Twelve Principles for Effective Online Communications Planning

Developing an online communications plan involves many of the same steps as developing a more general communications plan, but also requires some specific thinking about how to best take advantage of online communications tools such as email and the Web. Each of the following 12 principles should help you think through how to use these online tools and help guide the development and maintenance of your Web site, email system and database.

When writing your plan, remember that nothing has to be set in stone—you are almost certain to discover that things don't work out exactly as you anticipate and you'll need to modify your plan accordingly. This is all part of the process (in fact, it's principle #12), so expect to see your plan change as you go through development and maintenance.

1. Set Your Goals

It's important to set goals for two reasons. Your goals will help **guide** the development of your Web site and your online communications plan in general. They will also aid in **evaluation** of the effectiveness of the plan in the long run. Start by looking at the **mission** of your organization and use that to define the goals of your organization in general. Once you have a good list of your organizational goals, select the ones whose ends can be achieved effectively online. There's a good chance that most of your organization's goals can be aided through the effective use of online communications.

At this point make your goals **broad and general** and try to avoid mentioning particular audiences (we'll get to that with principle #2). Some sample online communications goals are:

> *Provide an overview of our group's issues and mission.*
>
> *Facilitate online action on our issues.*
>
> *Establish our group as a credible, reliable source of information on our issues.*

Once you have your goals defined you should rank them, or at least pick one or two that are the **most important**. A Web site that tries to do several things at the same time often doesn't do any of them well. Prioritizing your goals gives your site a primary purpose. Just because you pick one or two main goals doesn't mean that you won't be able to accomplish others, but it's good for people to get to your Web site and have a clear idea of **what you want them to do**. Narrowing down the obvious options for them is the best place to start.

2. Define Your Audience

Considering your audience is a crucial part of the planning process. Give some thought to the types of people you'd like to have visit your Web site. Just as you ranked the goals for your site, you should consider ranking and prioritizing the audiences for your site. The two

main reasons to define your audiences are to allow you to **target particular goals** at particular people and to help you **develop the tone** of your Web site. Audiences could include policy makers, the press, casual supporters, hard-core activists and community-seekers. When prioritizing audiences, it may be valuable to break many of them into two or three tiers of importance rather than prioritizing actual audiences. For example members of your organization, non-member activists and peer organizations may all fit into your first tier of "direct supporters".

3. Give Your Site a Purpose

Once you have defined the goals for your Web site and the audiences that you wish to serve, you should fit them together to create statements of purpose for your site. They needn't mimic exact wording from your goals, but the basic ideas of your goals should be contained in these statements of purpose. Try to write out sentences that suggest how content on your Web site will empower certain individuals to help you meet your goals. For example:

> *Provide **members of the press** with **up-to-date information** on our issue to empower them to **educate the public**.*

In this case, the audience is members of the press, you are giving them up-to-date information on your Web site, and this is helping you meet the goal of educating the public.

> *Develop **online resources** to empower **activists** to **affect public policy**.*

Now the audience is activists, you are providing them with online resources, and they're helping you achieve the goal of affecting public policy.

Your statements of purpose can be general at this point—you'll flesh out specifics later in your plan.

4. Define Your Site Structure

This is where you'll start to sketch out the basic sections of your Web site. There are a number of sections that most Web sites will have, like one that gives **background** on your organization and one that provides **information for the media**. You'll probably also want to include a section that gives people options for getting **involved** in your organization and another that contains **resources** for people seeking more in-depth information. You may also want to develop other main sections that are specific to the work that you do.

Think creatively about how to organize the information on your Web site on the macro level, but remember that in the end your goal is to develop a site with an **intuitive navigation system,** and your site structure will naturally become the basis of your navigation system, so make sure it makes sense.

At first concern yourself only with the **top-level sections** of your Web site. Once you have defined those sections you can start fleshing out their content, and at this point you should

be very descriptive, explaining the functionality of each section, who will use it, how they will get there and how it will help you achieve your goals.

5. Lay Out Your Site Map

Once you have outlined the **main structure** of your Web site, the next step is to develop a site map. You've probably seen Web sites that allow you to look at a site map to see at a glance how the entire site is laid out. Creating such a site map is a great way to make sure that the overall structure of your site makes sense.

You may wish to develop your Web site in **stages**, starting out with a simple site and adding functionality as you have the capacity or money. Start by thinking pie in the sky and draw a big map for your ideal site. Then start paring that down to what you think you can realistically accomplish. It might be helpful to develop three or four site maps that represent everything from a brochure-ware site that simply provides the most basic information about your organization, all the way up to an interactive site that contains searchable databases of information, online communities and chat rooms.

6. Develop Your Front Page Content

While the site map that you outline will drive the main navigation of your Web site, you should consider carefully what information you place on your front page. It will be the **first page** that most people see when they visit your site. It would be nice if they could simply look at your navigation bar and know where to find the information they're looking for, but that's most often not going to be the case.

Your goal on the front page is to provide limited content that will allow an individual to **self-select** as a particular audience. Go back to principle #2 and look at your top three audiences. These are the groups that you most likely want to engage on the front page. Rather than use text like *"activists click here,"* be more engaging:

> *Want to help protect Tiny Creek? We've been working for 25 years to do just that. Get involved!*

This text serves a couple of purposes. Rather than simply giving people an option to get involved, you're giving them a *reason* to get involved—they can help protect your special place. And just the mention of your group's 25-year history lends credibility without a lot of wordage.

