fewer words?” Don't be afraid to restructure sentences and leave out irrelevant information.

¹ Pew Research Center's Internet & American Life Project <http://pewinternet.org/Reports/2010/Older-Adults-and-Social-Media.aspx>

- *Be Consistent*
When communication between the church and the congregation/visitors/community is unpredictable or confusing, the church loses an opportunity to touch those people in a meaningful way. This confusion can lead to a lack of interest and commitment. Having a consistent message will help people know what your church values and give the church a sense of unified direction.
- *Be Compelling*
To be 'compelling' is to encourage, persuade or convince. How will you succeed in encouraging someone to do something if the message communicated is BORING? When writing content, whether it's for a newsletter or verbal announcement, remember to write with the target audience in mind. Even the most dedicated church member gets bored listening to announcements not directed toward him. Read everything you write out loud – is it boring? If you aren't sure, ask someone who will give you an honest answer and listen to what they have to say.

Also take into consideration the style and tone of your audience – what are their expectations? How will your message be received – how will they react, respond? Your message should influence people to do something. In the marketing world this is called our “call to action.” Does your key message have a strong call to action? Every message should compel the audience to “Go, Give, Pray, Come...”

Furthermore, Kevin Hendricks of the Center for Church Communication, reminds us of another critical marketing concept; to engage an audience, our message should focus on benefits not features. Features are attributes; benefits are advantages. A way to determine the benefit is to ask, “What's in it for me”? A feature is that your children's ministry does a background check on all ministry volunteers. A benefit is the peace of mind parents have when leaving their children in your ministry's care.

WHEN

Another important aspect of a good church communications plan is creating a timeline showing when all communication is expected to occur, deadlines, as well as when responses are expected. Specify the appropriate time frame of delivery for each message. Are you giving the recipients adequate time to produce the best response? An additional advantage of creating a timeline is the clarity it can bring to your communications plan. Consider the value and effectiveness of each piece. Is there opportunity to simplify the way in which we deliver our messages?

Kem Meyer, author and Communications Director at Granger Community Church, encourages us to do more with less. If you are overloading people with messages you begin to lose your credibility.

WHY

What do you hope to achieve with your message? When planning, it is important to start with the end in mind. Put the desired outcome into words. What is the goal? For instance, you promote a new adult ministry. Do you want adults in the congregation to attend an event, invite their unchurched friends or just be aware it exists? Remember the famous quote by Yogi Berra, "If you don't know where you are going, you'll end up someplace else." This step will also assist with feedback. Did your message accomplish what you hoped it would?

HOW

How will this message be sent? What medium should be used? This is not as simple as it sounds. Consider what is the best way to communicate this specific message to this specific audience? Instead, many churches attempt to stay trendy and try a little of everything – email, bulletins, posters, newsletters/e-newsletters, Facebook, Twitter – the result.....you inundate your congregation and nothing gets read! Look and evaluate what has worked best for you.

- Outline what's available
- What's been used in the past? What's been successful and unsuccessful?
- Consider the target market

Do not feel pressured to use every new method of communication. Many church marketers will say you **MUST** be on Facebook. Are you using social media because it's cool and trendy or because it is working for you? When using any social media, keep in mind social media is a two-way conversation. You must be willing to spend the time necessary to do it with excellence. If you don't have the time, don't use it. "We won't launch a deliverable (i.e. newsletter or web page) if we don't have the systems and personnel to maintain it with excellence," Kem Meyer shares.

BY WHOM

Who delivers a message, whether spoken or written, is as important as how the message is communicated. Nothing puts an audience to sleep more than a monotone, lackluster speaker. Why then, do we think anyone can communicate in a favorable way? Someone with passion for what they are writing will usually make up for a lack of technical writing skill. What's more, after they impart excitement and create interest, you can always have a more experienced writer read and edit the message. It is always a good rule of thumb for any writer to have someone else read and edit your material. Another pair of eyes and a different perspective often helps catch mistakes and fill in whatever was missed.

SUMMARY

- Who:** Establish your target market and learn as much about them as possible. When researching your target audience consider demographic, psychographic, geographic and behavioral attributes.
- What:** Determine the key message of each communication. Additionally, following the 4C's will help you write the most effectively.
Be Clear – Be Concise – Be Consistent – Be Compelling
- When:** Create a timeline showing when all communication is expected to occur, deadlines, as well as when responses are expected. Make sure you give adequate time to produce the best response.
- Why:** Start with the end in mind. Use this step to help with feedback to determine whether you accomplished what you wanted.
- How:** Consider the plethora of communication methods and choose the best way to communicate each specific message to a specific audience.
- By Whom:** Passion over skill. Encourage another pair of eyes and a different perspective.

Finally, it isn't difficult to establish basic guidelines and create a church communications plan. The time invested will be invaluable as you use resources to their maximum capacity while spreading your vision for the church more efficiently and effectively.

To learn more about time-saving tools to improve your church's communication, visit our website or request a consultation from a PhoneTree Sales Executive.

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CREDITS



Jill Bailey has over 23 years of communication, marketing and ministry experience with a BS in Christian Ministry & Business Administration from Arizona Christian University and a MA in Christian Leadership Studies from Liberty University.

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