

Communications Primer Step 6: Choose Your Pathways to the Public



Once you've settled on your target audience, your core message, and your goals and outcomes for your communications work, you can begin to think about the best pathways – or methods – you should use to reach your audience. We're all familiar with a variety of communications pathways – from magazine, radio and television advertising, to direct (junk) mail, the Web, email, and signs or billboards. Indeed, there are pathways to communication all around us everyday, but you'll need to determine the most effective method to reach your target audience and to achieve your desired outcomes or goals. You'll want to be thoughtful in your choices and be prepared to pre-test and evaluate the success in each case. In this section we'll review the most common pathways to the public and provide some inspiration for thinking creatively.

The News Media

The news media - including newspapers, magazines, television, the Web and radio - is one of the most common pathways to increased public awareness. A thoughtful strategy, patience and a sense of humor will help you find the media coverage your issue deserves (see the [Cultivating Media Relationships](#) section for more details). Traditional news outlets, like your local newspaper or nightly news, still enjoy a level of credibility not found through advertising. Of course, beyond the work of placing a story, there is no cost for news coverage – which is especially attractive to those of us with limited communications budgets. However, the audience share and demographics that most news pathways reach is somewhat limited.

The national trend for print newspapers and television news has more seniors and families without children connecting. The audience tends to be made up of educated, financially stable people who vote. This might be your target audience, but it makes sense to research demographic data of major newspapers in your target area before deciding how much time to spend on story placement – this includes Web-based news. Demographic data for most media outlets is available through the advertising sales division. In general, it makes sense to include the news media in your pathway plans, but don't make the mistake of betting the farm on just one pathway.

[Click here](#) for details on Great Lakes Forever news media efforts.

Paid Advertising

Paid advertising, with the exception of face to face communications, is probably the most prevalent communications pathway we

Do News Conferences Still Matter?

News conferences seem glamorous, especially if you've never held one. Most of us are familiar with presidential press conferences, where important treaties are announced while reporters shout provocative questions and cameras whirl all around. While we may feel our issue is worthy of such attention, few reporters are likely to drop everything for information that could best be shared via email or a standard press release.

However, if your organization has some especially strong news – perhaps a large corporate donation or an unusual announcement involving a major political figure – press conferences can be effective. Nothing draws a crowd better than big money and celebrity – even if that celebrity is your town's mayor or your

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encounter on a daily basis. Everywhere we turn we find paid advertising. Perhaps one of the strangest ad campaigns was in the late 1990's when the ABC television network advertised its new fall programs with stickers on bananas at the supermarket. It sounds crazy, but as environmentalists, we should appreciate the fact that the advertisement was biodegradable.

Don't assume that you can't afford paid advertising – radio spots and even television can be surprisingly “cheap” in small and medium-sized markets. And production costs, whether for print or broadcast ads, can be limited with some creative controls.

To decide whether paid advertising is right for you, consider your goals and audience first. Paid advertising can provide exceptional exposure to specific targeted audiences. And, unlike the “earned” media you try to get through press releases, paid advertising guarantees exposure. Sometimes, as in the case of the “Swift Boat Veterans for Bush” campaign of the 2004 presidential election, the advertising can become a story on its own and be highly successful at earning “free” media. But, as with the Swift Boat campaign, controversy may not be the best vehicle for raising the profile of your cause.

Many sectors of the public have a great dislike of advertising – something you'll want to consider as part of your audience targeting. Print, radio, and television ads seem to have increased over the decades, but the public has a certain tolerance for these more “traditional” advertising methods. Perhaps less tolerated are billboards, electric signs, packaging, and other “public” forms of advertising that are often accused of “polluting” the public space. Direct mail, or “junk” mail, can be problematic – so consider your options carefully. If your group is interested in paid advertising, consider consulting a professional agency that specializes in non-profit causes. Some communities have associations for advertising professionals that provide consultation to non-profits for reduced or no fees.

[Click here](#) for details on Great Lakes Forever paid media efforts.

