



From the Ground Up: How to Build an Effective Communications Plan  
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#### COMPONENTS OF A COMMUNICATIONS PLAN

A Communications Plan articulates your communications goals and provides a plan of action to meet short and long-term marketing goals.

The following outline reviews the components of a Communications Plan. The outline reflects our experience in providing strategic recommendations for institutional clients.

##### Research

Effective communications begin with a clear understanding of your institution's market position, strongest messages, and constituency concerns. That's why the research phase is a critical first step in determining the content of your marketing approach. The goal of the plan is to connect meaningfully with a specific audience. The more thoroughly you understand the target audience, the more effective the connection.

You may incorporate a variety of market research techniques and should select the kind of research that is most appropriate to your specific budget and the scope of the project.

The following techniques help to define audience attitudes and interests, and offer opportunities to evaluate response to conceptual approaches.

##### Interviews

Interviews are vital to assessing internal and external perceptions of your institution in contrast to competitors.

We recommend spending two days on campus conducting interviews with staff and leadership, current and past students, and school and faculty representatives to gauge opinions about your institution's strengths and weaknesses. This step is best conducted by an independent firm outside of the campus community. If necessary, you may arrange to conduct interviews off-site, although additional time and fees may be incurred.



Develop an interview agenda that addresses key marketing objectives. Apply the same sequence of questions during all group discussions. The agenda is particularly important for group discussions with students and faculty, as these individuals may be difficult to contact again at a later point for follow-up questions. We recommend that the agenda is reviewed and approved by a project coordinator from your institution.

Internal Audiences

*Campus Leadership, Administrators, and Staff* We recommend conducting one-on-one, or small group interviews.

*Students* Recruit representative students and provide a conference room on-campus where interviews will be conducted.

*Faculty* Recruit representative faculty and provide a conference room on-campus where interviews will be conducted. We recommend conducting small group interviews (3-5 people) with faculty members. To be sure that all academic areas are represented, we recommend conducting three or more of these group discussions.

External Audiences

*Prospective students* We typically recommend arranging for two groups of potential students. These groups can be held at a neutral facility to avoid potentially biased responses to the concepts presented in the discussions. To recruit these groups, we recommend using an inquiry list and names from the ETS list who fit the profile of a typical student but have not inquired at the institution.

*Alumni* Work with your alumni association leader to identify 30 to 50 alumni as potential interviewees. If possible, arrange to interview selected alumni on campus. Other key alumni may be contacted by phone or during an in-person visit.

*Community officials and business leaders* Identify 30 to 50 community members to be interviewed. The list should include community leaders who may or may not be publicly employed or elected. These constituents may be interviewed by telephone or in person, depending upon their availability.



#### Focus Groups

You may wish to support the findings from on-campus interviews with a focus group study. The following services will help you to get the most out of your focus group research:

##### *Project scope definition*

Develop a set of assumptions to be tested and questions to be answered based on the findings of initial interviews.

##### *Focus group scripting*

Script focus group questions and sequence, develop positioning themes for testing with target audiences, identify target audience characteristics, and determine format and scheduling.

##### *Target group identification*

Develop a recruitment questionnaire to screen for specific demographic qualities (income, educational background) in your target audiences. Work with a market research facility to identify test groups and schedule their participation in the research effort.

##### *Focus group moderation*

We recommend professional moderation services for all focus groups. You may benefit from the use of a research firm's facilities for audiotaping and one-way mirror viewing of the proceedings.

##### *Focus group reporting*

Prepare a report of key findings.

#### Communications Audit

A thorough communications audit provides an evaluation of your existing communications—from the Web site to all print publications—and includes comparisons with competitor communications. The audit incorporates existing market research and interviews with administration, staff, faculty, students, and alumni and should conclude with recommendations for meeting your marketing goals.



## Communications Plan

After completing the research, all findings should be summarized in a Communications Plan. The Plan includes the following:

### Overview

A brief summary of the history, character, long- and short-range goals, and communications challenges of your institution.

### Current and Desired Market Position

A point-by-point outline of desired market position compared to current position. This section determines if desired position matches actual audience perception.

### Communications audit

Evaluates the strengths and weaknesses of each communications vehicle.

### Positioning recommendation

Based on the above data, this section identifies core communications messages and offers guidelines on how to deliver those messages verbally and visually. Includes development of identity theme/tagline and recommendations for a positioning statement.

### Message differentiation recommendation

This section identifies all priority audiences and offers guidelines on crafting messages for different audiences.

### Communications recommendation

Detailed outline for recommended communications vehicles. Includes recommendations and timelines for implementing communications themes and concepts.

A preliminary draft of the plan should be sent to key internal personnel for suggestions and revisions before proceeding to a final report. The research phase concludes with the final plan presentation to campus leadership.