Creating a Strategy for Outreach: Effective Communications for Any Coalition
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You don’t have to have a degree in communications to create effective outreach for your coalition, but you do have to have a creative and open mind to try new things and take risks. When I started at CCASA over four years ago, we were regaining our momentum as an agency, and my position was brand new. I had a position description that was, I’ll admit, basic but I was fortunate to have a supervisor who encouraged my creativity and changes to our traditional communications. In this article, I’ll talk about CCASA’s integrated communications plan, the changes we made, the technology we added, and how it takes staff working together to make it all work.

An integrated communications plan is simple in concept, but it took me my first two years of fumbling into my job to figure out what that meant. I asked around for other nonprofit communications plans, and was surprisingly underwhelmed. I wanted to see a model, and most plans that I saw were little more than an event planning calendar or a list of communications channels they used. There was no strategy. So, I just did what I did. Until, one day, I went to our Executive Director and said that I finally have all the patterns, pieces, and strategies flushed out…I am ready to write our Outreach Plan. The plan details how our communications channels work together and are used together to promote our agency mission and our work. The CCASA Outreach Plan is designed to guide the communications strategy of the organization, while providing support to staff and board about outreach strategies, goals and messaging.

The audience for CCASA’s communications reaches beyond core membership to agency partners, allied professionals, survivors, legislators, media, and broadly, the general public. Communications are tailored to specific audiences and designed to provide information about CCASA and our projects and to further cultivate members and donors. In outreach strategies, CCASA leverages unique collaborations with agencies working with underserved populations or non-traditional partners in addition to campus, community and systems advocacy.

The CCASA Outreach Plan details guidance on branding, communications channels and approaches. The Strategic Plan for Communications, part of the overall Outreach Plan, identifies action steps and activities to accomplish goals identified within CCASA’s 2013 3-Year Strategic Plan. Our communications are directly connected to our overall agency strategic plan. Let’s look at the core sections of the Outreach Plan:
Branding

The CCASA brand is the foundation of our communications. The objectives that a good brand will achieve include that it:

- Delivers the message clearly
- Confirms your credibility
- Connects to your target audience emotionally
- Motivates the audience
- Creates audience loyalty

CCASA’s brand is a combination of the “look” of our communications and the messages we provide to our members, partners, donors, and the public. By determining your brand, you can provide staff, board, and volunteers with guidance on how to create communications that follow your brand and, in turn, create brand personality and audience loyalty. CCASA breaks our brand down by:

- **Origin:** The “origin” is where we look to for a standard brand for which other design elements and communications will emulate in one way or another, from fonts to colors to shapes and styles. For us, this is our website.

- **Look and personality:** Both of these came from a simple branding exercise I facilitated with staff and Board. It helps us to better understand why we create certain graphics or messaging.

- **Font:** Determining your brand font is much more important than people think, because it is a core aspect of how your audience will recognize you. If all staff (and Board) aren’t adhering to the brand font, then the brand will likely fail. CCASA uses the Futura font family. However, Futura isn’t a universal font that all computers can recognize, so we use Century Gothic when Futura isn’t an option. You may want to select a more universal font to avoid this happening, but then your choices are limited.

- **Colors:** Yep, you guessed it, many shades of teal! But we also have greys and orange. Be clear: you should provide the specific HEX and RGB or you will get lots of colors that are inconsistent and, therefore, an inconsistent brand.
Branding areas may include:

- Email/signatures
- PowerPoint or Prezi presentations
- E-blasts
- Website
- Blog
- Social media
- Videos
- Donor relations
- Brochures and publications
- Tabling & outreach
- Mission speeches
- Trainings
- Membership engagement

Don’t forget your messaging!
For CCASA, we have messaging language already written that says how we talk about our agency, and this is referenced in our plan. However, if you don’t have clear messaging that all staff, board, and volunteers can use, then you may want to take some time to flesh that out. Ideally, it includes your mission, but some agency missions don’t easily roll off the tongue.

