

COMMUNICATIONS PLANNING: An Audit Can Make the Difference

By Anne Van Dusen

From cell phones to Web sites, daily newspapers to video screens in elevators, we're awash in—and perhaps numbed by—the modern conveniences of communication. It's no different in our faith communities: people expect to be "in the know" without having to work too hard.

If people in your congregation complain that they don't know what's going on, if there's a poor turnout for a major event, or if the pressure to have a good Web site is growing, read on. Invest a few hours in some intentional thinking and planning, and you'll end up with a strategy for easier time management and fewer communications headaches.

Begin Where You Are

The heart of your plan will be a realistic approach to how much you can accomplish. If your congregational staff is typical, you probably don't have a person who works exclusively on communications. Decide how many person-hours are available to implement your plan. Explore resources, adding to the available communications hours not only volunteer time, but the hours required to manage the process. Establish clear lines of responsibility and oversight, with final editorial and management duties resting with a staff person.

Do a Communications Audit

This can be as complex or as simple as you choose. Gather examples of all the communications pieces you use in your organization, such as newsletters and other printed publications, stationery, business cards, letters, worship leaflets, signs (indoors and out), and newspaper articles and advertisements. If available, include nonprint materials, like sample pages from your Web site and audiotapes of announcements.

Once the samples are collected, review the materials. Display them on a conference room wall or spread them out on a table—some place where you can leave them and return at regular intervals to review. Is there something that catches your attention either positively or negatively? Is anything missing? Are directional signs clear and prominently displayed?

Look for overall impressions as well as details. Is there consistency in font type? Does the collection present a unified identity or does it appear scattered and disjointed? Does it capture and support the desired messages and impressions of your faith community? Can you easily distinguish the most important events or news items? Is your mission represented and supported? For example, if you are trying to grow your congregation, can a newcomer find the information he or she needs? Determine the things you like and are doing well and identify those things you'd like to improve.

Create a Best-Case Scenario

Think about your overall communication goals and the specific mechanisms you will use to achieve them. What is an absolute must? Are you primarily interested in publicizing events, sharing news, or offering spiritual support with prayers and reflections? What's the message you want to convey and whom do you want to hear it?

Identify and prioritize different constituents. How important is the senior pastor's voice? Are there ways the structure of communications can support your overall mission? For example, if your organization wants to increase lay participation, will the newsletter include many stories written by those who are engaged in congregational life?

Set Priorities and Goals

Compare the best-case vision with the available resources. You probably won't be able to do everything, so set priorities and timing accordingly. Keeping in mind what projects need to remain under staff control, empower individuals or teams to implement the new plans. For example, technologically savvy youths might be empowered to manage the Web site, or the children's education leaders might create a newsletter for parents. Determine lines of responsibility and control.

Create a Plan

The "plan" is simply a summary of the thinking you have done. It specifies the messages you want to convey, the audience you want to reach, and the means and processes by which you will communicate. Deadlines and production schedules flow easily as you match resources with specific pieces of the plan. Don't forget to schedule another communications audit as part of the plan.

An often-overlooked but critically important step is sharing the plan with staff and volunteers. Not only will this make the current work smoother, but as new ideas come up, the plan can be used as a basis to review proposals. Does the plan need to be revised to accommodate the new idea? If so, what will we not change and how will priorities (and related workloads) shift?

Keep Your Patience

As you move from haphazard communications to working under an established plan, there are bound to be adjustments. There's nothing like putting pen to paper to draw a congregation's attention to areas that need attention. When this happens, take the opportunity to step back, reassess, and return to communications planning once the issues have been clarified.