

SECTION 4: DEVELOPING A PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT PLAN

Public engagement requires a significant investment of time, effort, and resources. It also requires a thoughtful and strategic direction. Strategic planning can save time and headaches down the line if you are clear from the beginning about the objectives of your engagement.

Whatever your public engagement objectives are, it is important to be clear about your desired end goals. Re-evaluate those goals from time to time to make sure yesterday's goal is still valid today. A roadmap is of little value unless you have a destination in mind.

As mentioned in Section 1, it's important to remember that public engagement is more than the dissemination of information – it is two-way communication, requiring listening and dialogue between you and the key audiences you want to engage.

Answering a few questions up front is crucial to developing a game plan. The most important questions are:

- What do I want to happen as a result of my efforts?
- To whom or to which audiences should my efforts be directed?
- What is my time frame?
- Can I do the work myself?
- Who can I enlist to help me?
- How soon do I want results?

Answering these questions is the first step to successful public engagement.

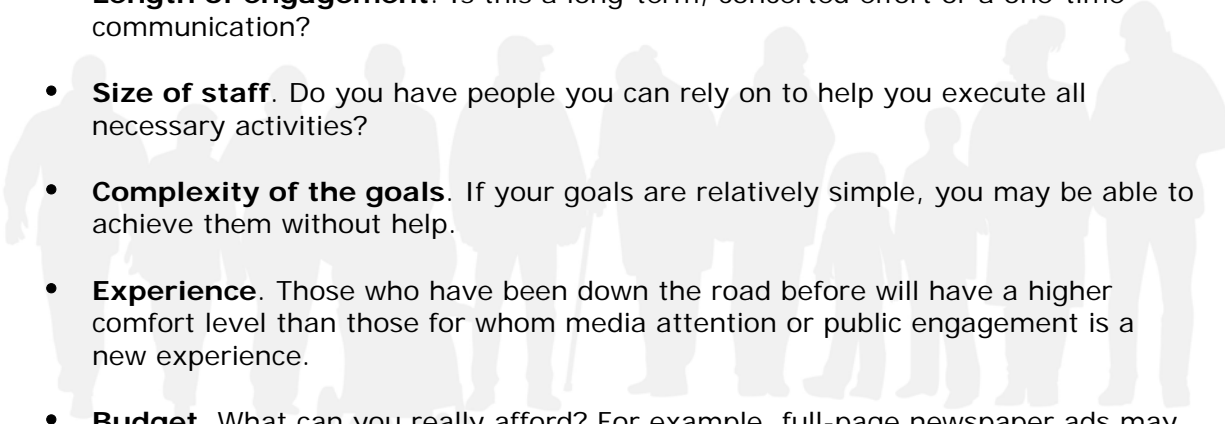
Determining Your Capabilities

While most libraries fully understand the public nature of the mission when it comes to their patrons and supporters, it's not uncommon to see a certain amount of hands-off treatment when it comes to the media, various interest groups, and government officials. Embracing the long-held perception of the "quiet" institution, libraries today can quickly find themselves at odds with that persona, especially when confronted by outspoken individuals or groups who desire an open dialogue about library policy or materials.

Further, pulling effort and resources away from what is believed to be the library's core responsibilities can make it difficult for libraries to see the value of spending time in proactive outreach – in other words, public engagement in *advance* of an immediate need. However, that's the point of engagement: to foster understanding, build relationships, and diffuse the potential problem before it is ignited. And public

engagement gives you the advantage of doing it from a position of offense rather than defense.

The biggest concern is whether or not you feel capable to execute your engagement activities on your own. The Ohio Library Council has significant exposure and expertise in this area and should be a first point of contact for any library considering a public engagement campaign. Determining if the OLC or extra help is needed depends on a number of factors, including:

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- **Length of engagement.** Is this a long-term, concerted effort or a one-time communication?
 - **Size of staff.** Do you have people you can rely on to help you execute all necessary activities?
 - **Complexity of the goals.** If your goals are relatively simple, you may be able to achieve them without help.
 - **Experience.** Those who have been down the road before will have a higher comfort level than those for whom media attention or public engagement is a new experience.
 - **Budget.** What can you really afford? For example, full-page newspaper ads may be tempting to get the word out about your issue, but they can be expensive and don't always accomplish your goals.
 - **The players.** If your goal is to build better relationships, the library board and staff are the best equipped for targeted outreach. If your goal is to saturate the community with a grassroots approach, engaging groups such as Friends of the library and perhaps others with expertise in this area may be necessary.

