

# **Telling Our Stories: Nuts and Bolts of Effective Communication**

## **RESEARCH**

Research is the objective and systematic gathering of information. It must be conducted before any plan can be constructed and communicated. Don't be intimidated by research.

Research can:

- Help probe basic attitudes of target groups so you can construct pertinent messages.
- Measure true opinions of various groups. A vocal minority may not represent the group's genuine feelings or beliefs.
- Identify opinion leaders who can influence target publics.
- Reduce costs by concentrating on valid objectives and key audiences.
- Help pretest messages and proposed communication channels before you implement an entire program.
- Achieve two-way communication. Feedback from audiences can help you fine-tune messages and generate mutual understanding.

## **PLANNING**

Planning begins with the definition of a problem and ends with a thorough plan to solve that problem. It involves four key steps:

1. Defining the Challenge
2. Setting Objectives
3. Defining the Audience
4. Planning the Program

### **1. Defining the Challenge**

The first step involved in planning is to determine the nature of the challenge. The challenges can be numerous and varied, but typically can be put into three general categories:

- overcoming a negative perception
- creating awareness where there was none
- developing or expanding an existing positive situation

### **2. Setting Objectives**

Once the problem is understood it should be easy to define the objective. An objective should be evaluated by asking:

- Does it really solve the problem?
- Is it realistic and achievable?
- Can success be measured in meaningful terms?

### **3. Defining Audiences**

Once objectives have been outlined, audiences must be defined. These are groups of people that you determine are important to your success. They usually are a broad general audience, an external target audience and an internal audience. A broad general audience

would be the public at large. An external target audience would be people who are or should be directly affected. An internal audience would be the employees or members of your organization. Your target audiences may include legislators, owners and managers of arts establishments, art educators, current constituents and the news media.

#### **4. Planning the Program**

Focusing on each of the target audiences, develop a plan that details exactly what needs to happen to achieve the objectives you have outlined. What will you do to solve this challenge?

### **EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION**

The third step in the process is communication. Using what you learned in the research and planning phases, this phase involves developing communications tactics and tools that will help you achieve your objectives.

Tips for developing effective communications:

- Identify communications tools that will advance your needs. They may include media relations, advertising, direct mail, Web site, grand opening or other special events. Discard tools that don't meet your needs.
- Start thinking from the viewpoint of the audience. What is on their minds?
- What is in it for them?
- Give the audience a sense of involvement in the communication process and what is going on. Get them involved and you gain their interest.
- Communicate *with* people, not *at* them. Communication that approaches the audience as a target makes people put up defenses against it.
- Localize. Deliver your message as close as possible to the intended recipient's location.
- Use many channels of communications, not just one or two. The impact is far greater when your message reaches people in different forms.
- Maintain consistency, so what is said on the subject is the same no matter who delivers the message and in what format.
- Don't propagandize, but be sure to make your point. Clearly state your position.
- Maintain credibility. Do not lie or mislead.

### **EVALUATION**

Evaluation is the measurement of results against the objectives you set during the planning process. When conducting an evaluation, always consider:

- Was the activity or program adequately planned?
- Did recipients of the message understand it?
- How could the program strategy have been more effective?
- Were all audiences reached?
- Was the desired organizational objective achieved?
- What unforeseen circumstances affected the success of the program or activity?
- Did the program or activity fall within the budget set for it?
- What steps can be taken to improve the success of similar future activities?

# Telling Our Stories: Seven Points of Effective Communication through Storytelling

Communicating your story effectively sets the stage for the next phase: **Getting people to act.**

- Know who your audience is and where they are listening from.
- Keep it simple.
- Use metaphors, analogies and examples.
- Use many different forums to spread the word.
- Repeat key messages.
- Lead by example.
- Listen and be listened to.

## Telling Our Stories: Twelve Steps for Communicating a Story

“We are all tellers of tales. We each seek to provide our scattered and often confusing experiences with a sense of coherence by arranging the episodes of our life into stories.”

-Dan P. McAdams in *The Stories We Live By*

1. The storyteller makes the story fresh by reliving it.
2. You tell the same story to the bottom as to the top.
3. You don't need many stories. Quality is more important than quantity.
4. It's also the storytelling, not just the story, that's having the impact.
5. The protagonist is not always the best person to tell the story.
6. You become a better storyteller through practice.
7. Framing the Story:
  - a. Often the audience isn't listening when you start to speak.
  - b. Talking about the listeners' problems is one way of getting their attention.
  - c. You can also get their attention by telling the truth about yourself.
  - d. You frame the story only to the extent necessary.
8. You immerse yourself in the world of the listeners – their language, their habits, their dreams and their fears.
9. The storyteller doesn't persuade the listener. They must discover the truth for themselves.
10. The process of the listeners crafting their own stories can happen very rapidly.
11. Organizational storytelling is about telling authentically true stories.
12. An organization isn't a machine. To understand it, you have to understand its stories.