

Why use the Communications Planner?

Congratulations! You've been given the task of putting together a communications or promotional campaign of some sort.

You want to make a success of it, but you aren't necessarily an expert, and you feel a bit uncertain where to start or who to contact.

And, of course, you've still got all the rest of your work to do as well.

So, what are the benefits to you of planning your communications activity in this way?

- You won't have to spend your time and energy working out how to go about it from scratch. We have prepared the planner for you, so anyone putting together a communications or promotional campaign can access it quickly and easily.
- Remember, there's more to life than leaflets and news releases! If you use the planner, you'll free up more of your time to think of some more innovative or creative ways to reach your audience. You never know, it might actually turn out to be fun doing this!
- You can also access more detail on the specific topics you are interested in. The range of topics covered on-line is listed on the next page and will continue to be enlarged and updated.
- You'll feel more comfortable if you know you are taking a systematic approach and you'll be much less likely to overlook something if you work to an outline planner.
- You want value for money and you'll find it much easier to distinguish between good opportunities and those that waste time and money if you have a clear idea of exactly what you are trying to achieve. Working through the planner will help you think more laterally about who you are communicating with and how you will do it.
- You want what you're doing to be a success. If you have realistic objectives and a clear idea of your strategy and the resources you'll need to achieve them, you're more likely to get those resources as well as commitment from all the staff who will be involved - and to achieve what you are setting out to do.
- We place emphasis on outcomes, and the evidence supporting our conclusions. Communications are an important part of all our services, and we need to use robust evaluation mechanisms to give us that evidence - even if it leads us to challenge what we are doing at present.

STEP-BY-STEP GUIDES AND CHECKLISTS

In order to help you still further, we have prepared some step-by-step guides on how you should go about planning different things, with checklists and some important do's and don'ts.

You can just access the particular topics you are interested in and, because the guides are on-line, you can be sure that they have been kept up-to-date.

The range of guides currently available is listed below. They are all available on the COT website.

- Objectives
- Target audiences
- Evaluation and research
- Different methods of reaching people
- Effective presentations
- Effective visual aids
- Effective presentations
- Effective visual aids
- Exhibitions and displays
- Public speaking skills
- Writing for the customer

The first item in the range is **Evaluation and research**. This is something you should read *before* you begin to think about planning your communications or promotional campaign.

Communications Planner

- 1. What are your objectives?**
- 2. Who is your target audience?**
- 3. What do you know about your target audience?**
- 4. What is the key message you want to communicate to your target audience?**
- 5. How could you communicate with your target audience?**
- 6. What resources (human/financial/material) will you need and from where will these resources be drawn?**
- 7. What is the timetable for this activity?**
- 8. How will you monitor the effectiveness of the activity?**

Planner – General Guidance Notes

Step One OBJECTIVES

Set out the aims of your communications campaign, the actual point of what is being done. Thinking through exactly what you intend to achieve, in specific and measurable terms, is the starting point. The test of an objective is to ask “Will it be clear enough in quantifiable terms, at the end of a given period of time, whether or not you have achieved your aims?”

Keep reviewing your objectives as you go through the planning stages, to make sure you're still on track. You may find you want to go back and change your objectives – this is OK!

Don't set yourself up to fail by setting objectives that are simply too demanding under the circumstances or even completely inappropriate. Think about the general background and any issues or constraints that might affect your project. You may decide, even at this stage, that your objectives just aren't realistic in terms of what you can hope to achieve.

If you have to make assumptions, make sure you state what they are, *before you begin*.

Step Two TARGET AUDIENCE

Who do you want to influence?

Any piece of communication is more likely to succeed if you have a clear picture of your audience. Sometimes this is described as “the public” or “businesses” or “local residents” – which is another way of saying “nobody in particular”. Even phrases like “potential occupational therapy students” are not very useful unless we can further define what kind of people our “potential occupational therapy students” are.

When you have clearly defined your target audience(s), then you can plan your use of different kinds of media in the way that is most likely to achieve the results you want **and** is cost-effective.

Step Three WHAT DO YOU KNOW ABOUT THEM?

If you can define the people in your target audience(s) to the finest degree possible, your activity plan will be all the more relevant, practicable and measurable. Don't just assume people fit into stereotypes! Try to imagine an individual who is the sort of person you want to reach and spell out everything you know or can assume about him or her at this stage.

- What are they interested in?
- What are their motivations?
- What do they want?
- What do they do?
- Where do they go?
- Who do they talk to?
- What do they read?
- What or who influences them?

Step Four KEY MESSAGE

The key message is the words you will say to persuade your target audience to do exactly what you want, e.g. attend your public meeting or try a session at one of the leisure centres.

Defining your key message may be rather like writing good advertising copy – easy and obvious when it's been done by someone else, but hard to get right when you have to do it.

Choose the right words for your target audience. A useful way of getting this right is to put down, in short, colloquial sentences, the words you would like your target audience to be saying to you after the promotion. The words must represent realistic possibilities, rather than your optimism!

Unless you are addressing colleagues who will understand it, don't use jargon. And don't go into great detail about how you or your department fit into the overall organisation – as far as your target audience is concerned, you are representing the organisation as a whole.

Remember, you are supposed to be communicating *the benefit* of what you are offering to your target audience. Try the "so what?" test. Just say "So what does this mean for the end user/potential student?" at the end of your key message. If you need to explain it further, then you are still talking about features or advantages, and your key message needs more work to arrive at the benefit stage! Below is an example illustrating the differences between them.