Identifying and Engaging Key Stakeholders

Any public engagement effort requires you to identify the people who could affect or be affected by changes or challenges at your library. Stakeholders may include but not be limited to:

- Internal audiences including board members, staff, and volunteers
- Library patrons
- Friends of the Library groups
- Neighboring libraries
- Local elected officials
- Nearby schools and universities
- Affiliated organizations (OLC, ALA, and regional associations)
- Identified public opinion leaders beyond elected officials

- Media (print, radio, TV, Web)
- Civic groups and citizen action groups (e.g., ACLU)
- County Job and Family Service offices

As your stakeholder list is developed, it will become apparent that the level of interest, and thus engagement, will vary. No single approach or activity will be successful in engaging all stakeholders. Instead, it's important to mix and match a number of approaches to meet different stakeholder needs. Since some stakeholders may choose not to participate until late in the process, it may be necessary to revisit or review information previously developed for the project. To ensure you have created a comprehensive stakeholder list, be certain to ask the following questions:

- **Whose support is needed and why?** Make contact with those people or groups early in the process to explain why the library needs their support.
- **Who are the community leaders that shape public opinion?** You need them to understand how your activities will affect the community and what you are doing to maximize the positive impact of your efforts.
- **What groups' involvement could affect the project's success?** You may need to do some research on how other libraries have engaged communities on issues similar to yours – including the resistance met or support received – to better understand the forces with which you are dealing.
- **Is opposition expected?** If so, make sure you are communicating with the opponents, even though you may never win them to your side. Opponents are often those who feel left “out of the loop.”
- **Has every group that could be affected been given the opportunity to participate?** It's not always necessary to sponsor a community-wide meeting to make stakeholders feel included. A one-on-one conversation or simple phone call at the right times might be enough.

Turning Stakeholders into Allies

Alliance-building has long been a proven tactic in political grassroots efforts. It's hard to imagine anybody being elected to public office without a number of diverse groups coming together in support of the candidate's policies.

Allies can be important to the library as well. As you implement a public engagement plan, you are, in essence, running a “campaign” for the library and its role in the community.

Key stakeholders can help you succeed if they understand the benefits of your activities and the laws and guidelines by which you operate. As you consider whether or not to enlist an ally in support of your plans, don't overlook other libraries, especially those that have gone through similar initiatives or neighboring libraries that also could find themselves in a similar position in the future.

How Alliances Can Help You

Working with partners instead of alone has several advantages, including:

- **Third-party credibility.** This is the most important advantage to building alliances. By enlisting others in your efforts, the public can see that you are not working only for your own interests; you also are working for the common good.
- **Increased resources.** An ally who shares a common interest with you may be willing to provide staff, finances, or other resources to help you get your messages out.
- **Audience penetration.** Working with an ally provides you with an opportunity to get your messages to those you might not be able to reach on your own with limited time and resources.
- **Education.** Members of the general public as well as local decision-makers sometimes misunderstand the value libraries bring to a community or don't fully understand the guidelines under which all libraries operate. By engaging them in your issue and ongoing operations, you can educate them about the contributions you bring to the community.

Assistance Allies Can Provide

Before approaching a potential ally, make a list of ways they might help. Your individual circumstances will dictate the help requested, but some examples include:

- Writing letters to the editor in support of your issue.
- Accompanying you to selected meetings with local decision makers, civic groups, and the media.
- Including a mention of your issue and the benefits of the library in a company newsletter.
- Helping to build understanding among decision-makers with whom they have a good relationship.
- Becoming an active volunteer or board member.

Approaching a Potential Ally

As mentioned earlier, your stakeholder list should include all of those who could help or hinder your success. They may include other libraries or library associations, key community opinion leaders, elected officials, and patron groups. While members of the media should be included on your stakeholder list, they are not likely to be an appropriate ally. Media relationships are addressed in more detail later in this section.

It's important to follow a few rules of thumb when approaching potential allies. For example, you should always:

- **Be clear about your plans.** Describe your issue or long-term goals in a way that allows others to understand and empathize.

