

Planning Communication Activities

While not every PMI site is planning for a media *component*, every site must anticipate the need to communicate with its target audience, and in some cases, secondary audiences. Communication activities may directly work toward PMI objectives—like influencing norms or attitudes—or may promote PMI services—like skills building workshops or condom distribution. Advertising, public relations, collateral materials (such as posters, buttons, or brochures), and interpersonal communication all fall into the definition of “communication activities.” Communication activities will enhance each PMI component.

Most of these communication activities will require the development of materials ranging from newspaper articles to information kits to T-shirts or TV or radio PSAs. PMI program planners will need to provide direction to consultants, creative teams or advertising agencies in a way that ensures that all communications will be consistent and effectively address program objectives. A broad look at communication activities across the PMI components will ensure integration and efficiency. And developing an overall communication plan up front will help site staff decide on allocation of resources.

Step 1. Defining Communication Objectives

The first step in planning for specific communication activities is to establish communication objectives. These objectives define exactly what you hope to accomplish with your communication activities as opposed to the other activities of your program. Communication objectives must always relate directly to your overall program objectives and strategies. For example, let’s say one of your program objectives is to improve safer sex negotiation skills among your target audience and that your strategy is to offer skills building workshops. A communication objective might be to motivate the target audience to attend the workshops. Another communication objective might be to recruit peer counselors to lead skills building sessions.

So start with looking at each of your program components. For each component, consider what you would need to communicate and to whom. Think about each of the possible target audiences that you need to reach, including influentials and intermediaries. Then for each of these audiences, ask the question: “What do we need to tell people to do or inform them about to make this component effective?” You will need to define a communication objective for each target audience that will be involved in or reached by a program component.

Step 2. Defining a Communication Strategy

The next step is to define strategies to meet each of your communication objectives. A communication strategy will set the approach that you intend to take with communications in terms of channels and messages. This strategy statement will help you decide how to allocate resources and determine which kind of "creative" partners you need to implement the communication program. There are four basic categories of communication channels that you might consider:

- advertising (paid or PSA)
- public relations
- collateral materials (posters, brochures, T-shirts, etc.)
- interpersonal (including presentations, peer outreach, "sales" calls, etc.)

You would use each of these categories in different ways to accomplish your communication objective. Cost and effectiveness are the main issues to consider as you determine which categories you want to use and how best to use them. Each communication category has particular inherent strengths and limitations. The communication strategy will take this into account and specify exactly how the channel will be used in your program.

Let's look at an example of a communication strategy for a particular communication objective.

Communication Objective. To motivate the target audience to attend skills building workshops

Communication Strategy

- Use advertising to promote the benefits of attending skills building workshops and provide information about location, time, etc.
- Use public relations to reinforce the "hip" image of the workshops and increase receptivity of the target audience to recruitment efforts.
- Use collateral materials to raise awareness of the workshops and provide information about content, location, time, etc.
- Use interpersonal communication to recruit attendees and help them feel comfortable about participating.

Defining communication objectives and strategies as in the above example is a crucial first step in the process of developing materials and media strategies. This will serve as your project's *communication plan*. This plan will define all of your project's communication objectives and strategies. You should not proceed to the development of a creative brief until you have a communication plan. The plan should always be presented to a creative team along with the creative brief.

Step 3. Writing a Creative Brief

Once you have a communication plan, you will need to provide more specific direction to your creative team so that they can begin to develop communication materials. A creative brief "briefs" the creative team about the parameters for developing messages and materials. While your brief will set initial direction, your creative team may bring insights and ideas that could lead you to want to change some portions of the creative brief later, and you should remain open to that.

A creative brief should be written for each communication objective in your plan. Any major product or specific material may require its own tailored creative brief. You will be able to look to AED and Porter/Novelli for assistance in developing each creative brief. Experienced communication professionals will bring expertise to the process.

CREATIVE BRIEF

Who? Describe the target audience for this particular communication task. Give more than just a demographic description — provide some insight into the audience's mindset.