Feature	Advantage	Benefit	Proof
A library which offers free internet access	You can browse the web for free	This will save you money	Come and use the equipment

Step Five YOUR STRATEGY – AND THE PLAN

How are you going to deliver the message? You want to match the most effective media to your target audience. The strategy is the "how?" in response to the objectives "what?" But do make sure that it reflects the overall policy of your employer or it will be doomed to failure.

The detailed programme of activity is the easy part for good organisers, so it's easy to fall into the trap of doing the plan first – before the objectives, target audience and strategy have been clearly defined.

Try to be as creative as possible in thinking about ways in which you can reach your target audience. Don't just settle for leaflets and news releases without considering anything else. Make a note of good ideas when they come up, but beware of trying to shoehorn them into your plan if they don't really fit with your objectives. Make sure the media you select to communicate your message will actually reach your target audience.

Don't just rely on one medium to get your message across. If you can use a variety of different channels, you will create more opportunities for people to hear or see what you are trying to say, and you will reinforce your key message by drip feeding it to your audience.

Another consideration is the degree of credibility the medium will lend to your message. Don't forget people are increasingly sophisticated, sceptical and demanding. For example:

□ Leaflets and posters

The credibility of leaflets and posters depends to a large degree on how "professional" they look. Something that looks cheap and amateurish will lead to negative attitudes about the organisation that produced it. The message contained in the leaflet or poster is unlikely to be believed, even if it is read.

❑ **Local radio**

Research into the effectiveness of local radio has produced some conflicting results. Some say that the spoken word enjoys more credibility than the written word – people are aware that the voice they hear is “a real person” and thus they find it easier to believe what is being said. Other research says radio is “audible wallpaper”, the ads are irritating and associated with the likes of used car sales or mobile phone warehouses.

There may not be a radio station specifically for your location but there are plenty which cover wider areas that are geared to all kinds of different audiences. Make sure you pick the right one!

❑ **Newspapers - fully paid titles versus free sheets**

A fully paid title is a paper you have to buy. The fact that people have to pay for them does seem to lend them some additional credibility. By contrast, because a free sheet is free, it has less credibility. Although people generally say they don't believe what they read in the papers, it seems to be more likely that they will believe it if they had to pay for the paper that printed it.

❑ **Direct mail**

Properly targeted, direct mail can be highly effective. If badly targeted, it simply becomes “junk mail” and irritating. Your letter or leaflet has three seconds – no longer – to grab the interest of the reader. After that, it hits the bin!

See the separate guide on Direct Mail.

There are so many different ways you could use to reach your target audience. Make sure you review your list of options objectively and weed out those that are unsuitable for your particular campaign.

For more information, see the separate guide on **Different Methods of Reaching People**.

Step Six RESOURCES

Don't underestimate just how many resources you may need.

Detailed step-by-step costs should be set out as far as possible, with an indication of when the money will be needed. Don't fall into the trap of saying “There isn't enough money so there can't be a campaign”. Consider alternative means of communication. Be creative!

Human resources can be more important than financial ones if you are not sure whether the people needed to handle the jobs set out in the programme are going to be available at the right time.

Get people involved right from the start and get them to contribute as much as possible. If the campaign is something which is imposed on them, which they don't have any interest in, then you won't have their commitment and the campaign is almost certain to fail. It's much easier for you to get people to be enthusiastic and committed to something they feel they “own”.

Step Seven TIMETABLE

Set out your activity plan in “year planner” style so you can get a fast visual picture of when things are going to happen and who will be involved at each stage. For shorter term programmes, it can cover months, days or even hours if necessary.

Make sure that, *at the outset*, you timetable in the steps necessary to evaluate your campaign. Last minute data collection is frustrating for those who have to sort it out and the data may be reduced in value if the pre-campaign baseline wasn't put in place.

And make sure the methods you intend to use to reach your audience make sense in terms of your timetable. For example, your employer may have a quarterly newsletter that is ideal in terms of the audience, but does your timing fit with its publication schedule?

Step Eight ASSESSING THE CAMPAIGN

It's vital to decide *at the outset* how the promotion will be evaluated. You can't commission expensive research, so what should you include? The number of opportunities your target audience will have to see a poster, leaflet or advertisement? Column inches published? What existing evaluation results might help you identify the likely winners and losers in methods of promotion?

Don't overlook the value of direct feedback from your audience at the time – make sure you have everyone lined up to ask where they saw your information, how they heard about the event or promotion, whatever is appropriate to your campaign.

The simplest and most direct measurement is preferable – for example, the number of extra people doing something compared with before the campaign. Don't overlook the important step of defining *where you are now*, before you begin the campaign. It may be nice to know that you have X number of people doing something after your campaign, but unless you can compare this to how many were already doing it anyway, it doesn't really tell you much.

You could try to do some mirror research, e.g. comparing the effect of a localised campaign against the “normal” pattern someone else.

Imagine you're six months' on, and the campaign has finished – how will you know whether it was successful? This may seem simplistic, but it can be very revealing if explored in depth at the outset – and it's a very good way of checking the viability of your objectives. If you are looking at a long-term programme, you will need some form of “tracking” research to compare the effect of your campaign over time.

Do look at your plan and its effectiveness on a regular basis – and if it's not working, **CHANGE IT!**

You will learn that some techniques work well with some target audiences and that others do not. If you discover that leaflets do not work with a particular target audience, do not think you have wasted money; you have learned something that will save money in the future.

In this respect, managers have a responsibility to think before they shoot the messenger when something doesn't work as well as hoped! Otherwise, no-one will ever admit that a particular technique has not worked, and the organisation will never learn from its mistakes.

For more information, see the guide to **Evaluation and Research** (available on the COT website).