Communication Channels

Public Affairs professionals use printed words, spoken words, images and combinations of all these tools to communicate. Technology has changed our notions about media, speed of delivery and reach. You can't effectively determine how you are going to send a message and information until you know who you are trying to reach and what you are trying to tell them.

Knowing what communication channel to use is imperative to reach the right audience at the right time with the right information. This lecture will give you information on different channels to make your communication efforts more effective.

Photo courtesy of smallbusiness.chron.com
Traditional Channels

Work in public affairs requires understanding of basic communication channels. This lesson provides insight into radio, television, newspapers, wire services and magazines.

Radio offers a wide range of audience reach as a mobile medium suited to a mobile people. It reaches the bedroom and breakfast table in the morning, rides to and from work in the car, goes along to the beach, and lulls us to sleep at night. Radio listening in the U.S. remains relatively constant at almost three hours a day or 19 hours a week.

Even though radio is a mass medium, radio possesses the qualities of a direct, personal touch, because it uses the spoken word, for the most part, to convey its message. Radio is a person-to-person medium that flourishes on conversation. Call-in talk shows now help set the public agenda and provide a forum for public debate on many local and national issues.

Communicators use radio news releases and audio feeds and send them to stations through networks such as CNNRadio, North American Network and News Broadcasting Network. Distribution is over the Internet and telephone lines to stations targeted by region and format.

One way to get your word out is to use Public Service Announcements. Public Service Announcements promote programs and services of government and voluntary agencies for which no payment is made to the station. Radio, as with any other communication channel has advantages and disadvantages.

**Advantages of Radio**
- Good saturation of local markets and geographical selectivity
- Relatively low cost and easy to change copy
- Well targeted by listener profiles
- Daily use by large numbers of people
- Local endorsement
- Fast and flexible placement
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**Disadvantages**
- Short time segments place limitations on message
- Limited opportunity for feedback
- Restricted primarily to talk format
- No visual appeal

Now that you have an understanding of radio, let’s move on to television.

**Television**

The communication phenomenon of the 20th century was television. Television provides a window on the world. This medium uses the printed and spoken word, pictures in motion, color, music, animation and sound effects — all blended into one message. Television offers a vast range of possibilities for telling a story. This would be anything from a 60-second video on a newscast to a one-hour documentary film. Other possibilities of television would be offering 24-hour coverage of a crisis or a miniseries focused on a topic of interest. Television also has some advantages and disadvantages.

**Advantages of television**
- High impact because it combines sight, sound and motion
- Immediacy and credibility of message
- Popular with large audiences
- Worldwide coverage
- Access to segmented special interest channels

**Disadvantages**
- Time constraints for message content
- High production and advertising costs
- Provides little feedback

Now that we have discussed radio and television, let’s move on to print media. We will discuss newspapers, wire services and magazines.
Traditional Channels (continued)

Newspapers
Newspapers remain the workhorse of the public information system. Daily, weekend, Sunday, weekly, semiweekly, ethnic, labor, religious, scholastic and foreign-language newspapers are frequently read, whether online or in hard copy. Newspaper scholars have suggested that the power of the press comes from its dissemination of information and its impact on public interest in important issues. Listed are some advantages and disadvantages of newspapers.

Advantages
- Geographical targeting
- Broad reach of income groups at low cost
- Immediacy of newsworthy events and timely features
- Highly accessible and credible

Disadvantages
- High cost for national advertising
- Short information life
- Primarily black and white print, but with some color opportunity (especially with photos)
- Declining readership, but still high among older public

Wire Services News
Wire services economically and effectively distribute human-interest stories to state, regional, national or international media. Publicity with a local angle can be directed to other media, where the information is relevant. For timely stories not limited to a locale, placing them on the wires increases the likelihood of immediate and widespread coverage. A well-written wire story can reach newspaper readers, radio listeners and TV viewers across the nation or around the world. Some of the major wire services are Associated Press, Reuters, United Press International and Agence France-Presse.

Advantages of Wire Service News
- High visibility online
- Extensive distribution
- Interested audience. Organizations that receive direct distribution from wire services have opted in to subscribe, so they are actively interested in receiving news releases specific to your topics.
- News credibility. The news releases are reviewed by professional editors, and the news is formatted and written in a credible and professional way.
- Search engine optimization

Disadvantages
- Tight deadlines to get story to wire service
- Competition for placement
- Cost of subscription

Magazines
Magazines provide communicators a way to reach audiences who share common interests, including through the Web sites. More than 19,500 magazines and specialized publications published in the U.S. offer effective specialized channels of communication to narrowly-defined audiences. Variations in content and audience appeal are almost limitless and ever changing.

Advantages
- Highly segmented audience
- High quality, visual medium with color and credibility
- Lengthy messages
- Pass-along readership. Magazines are in barbershops, doctor’s offices, hair-salons and other public places where people sit and wait and are usually read, although some of the people don’t have a subscription with that specific magazine.
- Issues often retained. Magazines provide more durable information than newspapers. Readers can read, reread, discuss and debate information found in a
Traditional Channels (continued)

- Placement of content in a magazine will reach many of the same people as other forms of communication, such as newspapers.

Now that we have discussed types of traditional news sources, let's move on to editorial boards.
Editorial Boards

An editorial board is a group of people with wide-ranging areas of expertise, usually at a publication, who dictate the tone and direction a publication's editorial policy will take. One of their responsibilities can be to write editorials, which represent the voice of the board, its editor and the publisher. At least once a year you and your commander, a key subject matter expert or some other command representative, need to visit the editorial boards of the media you use most. These visits are not intended to result in stories. Instead they are used to update the editorial board on the status of your organization, provide a general look at the plans for the year ahead or give a heads-up on some upcoming challenge. The protocol is simple: your boss, you or a SME gives a brief presentation and then responds to questions. The result: a better relationship with the media and a better understanding of your organizational focus, priorities and concerns.