What? What exactly do you want the target audience to do as a result of this communication? Be specific about the action you want them to take. In the creative brief, the communication objective (for example, "to motivate sexually-active 14-18-year-olds to attend skills building workshops") is taken to another level ("to attend three skills building workshops over six months to improve safer sex negotiation skills"). The "what?" here states *precisely* what you want them to do.

Why? Why should the target audience want to take the action/make the change we are seeking? What are the compelling benefits? What are some barriers to overcome? Make sure the benefits promised are rooted in reality - specify what it is about the product/service/behavior that supports these benefits for the target audience.

Desired audience response. It is helpful to write a response that you would like the target audience to have as a result of your communication. For example, "I want to attend the skills building workshop because it will help me take more control of my life. I'll call some friends and see if they want to go with me."

Tone. What is the image you're trying to associate with the product/service/behavior? What is the tone that the messages should take to be more effective with the target audience? Is it serious and straightforward? Is it lighthearted? Is it rebellious? Is it comforting? While final decisions about tone may be part of the creative execution, you should have some ideas in your initial creative brief. Selection is not arbitrary or whimsical, but will be based on experience and an understanding of the target audience. Look to professionals for guidance here.

Executional considerations. Are there specific copy points that need to be included? Language or literacy considerations? Requirements related to logo treatment?

Having a creative brief is not the end of the planning process. The other important questions that need answers as you develop a communication plan include "where?" and "when?" Most of these decisions will need to be made in consultation with your creative team. For example, a decision about using radio vs. TV advertising will require input from your local advertising agency or consultant. Decisions about the best times to run your advertising messages should also be based on their recommendations. Decisions will still need to be made about the specific kinds of materials you need to produce, the timeline for implementation and budget allocations. The costs for production of your materials will need to be discussed with the agency or consultants based on their proposed design and your budget guidelines.

The following are a sample communication plan and a creative brief based on one particular communication objective.

Communication Objective #1

To motivate sexually-active 14-18-year-olds to attend skills building workshops.

CREATIVE BRIEF

Who? Sexually-active 14-18 year olds who use condoms inconsistently and experience problems negotiating safer sex with partners. Target audience tends to be low-income, with a significant Latino population. Some practice same-sex behaviors but most do not self-identify as gay. The target audience is seeking a sense of greater control over their lives and values independence.

What? Attend three skills building workshops over six months to improve safer sex negotiation skills.

Why? Key benefit for the target audience is gaining a greater sense of control and independence by improving skills in negotiating safer sex. Support for this claim:

- research indicates that target audience wants greater sense of control and independence;
- more effective negotiation skills will allow the target audience to control risky situations;
- skills offered in the workshops will include ways to manage a variety of sexual situations and ways to prepare for sex.

Potential barriers to attending the workshops are the audience members' sense that they don't need to learn anything (a know-it-all attitude) and their reluctance to discuss personal issues with peers.

Desired audience response. "I want to attend the skills building workshops because the skills will help me gain more control of my life. I'll call some friends and see if they'll go with me."

Tone. The image should be hip and trendy. Tone should also be one that inspires confidence and comfort with the workshop setting and experience. Fear-based messages should be avoided.

Executorial considerations. Messages need to provide 800# for more information and allow for tagging with workshop times and locations. Spanish-language versions of materials are required.

COMMUNICATION PLAN

Program objective:

To improve safer sex negotiation skills among sexually- active 14-18-year-olds.

Communication objectives:

1. To motivate sexually-active 14-18-year-olds to attend skills building workshops.
2. To recruit peer counselors to lead skills building sessions.
3. To encourage parents and other influential adults to support safer sex skills-building activities.

Communication strategies for objective #1:

- Use advertising to promote the benefits of attending skills building workshops and provide information about location, time, etc.
- Use public relations to reinforce the "hip" image of the workshops and increase receptivity of the target audience to recruitment efforts.
- Use collateral materials to raise awareness of the workshops and provide information about content, location, time, etc.
- Use interpersonal communication to recruit attendees and help them feel comfortable about participating.