

Chapter 3: Internal Communications 101

OUTLINE OF STEPS COVERED IN CHAPTER THREE:

- 1. Know Your Audience**
 - Use inclusive language
 - Consider everyone a “newcomer”
 - Don’t be afraid to repeat yourself
- 2. Work With Your Resources**
 - Use your website
 - Use your newsletter
 - Share the workload
 - Save, re-use and recycle information
- 3. Be Pro-Active**
 - Use your planning calendar
 - Anticipate financial and other resource needs
- 4. Be Accountable**
 - Seek and respond to feedback
 - Conduct periodic reviews of methods and materials
- 5. Think at Least One Year Ahead**
 - Plan, plan, plan
 - Create and maintain a story file and clippings archive
 - Build connections between internal and external communications work

A thorough treatment of all aspects of internal church communications is beyond the scope of this manual, so this chapter attempts merely to sketch out a series of processes that will help guide and enhance your operations. For more detailed information about specific communications channels and materials, please explore the resources listed in **Appendices 1-3** at the back of the manual.

1. Know Your Audience

- **Use inclusive language**

Make sure that you always use inclusive language, both in print and spoken communications. If your congregation has completed the Welcoming Congregation Program, then you have already begun to educate your membership about the importance of inclusive language. If not, then you will need to find resources to help you with this. Language inclusivity refers, at a minimum, to categories of gender, race, ability and sexual/affectional orientation. A great place to start learning how to use inclusive language is the Welcoming Congregation Program Handbook, published by the UUA's Office of BGLT Concerns (<http://www.uua.org/obgltc/wcp/wcrncmnt.html>). Or you can search the web for shorter guides to print and share with other church communicators. One brief but very clear guide was created by the Media Task Force of the Honolulu County Committee on the Status of Women. You can find it online at <http://honolulu.hawaii.edu/intranet/committees/FacDevCom/guidebk/teachtip/inclusiv.htm>.

- **Consider everyone a “newcomer”**

Congregations, and especially affinity groups within congregations, often make the mistake of communicating as if they were a tightly-knit club. Successful communication is not simply a question of saying the same thing more frequently or to a wider circle of people. You also need to tailor your messages to include enough information to orient and actively welcome new readers/listeners. It is a sad fact that the

more an insider-oriented message is circulated, the less welcome a visitor will feel in your community. Some examples include very common announcements, like “The YAG will meet as usual on Monday night. See Jane for more information.” This message is completely meaningless to anyone who is not already an insider. A longer, but much more effective version would be, “The Young Adult Group’s (YAG) monthly meeting will be at 7:00 this Monday night in the church library. We would be delighted to welcome first-timers to this event. Please contact Jane Doe, the group’s convener, for more information. Jane will be at the YAG information table in the lobby after services. YAG is an affinity group for those who are 18-35. Our members are single, partnered, BGLT and straight. Join us!”

By providing all the details, you will orient new people and give them insights into the group’s mission and membership. But an equally important message is the explicit invitation indicating that the group welcomes new faces. Even your current members may need to hear this in order to feel comfortable showing up to their first meeting. Every mention of a Sunday service or RE program should also include an explicit invitation. By consistently practicing this strategy, you will be in a strong position to take your message outside the church walls and successfully reach a broader audience.

- **Don’t be afraid to repeat yourself**

Messages like the one above may sound overly detailed and formal, but they are truly worth the extra effort. A fun way to think of your writing for the church website or newsletter is to imagine that you are writing for a soap opera. Like members in your congregations, certain key characters and story lines have been around for years, but the writer’s goal is to attract a new audience each week and get them up to speed on the major stories as quickly as possible. So you need to carefully identify everyone and everything that you mention. In soap operas this requires writing clunky lines like “Brad, my cad of an ex-husband,” or “my former crummy job at General Hospital.” For congregations, this might mean saying things like, “The Youth Group, our Sunday evening social and educational program for all young people aged 12-18.” Or, “Friday

Night Supper, Arlington Street Church’s free weekly meal program, served at 6:00 in our basement to anyone who needs a hot meal.” The identifying tags might sound repetitive and awkward at first, but the background information conveyed this way is vital to orienting a new audience.