Now let’s look at Internet capabilities and how they can assist you in providing information to your audience.
Internet-based Capabilities

Internet-based capabilities are collaborative tools such as social networking services, social media, user-generated content, social software, e-mail, instant messaging and discussion forums. The Internet represents the most ubiquitous leading edge of the communication revolution since nearly all new media are Internet-based.

The new media environment offers three challenges: staying abreast of technological developments in new media, conducting media relations with non-traditional journalists and representing organizations in the new media environment.

**Advantages of IBC**

- Expanding use and savvy users increase messages
- Broad usage and easy to use
- Comparatively inexpensive as a channel
- Fast and flexible
- Visual medium with high interactivity
- Social media explosion with peers as message sources enhances credibility

**Disadvantages**

- Some public segments still not online
- Potentially high technology and start-up costs
- No control of the message in social media

Now that we have discussed types of traditional news sources, editorial boards and Internet-based capabilities, let's move on to community engagements.

We will discuss three different types of community engagements: open house, town hall and service projects.

Photo courtesy of airforcelive.dodlive.mil
Community Engagements

Community engagement is the process of working collaboratively with, and through, groups of people affiliated by geographic proximity or special interest to enhance the understanding and support for military operations.

Open house

An open house is a military program conducted on an installation or other military facility to which the general public is invited. It is designed to showcase military missions, equipment, facilities, and personnel to a local or regional civilian community to satisfy the public's interest in the defense establishment and its role in national security affairs. Military installations are encouraged to hold at least one open house each year. Open house displays, events, and attractions generally come from the resources of the host installation or local community, with the exception of military equipment or personnel who may be invited from other installations to demonstrate equipment or capabilities not found locally.

Military open house programs are primarily public affairs activities and are not intended as Morale, Welfare and Recreation fund-raising events. That does not prevent MWR involvement in those events, as long as fund-raising does not become the primary role.

Town Hall

A town hall meeting is an informal public meeting that gives the members of a community an opportunity to get together to discuss emerging issues and to voice concerns and preferences for their community. A typical meeting is attended by both citizens and officials, giving everyone a chance to talk personally in a relaxed environment about the things that matter to them.

The structure of the meeting is usually very loose. Typically, officials sit in the front, facing the group, and the group is seated in rows. When the meeting is opened, people in the group can ask questions or bring issues up, and the officials and other members of the group may respond.

Advantages

Participating in a town hall meeting can be an excellent experience. People of all ages and backgrounds show up at such meetings, bringing their own perspectives and issues to the table. For people new to a community this can be a great way for them to learn about the issues facing the community, and to get an idea of who holds the most power and influence in the community. This is an opportunity to engage those who might not otherwise seek out information and cultivate new leaders. A town hall meeting provides an opportunity for groups of individuals who have been having dialogues on related issues to come together, report and to learn from each other. This can begin the process of changing attitudes and behaviors.

Disadvantages

When heated issues arise, the atmosphere may become less orderly. Usually members of the group are capable of policing each other to ensure that everyone is heard. Issues may be framed by a small group of "grandstanders," which may not afford a number of people a chance to speak, resulting in frustration.

You may want to provide additional or alternate opportunities for people to state their opinions. Provide comment cards and a drop box at the event, or provide a web page to receive information and for interested people to ask questions and write or post comments.

Service projects

The service project is an avenue for the command to provide its members a better understanding of the role civic activities have in society to make a contribution to a community service or charity. Understanding your community's strengths and weaknesses is an important first step in planning an effective service project. By taking the time to learn about your community, your command can discover new opportunities for service projects and prevent the duplication of existing assets.

Advantages of service projects

- The benefits of a community service project include new experiences for those participating
- Exposure to people from different cultures, backgrounds and ages
Community Engagements (continued)

- Opportunity to work in a different social setting
- Developing an awareness of those who are less fortunate than you are and what their needs are
- This helps a command or unit build credibility, promotes future community involvement and boosts an understanding about the command and the community.

Disadvantages

- Significant expertise may be needed to begin and continue a project.
- Time constraints and the availability of military personnel
- The cost and long time commitment from the command

Now that we have discussed types of traditional news sources, editorial boards, Internet-based capabilities and community engagements let's close out with the chain of command.

Photo courtesy of /larslceproceedings.wikispaces.com
Chain of Command

The commander must establish a culture of communication and endorse it as a formal policy. The command’s most important relationships are those with the people who make up the command. The value of understanding teamwork and commitment by civilians and service members in achieving the command’s goal is important. The need to build a strong communication network, and make every commander at every level accountable for communicating effectively with those in his command, is imperative. The chain of command, as a communication channel, has its advantages and disadvantages.

Advantages

- Confidence and trust between the commanders and subordinates
- Honest, candid information flowing freely up, down, and sideways in the command

Disadvantages

- The military culture takes on the form of disseminating the ideas and goals that may not be popular to various internal audiences.
- Communication can be one-sided in that management directs subordinates, with little communication flowing from subordinates back to the commanders.

Photo courtesy of cdn2-b.examiner.com
Conclusion

Now that you know more about the elements of a specific plan and how they fit together, you are better able to use what you’ve learned about research to develop a plan, which you will then implement, while evaluating your efforts throughout the process.
References and Additional Resources


Directive-Type Memorandum (DTM) 09-026 - Responsible and Effective Use of Internet-based Capabilities (Feb 2010)

DOD Directive 5410.18, Public Affairs Community Relations Policy, November 20, 2001
