2.5 MANAGING AND MAINTAINING

Communicating in partnerships

USE IT
To plan and manage communication within and about a partnership

WHEN
Start planning once objectives are agreed and a partnering agreement is close; use throughout

WHO
Partners together, often led by the partnership manager or broker

Good communication holds a partnership together and carries its story to the people who need to hear it. These nine short tools cover planning, communicating within the partnership, communicating beyond it, choosing methods, and assessing what worked. Adapt them freely to your needs.

1. Preparing to plan

Information
- Each partner's communication needs and preferences (see tool 3 below)
- The skills and resources each brings
- Existing materials to draw on, and who could compile them

Framework
- A plan for the whole partnership, or one activity?
- One umbrella plan, or specific plans (annual, crisis)?
- Internal audiences first, then one or several external plans?

Logistics
- Who leads, and when?
- One session or several, and how structured?
- Who participates and facilitates?
- Who writes, edits and signs off the plan?
- How partners share the costs

2. What the plan covers

Background
Goals, activities to date, how partners already communicate, media coverage and research so far.

Objectives
What you hope to achieve, and what audiences should say, do, think or feel as a result.

Strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, threats
Internal and external: including competitors and the risks of your planned actions.

Audiences
Who is affected, who needs or would like to know, internal and external, primary and secondary.

Key messages

Three to five succinct statements used repeatedly. What should audiences remember? What's in it for them?

Strategies and action plan

Effective ways to reach each audience; specific actions, owners and deadlines.

Materials and resources

Existing and new materials; money, people, training and in-kind resources, and whether they are budgeted.

Spokespeople, oversight, success

Who speaks for the partnership, who oversees the plan, and how you will measure and monitor it.

3. Each partner's needs

Use these questions as a prompt for partner representatives, a guide for a conversation led by the partnership manager, or a questionnaire to share with the group.

The organisation's profile

- Current communication protocols and opportunities
- Resources, skills and channels
- Key messages and hoped-for responses
- Preferred ways of communicating
- Specialist staff, consultants and champions
- Any non-negotiables

Its internal stakeholders

- Who they are, and which are priorities
- What each needs to know, and why
- What other partners should know about them
- Who communicates with them
- Whether they expect to be consulted or given feedback, how often and how

Its external stakeholders

- Who they are, and which are priorities
- What each needs to know, and why
- What other partners should know about them
- Who communicates with them
- Whether they expect to be consulted or given feedback, how often and how

4. Successful partner meetings

1 Before

- Invite the right people from each partner, and consider key non-partners such as specialists, officials or donors.
- Circulate a participant list showing each person's organisation, role and link to the partnership.
- Be sensitive to cultural considerations.
- Discuss the agenda and format in advance to avoid surprises; research the issues; prepare talking points for important meetings.
- Choose an accessible, welcoming venue, and arrive on time.

2 During

- Ask, more than once if needed: What are we trying to achieve? What value does this have for us? What constraints are there? Is that a personal or organisational view?
- Seek and give clarification; paraphrase and summarise to check understanding.
- Widen the discussion when useful, and push for closure when a decision is needed.
- Make time for everyone, including expressions of anxiety or dissatisfaction.
- Propose ways forward, accepting that each participant decides according to their organisation's priorities. Check agreement on outcomes and actions.

3 After

- Circulate summary notes with a clear action list: what, who, by when.
- Inform anyone else who needs to know.
- Have a system to hold people to the actions they agreed.

