

A Proactive Communications Plan and Checklist

Communicating your message: WHO, WHAT, HOW and WHEN

This plan/checklist can be applied to any situation in which you are proactively providing information to the public that is either neutral, good news or getting ahead of a potentially negative story. (e.g., disseminating new evidence for tobacco control; passing of a bill; polling results, etc).

Regarding 'getting ahead of a negative story' - there are varying opinions on the issue of being proactive as opposed to flying low under the radar. When making this decision, ask yourself this question: would you rather have a hand in crafting the story, or would you rather respond to a bad article *after* it is printed? In many cases, the best thing that can happen is that there is *no* story, so you may ask – then why be proactive? The answer is- 'the field is more likely to maintain good relationships and credibility when transparency exists and its evident to your audiences there is nothing to hide'.

- 1) The first step in a proactive communications plan is assessing **WHO** needs to know the information. Who will benefit or be affected by your news?
 - Inner circle – your colleagues within the tobacco control world
 - Community leaders and activists, government officials and stakeholders
 - Media – create local, national and international media lists with print, trade, Internet and broadcast outlets in each location where you will have activity.
- 2) Next, determine **WHAT** information do they need?
 - Establish your message based on your audience and how they are affected
 - Include important facts and avoid language that is too technical
 - Select a spokesperson who is accessible to the media and community where the “action” is taking place
 - Select third party spokespeople. For instance, if your workplan includes school policy, recruit a spokesperson from the school board who supports the policy and understands the benefit to the community.
 - Provide key messages to spokespeople
 - Draft a statement or press release
 - Circulate the information in the order listed in #1
 - Respond quickly to all queries
- 3) If the desired result of your outreach is to gain media coverage, rather than neutralize a potential story, always follow these points;
 - Target your most important media outlets and follow up with phone calls
 - Offer prepared spokespeople (know their availability and contact info in advance)
 - Respect deadlines
 - If you are the spokesperson and are not sure of an answer to a question, let the reporter know that you will have to get back to them rather than guessing an answer.
 - Choose your top three key messages and stick to them
- 4) **HOW** do they receive their information?
 - Inner circle – do you have a system for disseminating information quickly to the entire network?
 - Community leaders and activists – one on one meetings (if appropriate), phone calls and emails prior to disseminating information to the media is important for maintaining their support
 - Finally, know your audience and how they get their news. In some communities, the radio may have a stronger impact than the daily newspaper or vice versa so target media accordingly.
- 5) **WHEN** should they get the information?
 - Obviously, your inner circle of colleagues must have the information and key messages in order to provide support to you – and to support their efforts. Be sure they hear it from you first before they read about it.
 - Always be as prompt as possible but get the facts in order and prepare your spokespeople prior to disseminating information.