- **Ask for help early.** The best time to bring others in on your issue is before it becomes a public controversy. It is much more difficult to enlist others if they believe you've become a "target."
- **Express a willingness to reciprocate.** Let them know that if they are there for you, you will be open to helping them with a future need.
- **Provide a clear explanation of what you want your allies to do.** Make sure you spell out why you have approached them and how you believe they can help.
- **Describe what's in it for them.** Allies have little reason to become involved if they don't see the value to their own interests.
- **Provide a description of what could happen if your plans fail and what will happen if you succeed.** Sometimes, the negative impact of failure will affect a stakeholder more dramatically than the benefits of your success. Make sure you explain the stakes in both positive and negative terms.

Developing Media Relations

While there are likely to be many stakeholders that you'll need to engage on your issues, one critical stakeholder group that deserves special attention – and requires understanding on how they operate – is the media. They have a vested interest in "accurately informing" the public about your issue, not necessarily telling your exact story. That is a critical distinction, and knowing that from the beginning will help you in working successfully with the media.

Understanding News

The most important thing to know about the news media is this: ***They are going to print their stories with or without your input, so you might as well make your voice heard.*** And, it is much easier to work with the media when you are working proactively and spreading "good news" than it is to try to develop relationships with reporters when you are in the midst of a crisis. For this reason, a proactive media relations effort is a vital part of your community engagement program.

Following is some practical guidance for dealing proactively with the media. It will help you better understand the media, what it is they want, how they work, and what drives them.

The News Media Today

While it's easy to lump all news organizations under one general category – "the media" – there are numerous distinctions between print, broadcast, and Internet news organizations. There are even stark differences between specific functions within news organizations. It's important to understand these differences before engaging with the media.

The way people get their news has shifted dramatically as technology and society have changed. At one time, newspapers were king, primarily because there were no alternatives. With the advent of radio and television came the ability to get "real time" news. Suddenly, people who didn't want yesterday's news today, or who only wanted highlights, began tuning in to the television news. Some never returned completely to

newspapers, and today almost twice as many people get their national and international news from television as from newspapers.

The advent of the Internet has thrown a whole new dynamic into the mix. We now have the ability to search out news and opinions from almost anywhere in the world, whenever we want them. Today, more people get their national and international news from the Internet than from radio, which lags behind in fourth place. While that isn't particularly startling on its face, it has ramifications for anyone dealing with public image or reputation issues. That's because special interest groups that might not be able to get their messages out in conventional ways are providing their own information via the Internet.

Societal changes have altered the face of journalism, too. We live at a faster pace today, and fewer of us are interested in "all the news that's fit to print." We tend to be more interested in "all the news that affects me now." While general interest newspapers, network television and local television news still attract the most people, they are all losing audience to the Internet and ethnic and alternative media. News organizations have reacted by reducing staff, merging television and newspaper news operations, and selling out to non-local owners. The point? The reporters you will encounter are probably spread thin, stressed out, and all competing for that "great story" like never before.

What is News?

We all know the answer to that, right? When a dog bites a man, that's not news; when a man bites a dog, that's news. Why? Because it's different and unexpected. This is one way to define news, but it's not the only way. In fact, news can be just about anything if it:

- **Affects a large number of people.** This is why the weather is still news, after all these years.
- **Affects a smaller number of people in a dramatic way.** Coal miners trapped in a mine is news.
- **Has a strong visual element.** Fires and car chases are news.
- **Could touch or impact almost anyone.** This is why controversies like syringes in Pepsi cans or cyanide in Tylenol make the news.
- **Reflects controversy or conflict.** If everyone agreed that the Ten Commandments should be displayed in county courthouses, doing so would not be news.
- **Connects local people or events to a story happening elsewhere.** A man surviving a ride over Niagara Falls is news everywhere. It's an additional news item when somebody from your local community witnesses the act, as was the case with a couple from Pataskala, Ohio, which made the story front-page news in the *Columbus Dispatch*.

Cultivating Relationships

Cultivating relationships with reporters is as much science as it is art. You must first understand what drives reporters so that you can be helpful to them. The goal of cultivating relationships with reporters is to establish a mutually beneficial relationship

between you and reporters in your community so that they can contact you when they need something and vice versa.

In general, reporters are trying to get a good story and are working to meet their assigned deadline. News is an “instant” business, and reporters are under the gun to get the best story and to be the first to report it.

Two critical ways to cultivate relationships with reporters are to understand their motivations and to work to provide information to them that meets their needs.

