

Communicating for Change

MODULE NINE INTRODUCES STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION as an important tool to move communities from talk to action by developing and sharing powerful messages with target audiences. Effective communication to diverse audiences helps raise visibility, build credibility, attract resources, and engage important constituencies in community change.

MORE PEOPLE ALWAYS NEED TO KNOW

Whatever issue you are addressing and whoever is involved, more people need to know about it and be engaged if the effort is to be sustained over the long term.

There can be a tendency to regard communications narrowly as a public affairs exercise that takes time and resources away from the crucial work of delivering urgently needed services. This view is short sighted. Community problems aren't solved in a vacuum or by an isolated group of citizens. For substantive change to occur, a lot of people in a community need to know about the issue, be involved, and most important, be motivated to act. This doesn't just happen. It takes deliberate effort and specific skills to sustain a conversation in the larger community about the issue(s) you are addressing.

Informing people about the problems you are trying to solve can involve a wide variety of activities from hosting a neighborhood pot luck to holding a national news conference. Using traditional media, such as newspapers and television, is one strategy to raise awareness about your work. Although it is an important tool, media coverage is not an end in and of itself. Newspapers, radio, and television news programs are simply efficient ways to share your message with a lot of people.

There are countless other ways to raise awareness about your work—from bumper stickers to block parties to Web sites. Module Nine introduces the key skills of communicating for change, including developing a message for specific audiences and identifying effective ways to deliver your message to the folks you need “on board” to accomplish results.

THE WHAT AND SO WHAT? DEVELOPING A MESSAGE

The first step of communicating for change is developing your message: What do you do and why does it matter? This sounds easy but can be difficult. Ideally, you should be able to

tell people the gist of your community work in a brief sentence or two. This is tough because community projects tend to be complex and work on a lot of fronts. Your message communicates to people the central idea of your work. Think about the corporate, community, and campaign slogans that people can easily recall and identify:

Nike: "Just do it"

National Crime Prevention Council: "Take a Bite Out of Crime"

— *McGruff the Crime-fighting dog*

Children's Defense Fund: "Leave No Child Behind"

A message can be longer than these slogans. There is no "right answer" to developing a message. It depends on the type of initiative, the goals of your work, and the audience you are trying to reach. A good rule of thumb, however, is "less is more." You want to develop a message that sparks people's interest in your work—rather than attempting to give them comprehensive information about every aspect of your programs.

WHO NEEDS TO KNOW?

Although you may want every person in the community to know about your work, it's very hard to identify any single way to reach everybody. A high school student, a retired insurance executive, a pastor, and a homemaker probably enjoy different social networks, watch different television shows, listen to different radio stations, and read different publications. Depending on their ages, their interests, and their habits, people are informed and entertained by an overwhelming array of sources. The challenge of a communications strategy is to prioritize whom to reach and how to reach them with limited resources and time. Making a message travel demands a lot of creativity and some specific skills. The strategies and activities introduced in Module Nine equip your group to make these crucial decisions.

WHEN AND WHY USE MAINSTREAM MEDIA?

There is no one-size-fits-all way to reach a wide range of people in your community and mainstream local media, such as the daily newspaper and television news programs, may or may not be the best way to go. For example, if you want to organize your neighborhood to start a Crime Watch program, a series of potluck dinners around the block may serve your communications needs better than a series of articles in the local paper. The dinners would probably give neighbors a better chance to get acquainted and discuss ways of improving neighborhood safety than would coverage of the Crime Watch program in the newspaper.

However, if you want to persuade municipal officials to support the Crime Watch program throughout the region and connect it with community policing efforts, you probably would want to use local newspapers, radio stations, and television news programs to raise awareness about the issue. You can use the media to educate people throughout the region about the importance of this strategy to increase community safety. Mainstream media coverage reaches larger numbers of people, especially established leaders, than it is possible to engage through more informal networks. Media coverage can help you take your message to the specific audiences that need to know about what you are doing.

ENGAGING THE COMMUNITY

The ultimate objective of developing a message and sharing it with targeted audiences is to engage the larger community in solutions to civic problems. Increasing the visibility of your work helps educate the community about the issue you are addressing, the challenges you are facing, and the results you are achieving. As you plan and implement strategies to inform people about what you are accomplishing, it is also important to let people know specific ways to become involved—for example, volunteering, contributing money or other resources, or supporting particular public policies.

Finally, don't be intimidated by the sometimes overwhelming array of communications options and "experts." You and your group are the real experts when it comes to communicating about civic solutions. You have important information to share and an intriguing story of change to tell.