5. Communicating beyond the partnership

Question	Consider
What do partners need and expect?	Whether each is most concerned with reaching decision-makers, reaching as wide an audience as possible, or media coverage for its profile. Tailor accordingly.
What resources does each partner bring?	People, mailing lists, media contacts and know-how, authority on the subject.
How many people are you trying to reach?	A known, focused audience suits an event or direct email; a large, less defined one suits media coverage.
How open is your audience to hearing from you?	People who expect to hear from you suit a direct approach; people who don't know you suit advertising or public relations.
What medium suits the audience and message?	Something to hold or something digital? How complex is the message? Would media endorsement or images help?
What is your budget?	A report has a long shelf life but takes months to produce; a website is cheap to build but needs promotion and upkeep.
What about timing?	Allow lead times for writing, design, invitations and journalists' deadlines. Events and coverage make a splash; reports last longer.
How can it be two-way?	Aim for dialogue, not send-and-receive: you want to provoke action, such as a change of attitude or a funding commitment. Get a diversity of voices at events, and use digital channels for polls and discussion.

6. Managing external relationships

1 Analyse the situation

List the external groups that can influence the partnership economically, socially, politically and culturally, and check the list with all partners. Compare how partner staff and the audiences themselves see each relationship, using discussions, focus groups or surveys.

2 Plan initiatives

With an advisory panel of community and partner members, develop initiatives that respond to audiences' needs and communication to share them. Encourage influencers to act as spokespeople. Pre-test, and have the panel meet at least quarterly.

3 Implement

Launch the initiatives and publicise them through suitable channels.

4 Monitor

Track whether each audience feels its needs are being met and how its perceptions change. Adjust as needed.

5 Evaluate

Have the initiatives met audiences' needs? Should you target different needs? Have relationships and perceptions improved? Do the initiatives benefit the partnership as well as the audiences?

7. Document checklist

Have you…	✓
Focused on your audience, who may know much less than you, and clarified what you want them to think, feel, say or do?	☐
Decided your key message, and which points are important and which secondary?	☐
Used a clear structure and headings, and told readers where you are heading?	☐
Kept lists to seven or eight items at most?	☐
Given one main idea per paragraph, kept paragraphs short and linked them?	☐
Varied sentence length, kept sentences mostly short, used the active voice and stated who does what?	☐
Chosen familiar words and action verbs, cut unnecessary words, and avoided jargon and unexplained acronyms?	☐
Used a readable text size, headings, white space and illustrations where they help?	☐

8. Choosing methods

Method	Consider
Community meeting	Ensures two-way communication; can be open or selective.
Event	Engaging if well managed, but needs careful planning. Save it for major announcements.
Focus group	Useful for research, and two-way.
Presentation	Good for internal audiences such as steering committees, especially at the start and end of projects.
Radio	Spreads information fast; clarity of message is vital.
Advertising	Can be expensive and hard to measure; must break through the clutter.
Direct mail and email	Letters pitched at people's specific concerns work; email is good for information, less for communication. Be selective.

Method	Consider
Media release	Easy but not always effective, as it depends on journalists. Individual interviews can work better. Think in pictures.
Brochures	Are they needed? Consider fact sheets, letters or the web, and always date publications.
Public displays	In places where people stop and talk, such as community centres.
Website	Very effective if promoted: available all the time, at whatever depth suits the reader.
Piggybacking	Attach your message to other activities and gatherings to extend reach.
Opinion makers	Industry associations and community leaders add credibility and their own channels.
Word of mouth	Can be positive or negative.

9. Assessing your communication

Track implementation

- Deadlines met for releases, materials, research and events
- Counts: website visits, enquiries, surveys returned, publication requests, attendance
- Records of responses, coverage and publications

Measure impact

- Audience participation and opinion change, against benchmarks
- Use of materials
- Media coverage, tone, placement and frequency

Assess satisfaction

- Formal: focus groups, phone or online surveys, reader feedback
- Informal: conversations at site visits, over coffee, while travelling

Run a survey

- Decide exactly what to measure, the delivery method and how you will present results
- Build or adapt the form, agree wording, list respondents
- Distribute, collect and analyse, present the results, and act on them
- Ask: did they receive and read it? Did it make sense? Preferred format? What did they think or do as a result? Overall satisfaction? What worked, what didn't, what next time?

Adapted from Talking the walk (Tools 1–9). © The Partnering Initiative. More tools at thepartneringinitiative.org/resources/type/tool/