For example, it is critical that anytime you contact a reporter with a story idea about your library, you are providing them with a story that fits into the definition of “real news” (as outlined above). Before you contact the media about a story on your library, you should analyze carefully what the news is and why they should care. For instance, look for stories that:

- Illustrate a new way of doing things.
- Describe an event that is about to happen rather than one that has already occurred.
- Benefit the community or the economy.
- Highlight an unusual circumstance.
- Involve interesting or prominent people.
- Have a visual element that will appeal to photographers or videographers.

One of the best things you can do to cultivate relationships with reporters is to be cognizant of their deadlines and respond in a way that helps them meet those deadlines with a good story. Breaking news can't wait until the next day because by that time it will be “old news.” The story must be completed by the deadline, and you can help by responding to reporters in a timely way – no matter how difficult or inconvenient that might be for you.

Proactive Outreach

Putting the principles of relationship cultivation to work, you can begin proactively reaching out to reporters in your community.

Make a list of the newspapers, magazines, radio stations, television stations, and prominent Internet sites in your community. Identify the appropriate person at each of these organizations with whom you will want to cultivate a relationship. A general guideline for the titles of the people you will work with includes:

- **Print publications.** You will want to work with the “beat reporter” who covers the library, such as a library reporter, education reporter, or community news reporter. It's also helpful to build a relationship with the editor of the newspaper or magazine, as reporters, particularly in smaller communities, tend to have higher turnover.
- **Television stations.** You will need to work only with stations that have a news department. Your point of contact will usually be the news assignment editor, but you may also want to identify and develop a relationship with a specific reporter.

For instance, you may consider working with the local meteorologists to do a children's program for the library on a regular basis, which generally results in positive coverage during the weather segments (often the most-watched portions of the program).

- **Radio stations.** The news director is the contact at most radio stations. Some stations do not have a news director. In these cases, you'll likely want to work with the program director.

Once you have your list of media contacts developed, identify opportunities to communicate with your contacts in a systematic way. You may want to create a contact matrix (see Appendix D.4) in which you log your contact's name, the date, topic discussed, and necessary follow up. This will allow you to track when you have made contact with reporters and serve as a reminder for you to touch base with them on a regular basis.

The end goal is to develop a relationship with these contacts – getting them into the library and educating them about the library's purpose, services, and activities – so that they know you and your organization well in advance of any challenge you may face. Following is a list of suggested activities that will allow you to engage reporters in an ongoing dialogue about your library.

- **Briefing meetings.** Contact each reporter and ask them to meet with you over a cup of coffee or lunch. Provide them with general information about the library, its policies, and its activities. Prepare a folder with printed information to leave with the reporter following the meeting.
- **Invitations to events.** Be sure to include your media contacts on your mailing lists and personally invite them to attend special events at the library.
- **Providing information.** As you get to know your contacts, you will learn about their interests and hobbies. As you run across books, articles, or items of interest, be sure to send the information or copies of the materials to the reporters. This is especially effective when the topic of the material has no benefit to you or your organization, but is simply a goodwill gesture on your part. Just like all of us, reporters appreciate thoughtful gestures.
- **Engage contacts in your programming.** As mentioned previously, TV meteorologists typically conduct educational programs for children as part of the station's outreach. Inviting your contacts to become part of your ongoing programming is an excellent way to engage them in your library's interests and activities. You might work with a local radio station to broadcast from your facility monthly or work with your local newspaper publisher to distribute free papers to your patrons at certain times during the year. You also might ask contacts who show high interest in your activities to become a member of your board or to serve on an advisory committee.
- **Thank you notes.** When you have worked with a media contact on a story about the library, it is important that you thank them. In addition to a verbal thank you, send a hand-written thank you note to the reporter. Thank the reporter for his/her time, not for the "great story," as they may perceive this as an insult to their journalistic integrity. Regardless of whether you felt the story was positive, balanced, or negative in slant, you want the reporter to know that you appreciate his or her time and the opportunity to talk about the library. Despite the fact that

they report on hundreds of stories, reporters are rarely sent thank you notes, and a little thanks can go a long way in building a relationship with your contacts.

If you have the time and resources, you should consider developing a full-scale media relations plan. A comprehensive toolkit for developing a full-scale media relations plan is available from the American Library Association (see Appendix D.11 for more information).