You need to think like a soap opera writer in all of your communications work, all of the time. Don’t assume anything on the part of your audience. The people who most need your information are the ones who have the least familiarity with the context, so provide all the relevant details and don’t be afraid to repeat them over and over again. Even long-time members benefit from this technique. In fact, a common rule of thumb for public relations professionals is that people need to hear or read a message seven times before it becomes fixed in their memory.

2. Work With Your Resources

- **Use your website!**

It’s the most valuable communications tool you have. It’s 100% sustainable, infinitely renewable, and it reaches the largest possible audience. You can also easily re-use and revise any document or image if it is in an electronic format. So make the most of it. For practical advice on content and management, see **Appendix 2**, a basic checklist for your website with tips compiled from the UUA’s communications staff and volunteer webmasters. Many of these tips are also applicable to church directories, brochures, outgoing phone messages, and newsletters. For an online version of this list with live links to helpful resources, please go to <http://www.uua.org/programs/online/#congs>.

- **Use your newsletter**

Your newsletter is the congregation’s second-most powerful communications tool, but it is probably the one that your current members consult most often. Consider creative ways to increase the range of the newsletter, like posting appropriate portions of it online. Also, consider expanding your mailing list to include partner churches, community organizations, and local city and religion news reporters. If you carefully

choose just a dozen new recipients, you can create important connections and raise the profile of your congregation's work in the community. The UUA's clipping service often sends us news articles featuring material that a religion columnist has quoted from or even reproduced entirely from a UU church newsletter piece. Paid advertising with that kind of impact would cost a fortune! Think of it this way – you're already producing a newsletter, which is a huge investment in time and money. Why not use a few extra postage stamps to maximize its impact?

- **Share the workload**

Meeting deadlines and keeping everyone informed is tough work. Try to make the most of your volunteer resources and share the load whenever possible. Burnout comes at a high price; when overburdened volunteers drop projects and disappear it causes extra work for those who have to reconstruct systems, re-created documents and search for archived (or lost) materials. In addition to managing your labor force, be sure to create a reliable method for creating and retaining an “institutional memory” of your communications practices and resources, so that one volunteer can replace another easily and smoothly. This will spare your most trusted and valued volunteers from enduring a “life sentence” in one key role.

- **Save, re-use and recycle information**

To create a living institutional memory bank, get into the habit of saving materials in a system that is transparent, accessible, and permanent. An electronic archive is ideal, but make sure that you use easily adapted computer platforms and programs that are widely available and supported by all of your congregation's computer systems. Consider designating a computer in the church offices specifically for volunteers and make it part of the staff network. A staff liaison would be very valuable in keeping the lines of communications open. Above all, resist relying too heavily and too often on equipment and other resources that are the personal property of volunteers.

Many of your publications can be re-used and recycled. For example, the history of your church and your minister's biography won't change much from one year to the next, so maintain these as short documents that are archived electronically. They can be used on the website and adapted as needed for welcome letters and brochures, to promote special worship services, and to use as "backgrounders" in media kits later on. Other useful documents include your congregation's covenant and mission statements and short descriptions of the RE program and any permanent affiliate organization or social justice program, such as a soup kitchen or prisoner education group. After they have been written for a newsletter article or canvass brochure, many of these pieces can be electronically "clipped" and saved in a designated backgrounder folder. The same is true for especially good photographs. Make digital files to save, adapt, and use repeatedly. And make sure that everyone on your team knows where and how they are archived. These steps will save time and money in the future.

3. Be Pro-Active

- **Use your planning calendar**

A communications team member who is familiar with the church calendar is the best person to put in charge of this task. It would also be helpful to have a minister or other staff member to consult with. Keep the calendar in a public place and encourage key volunteers from other committees to add to it regularly. Decide with the rest of the team how far in advance you need to begin planning for each special project, and bring the calendar to every team meeting.