While you'll want to include two or three **static teasers** like the one above to help direct your most important audiences to the sections of your site they'll find most useful, you'll also want to have information on your front page that is **regularly updated**. This will help give your Web site a fresh, up-to-date feel. Think about the kinds of information that your organization distributes or has access to and how you can make timely information available on your front page. You could have links to recent press releases or new reports your organization has issued. If you don't produce new content regularly you might consider

linking to external sources that do. For example, you could briefly summarize newspaper articles about your organization or issues and link to the full stories on other sites. Most importantly, you should make sure you continue to update this section of your front page regularly. It's great to have time-sensitive material on your front page … as long as it's not six months old.

7. Make Your Database Work for You

What does your database have to do with your Web site? It's probably the best tool you have to **keep people coming back**. You can't just put up a Web site and assume that people will stop by on a regular basis. Rather, it's important to have email addresses you can draw on to let people know when you have new content on your site—it's a quick, inexpensive way to keep in touch.

First, confirm that your database has a place to put email addresses. Also, make sure that your organization is actively collecting email addresses: membership forms and merchandise order forms should include a space for an email address, and individuals in your organization who handle phone calls or email correspondence should also be collecting email addresses and funneling them into your database. People aren't always forthcoming with their email addresses because they're afraid their inboxes will be flooded, so assure them that you won't be sharing their addresses with other organizations and **specify what you'll be sending them** (see principle #8) and how often.

Your database needs to be integrated into appropriate parts of your online communications plan. Consider places where your Web site should take input from forms and feed it into your database, and times when you'll be turning to your database to get email addresses.

8. Use Email Outreach Effectively

Before you start gathering email addresses in earnest, consider how you intend to use email for outreach and how these efforts are going to connect back to your Web site. The most basic thing to do is send out a regular email newsletter to those individuals whose email addresses you've collected. While you could certainly pack all of your content into that email, you'd be missing an opportunity to direct people back to your Web site. Instead, your newsletter could consist of short summaries (50 words or less) of your articles with links to the full content on your site. This format allows readers to quickly browse to see which pieces most interest them, while providing more value than a simple list of article titles.

You could also let people tell you **what they want to receive** information about. For example, do they want to get action alerts? Are they interested in one or two particular issues that you work on? If you are currently sending out action alerts to your entire email list on a weekly basis, your members are probably experiencing information overload. If you can target them with information they care about, you can send them monthly action alerts that will have a greater impact. To do this you'll need to track people's interests in your database and use an email merge to pull out specific names. For more information on email merging and sending effective email messages, see:

http://www.onenw.org/bin/page.cfm?secid=15

9. Assign Responsibilities

Once your plan is near completion you should consider **who will actually be implementing it**. Start by breaking the work up into tasks and figuring out who can take responsibility for what—specific staff members, volunteers or consultants. Included in the assignments should be a timeline for expected completion of tasks, and consider that some tasks must be finished before others can get underway. Assignments shouldn't stop with the completion of your Web site. While in the planning process you should assign maintenance tasks as well. It's important to do this before you take your site live or you'll have a lag between the initial launch and the time when you start updating the site on a regular basis.

10. Market Your Site

While the Web is a kind of marketing tool in and of itself, it's important to consider using some resources to try to **drive new people to your Web site who might know little about your organization beforehand.** There are two main ways to promote your site: online and offline. The online method is the most obvious, and the first step is to make sure that your Web site is being picked up by search engines. Go search for your organization in some of the top search engines: Yahoo, Altavista, Google, MSN, etc. If you aren't showing up you need to do something about it. You can read more about your options here:

http://builder.cnet.com/webbuilding/pages/Business/SearchSecrets/

Another option for online marketing is banner ads. Unless you can very clearly target people with banner ads by putting them on relevant sites or working with a search engine company to match your banner ads with keywords, they may not be worth the investment of time or money. The click-through rates on banner ads are dismally low.

Offline marketing refers to any form of **traditional marketing**: print, radio, TV, billboards. Traditional marketing can be a very effective way to drive traffic to your Web site if you can hit your target audience. This means figuring out the demographics of radio stations, newspapers and magazines—their ad departments usually have a lot of information on this.

11. Budget Your Expenses

A final step, after you have most of your plan written out, is to develop a budget for your project. This budget should include **money** that you will be spending on consultants, stock photos and images, and any other materials or software you'll need to maintain the site. You should also consider including **staff time** in your budget. For most nonprofits time is scarce, and you should set expectations in advance for how much staff time it will take to build and maintain the site.

12. Evaluate and Refine

Once you have your site up and running, you should evaluate it and the process you are using to maintain it. Ideally you would integrate **specifications** into your plan for evaluating your site on a regular basis. It can be difficult to measure exactly how much effect your Web site has on your work because often it is forcing you to work in a different manner. Instead, start by looking at the goals you proposed for your Web site and develop some metrics with which you can evaluate your success based on those goals. Consider setting goals for specific campaigns or certain functionalities of your site. For example, if your site gives people the ability to give you their email address, set a goal for how many addresses to collect per month. You should define the most important content on your site and look at your usage reports to see if those important pages are being viewed. If you aren't meeting your goals you need to review your site and see if there are improvements that can be made in the site structure or the way the content is presented in an attempt to improve those outcomes.