Key Considerations of the Public Engagement Plan

Building public awareness and support for issues and initiatives critical to your library can pay dividends if implemented correctly – or become costly if they are implemented poorly. That’s why every major project or communication effort should have a written plan that describes goals, stakeholders, possible public impacts, roles and responsibilities, key messages and public engagement components.

The public engagement plan is a written document that will help organize and guide your external relations efforts. The written plan should answer the traditional questions of “who, what, where, when, why, and how” by discussing the following clearly and concisely:

- **Situation statement and project scope.** The introduction should *briefly* describe the scope of the project. It should state the goals of the project and how you want the public to perceive that project.
- **Engagement objectives.** The plan should explain “why” you are attempting to engage the public in your project.
- **Key messages.** This part of the plan should include the overall ideas you want the public to accept – in other words, the three to five most important things you want the public to know about your library and your planned activities. These positive messages, which should be clear, crisp, and concise, will guide all of your communication and outreach efforts.

Key messages for your public engagement plan may look something like this:

- *Our library meets a public need by providing materials and resources to the community that foster lifelong learning and understanding.*
- *Our library strictly adheres to the laws of the State of Ohio and the American Library Association’s Library Bill of Rights to guide us in our decision-making process to ensure we are meeting the needs of all members of our community.*
- *Our library cares about the safety and privacy of our patrons, especially children, and takes seriously its responsibility to ensure these issues are enforced.*
- **The players.** The plan should be clear about “who” will be involved in communications and outreach, their specific duties and responsibilities, and how the project and the public engagement will be managed.

- **Engagement activities.** The plan should spell out what activities or tools and techniques will be undertaken during each step of the project. In other words, answering the questions of “what, when, where, and how.”

With this framework in mind, there are a few key principles that are critical to building trust and credibility:

- **Telling the truth.** This is rule number one. You should be as forthcoming as possible. Never give incorrect or misleading information, and remember, as a public entity, most if not all of your communication – as well as your written engagement plan - is public information.
- **Promising only what you can deliver.** It’s better to under-promise and over-deliver than to over-promise and under-deliver.
- **Proper timing.** Think through who needs to know first, second, third, and so on. For example, always strive to notify your internal audiences and local officials before talking with the media. Key audiences will want to hear your news from you first, not the media.
- **Community involvement.** The organizations with the best reputations, regardless of their industry, are those who make community involvement a business practice. Libraries are well suited to build on their role and strong reputations as organizations that serve the lifelong learning needs of the community.

Typical Public Engagement Activities

Your engagement plan is likely to contain a variety of activities for each step of the process. Following is a brief description of some of the activities that need to be included in most plans:

- **Stakeholder identification.** In addition to providing the key information about involvement by various groups, individuals or businesses, the stakeholder list serves as the basis for mailings and other notifications.
- **Media relations.** It is important to build partnerships with the local media to help ensure that your message is being told accurately. Leaving it solely up to the reporter to get it right means he/she could send the wrong message to a wide audience.
- **Development of materials.** These must be written in clear, concise language so people can understand them. There may be a need for a variety of materials depending upon the targeted audiences.
- **Meetings, interviews, and presentations.** The type and purpose of each must be clear. The number and type of meetings for each step and who will organize each should be detailed in the project plan.
- **Hotlines/Web pages/newsletters.** If any or all of these items are used, the type and purpose of each should be spelled out and it must be clear who is responsible for creating and updating content.

- **Displays and use of library bulletin boards.** Clarity and brevity are key considerations – the information must be easily and quickly absorbed and understood by audiences not intimately familiar with your issue.

Additional Considerations

Always remember that there is no one-size-fits-all plan. The scope and content of your plan will depend on three things:

1. **Strategy.** What overall approach makes sense? What combination of approaches makes sense? Is it unlikely that only one approach will be enough? What legal requirements or processes must be met?
2. **Magnitude.** How much is enough? Determine the appropriate program magnitude and develop an efficient planning process. Keep it simple.
3. **Budget.** The time needed to plan meetings, prepare mailing lists, document meetings, answer phone requests, and respond to questions can be significant. Be mindful that using consultants to perform these tasks can be expensive. However, if staff resources are limited, consultant assistance may be needed. Be sure to establish a budget before beginning the planning process.

A community engagement work plan checklist and a sample community engagement plan are provided in Appendix D.2 and D.3.