Core Communications
You will want to identify your core communications channels. For CCASA we include email marketing, website, blog, social media, video, and in-person. For each of these, I detailed the strategy for the communication:

- Who’s responsible? (i.e. oversight committee, communications staff, all staff, etc.) For instance, our blog is overseen by our CCASA Blog Committee (a committee of our members).

- Frequency of communication & updating

- Content: formal vs. informal, etc. For instance, our blog is our most informal communications channel, whereas, our website is most formal. It is completely ok that they exist in the same space, too.

- Purpose: to provide agency information to engage members, etc.
Communications Channels Chart

I didn’t come up with this myself, but I think it is invaluable to your integrated communications plan. I actually relied heavily on Idealware’s “A Practical Guide to Integrated Communications,” and recommend their work and trainings.

Below you only see three channels but I have many more detailed in our Outreach Plan. This is a great tool to share with staff, board and volunteers that is simple to follow and see the strategy. The “category” section refers to whether it is something you are creating yourself, promoting from another page, or using to create dialogue/engagement, etc.

Implementation Charts

This is where you see how your communications integrates with the work of your agency. Therefore, if you are me, the communications staff person, you will need to have your entire staff on board. You may do most of the work, but they need to be fully on-board with the plan and the goals of the communications. I love these charts, and each core project throughout the year gets one and that is shown to the full staff. It helps you show how each communications channel will work together for one goal.
Brace Yourself: What We Took Away

The Newsletter: Replaced by the CCASA Blog. We decided that we could better engage members and the public with a regularly updated blog instead of a static, compiled over a month or quarter, newsletter that was all old news by the time it went out. The blog is news as it happens and is a great way to highlight the work of our members and to engage our members directly with the visioning and content of the blog through our CCASA Blog Committee.

The Looong Eblast with Many Resources: Replaced by the once monthly digest that is a short eblast with lots of links back to the website (and not to other’s website—we house most resources on ours—and we want our website to be a resource hub for members).

The Standard Policy Alerts: Ok, not replaced, but enhanced by the addition of Policy Podcasts.

Mailings: It’s all online now. E-V-E-R-Y resource. We only mail an annual appeal letter to donors and print publications to members (our free print publications are a favorite member benefit!).
The Technology We Added

We ditched Constant Contact and added Emma: I hate to say it, but there are other options that will allow you more flexibility and ease of use than Constant Contact. CCASA was very fortunate to apply for and receive a free lifetime subscription to Emma. I was hesitant, but after a year of using Emma, I am over the moon! This email marketing platform is amazing. I encourage you to find the one you feel this excited about.

We added basic software and devices: Adobe InDesign, Premiere, and Photoshop are ones I like and are affordable through Tech Soup. We also bought an affordable and user-friendly video camera that I can’t live without. At events, we take donations with our square readers and use our smartphones to check people in. It streamlines how we do things, which is in-line with our brand.

We stopped paying for webinars and added GoToWebinar: Ok, a bit of a lie, but $99 feels like free and that’s how much we now pay annually through Tech Soup for the GoToMeeting & GoToWebinar platforms. That is for unlimited meetings, webinars, and no participant limit. It’s a steal. We used to use ReadyTalk and loved it, but it cost hundreds per webinar.

We added interns: So…I will be the first to admit that interns can be more work than they produce. BUT they also bring fresh ideas that keep your communications cutting edge. I know I could never keep all my creativity without some fresh ideas from others. And yes, they bring ideas about new technologies to use and try.

We added a graphic designer: Nope, not on staff, but we found someone we like and use just that one person consistently. It doesn’t add that much to your budget to start using professional graphic designer, but it pays off in dividends with your agency image.

I hope this information is useful to other coalitions and their staff as they think about creating a strategy for expanding the outreach and communications they already do. Of course, it can’t be one person either. Every single person from staff to volunteers and interns to board members need to know your agency communications plan and how to best represent it in their daily work. When I completed the CCASA Outreach Plan, it was reviewed with staff and board…and each intern I continue bring aboard. Our image to members and the public (our brand) is valuable, and agency communications should always be a top priority.