- **Anticipate financial and other resource needs**

If you learned last year that your annual holiday auction required extra funds for printing and mailing invitations or including an ad on the local radio station, then keep track of the details and include them in your budget proposal (or auction profit estimates) for next year. The same applies to volunteer resources. You may have

realized after the fact that more help was needed early in the church year. If so, then plan on recruiting some summer volunteers well in advance. Offering short-term volunteer opportunities is great way to get extra help without overwhelming busy members.

4. Be Accountable

- **Seek and respond to feedback**

Encourage structured feedback from the board, ministers, and trusted lay leaders. And don't forget to stay in touch with visitors and new members, your prime audience. In some cases, a formal survey may be helpful. Remember, though, that asking for feedback means creating the expectation that you will respond to it in a way that satisfies the folks who participate in the survey. Be sure that you are in a position to do so before initiating the discussion, and use surveys with care. In many cases, a small focus group or short-term task force is more effective.

- **Conduct periodic reviews of methods and materials**

In addition to soliciting feedback from others, the communications team should plan to review its own work at regular intervals. Some teams bring the latest newsletter to each meeting for critiques; others will aim for an annual review during their summer planning sessions. Save the best brochures and newsletters that you receive in the mail from other organizations. Pick up anything that catches your attention in museums, theaters, or other places where outreach is vital. Bring the good examples to your review sessions to analyze and compare with your own materials. There's nothing wrong with learning from experienced organizations that use professional staff and high-quality materials for their publications.

5. Think at Least One Year Ahead

- **Plan, plan, plan**

Because of the nature of volunteer work, many ideas are discovered only after opportunities have been missed the first time around. In addition to your regular practical planning sessions, the next chapter will explain a useful method for incorporating strategic planning into your external communications work. If you keep track of opportunities and lessons learned as you go through the year, you'll be in a good position to rise to the occasion next year.

- **Create and maintain a story file and clippings archive**

In addition to your planning calendar, your most valuable tools are a story file and a clippings archive. A story file is a collection of ideas that the team thinks would make good stories for the newsletter and website, and, eventually, to pitch to the local and regional press. Story ideas could include recurring annual events, occasional events, and one-time only occasions. Choose a few stories to highlight in the year ahead and begin to collect supporting information that can be used to promote the event with a press release and media kit (details about how to create and maintain these tools will be covered in later chapters).

Clippings are samples of stories that were published about your congregation's work. If possible, try to scan and save all clippings in an electronic archive. These will last longer than print copies and they can be used in many creative ways. You can post them on your church website, share them through email with interested visitors and reporters, and reuse them for years to come.

It is also helpful to seek out and clip stories written about other religious organizations in your community. These will give you a good idea of how your local news writers and broadcasters think and what the public is learning about other congregations. Below are some typical examples of stories about UU churches that the UUA's Information Office receives from around the country.

Annual Events:

- * In-gathering or homecoming water communion
- * Interfaith holiday celebrations
- * Thanksgiving meal at your soup kitchen
- * RE students visit elderly soldiers on Veteran's Day
- * Blessing of the Animals service in a city park

Occasional Events:

- * New minister called (these are very common)
- * 5 and 10-year interval anniversaries of fellowship founding or minister's tenure
- * Church building renovated, trees planted, etc.
- * Community art exhibit hosted by congregation
- * Celebrity speaker/performer featured at worship service

One-time Events:

- * New building dedicated (also very common)
- * A congregational "first" (first same-sex wedding, first woman minister, etc.)
- * Special statements by congregations (opposing war, supporting Marriage Equality, declaring church a sanctuary, etc.)
- * Pastoral support for community in times of crisis (shelter for flood victims, prayer service for killed soldiers, etc.)

- **Build connections between internal and external communications**

As you can see from the above examples, many of your church's ordinary activities can be quite newsworthy, even to audiences outside the congregation. As your communications team works to support the congregation's inner ring communications channels, you will gain insights into how to use your stories to reach beyond the walls of the church. The last four chapters of this manual will focus exclusively on the "outer ring" audiences of your local community and the news media, and will include samples of the sort of stories mentioned above, as well as strategic advice on how to pitch and secure this kind of coverage in appropriate news outlets.