Public Signs and Point-of-Experience Products

Public signage and other “point of experience” communications products can be an effective way to target an audience at a specific resource, such as a state park, a beach, or on a trail or dock. Unlike billboards designed for high speed viewing, smaller signs and related products can be designed for close inspection and reading. Some signs are educational – providing historical or scientific information – or instructional – encouraging specific behaviors that can benefit the resource. Classic educational signs are found in museums, zoos, and on trails and roadsides throughout the world. Instructional signs are found nearly everywhere, telling us to “Buckle Up,” “Don't Litter,” and to “Slow Down for Children.”

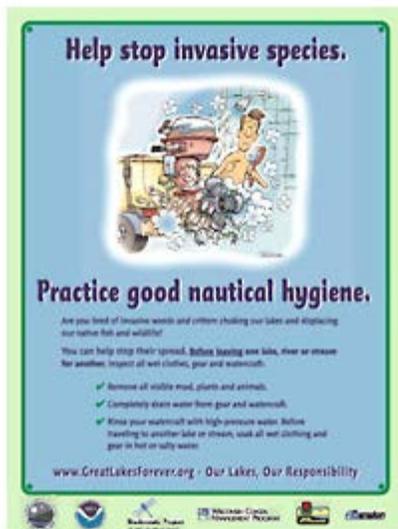
The effectiveness of these kinds of communications can be hard to evaluate, but you may want to consider them in your communications strategy. Try to keep messages on the signs clear and graphically compelling. Place your signs where people will see them, but not someplace where they'll have to compete with – or even spoil – a view. Signs on docks, beaches and other points of recreation often go ignored because visitors are there to play, not

provincial premier. So, here are a few tips for organizing a news conference:

- Don't take more than 5-10 minutes to make your point. After that you're probably repeating yourself, or gratuitously allowing every coalition member a turn at the mic.
- Designate a moderator or lead speaker. Limit the number of speakers and the length of their remarks. Remember, your best messenger may not be your highest ranking staffer, but someone directly affected by your issue, an expert or someone else with newsworthy value.
- Choose a site that offers something visual for the TV cameras: a forest or lake, the site of flood damage, an urban garden or city park, etc. If you can't hold your news conference on location, use large charts or blown-up pictures, invite children or affected neighbors.
- Allow reporters to question individual participants after the formal presentation is done. Reporters will often take individuals aside to get quotes or pictures that will be exclusive to their station or newspaper.
- It's important that all of the participants understand and stay with your message, so rehearse with them.

Free food and refreshments aren't usually expected, but reporters will appreciate them.

to read signs. However, nearby restrooms, picnic areas, and campsites could be effective locations.



In recent years, signs in restrooms, near the sinks or above the urinals have become more commonplace. Of course, you'll want to consider the location as it relates to your message – signs about water conservation could be great in public restrooms, but you might not want use bathroom stalls to educate folks about organic produce. Biodiversity Project worked with the Wisconsin State Parks system to develop the adjacent sign for posting in showers and above urinals in coastal parks (for more about this project, [click here](#)).

You don't have to limit yourself to signs either. Messages on menus at area restaurants or in local hotel rooms might find a captive audience that is visiting the very landscape you're working to protect.

For most non-profits, partnerships are required for any signage or point-of-experience products. Never develop signs on your own without firm commitments

on placement. Local, state and national parks could be excellent venues for your messages and, with decreasing budgets, these agencies are often eager for partnerships with non-profits. However, venue providers may ask you to alter your message for a variety of reasons. Be careful about compromises and make sure your communications goals are served by the partnership.

Also, local businesses might appreciate the opportunity to show their "green" side by working with you – they may even offer to cover some of the production costs. Costs for producing signs and other materials vary, but building the partnerships can be time and staff intensive.

The Web and E-mail

The internet – including the Web and Email – is your friend. As a source of instant information and two-way communications, there is no more powerful medium. Web-based communications have the advantage of being environmentally friendly – no paper – and you can update and change text as your issue or organization evolves. E-mail communications can be tied to your Web site, be personalized and targeted by subscriber interests, and provide instant citizen action on timely issues.

Although the costs can seem daunting, the technology is surprisingly accessible. Web sites can be designed by skilled amateurs, student volunteers, or agencies that specialize in non-profit contracts. Hosting fees – for the service that "puts" your site on the Web – are usually less than twenty dollars a month. Groups with smaller budgets can produce pages and pages of full-color content on the Web for a tiny fraction of what they would pay for a printed brochure or glossy newsletter. You can ensure the greatest possible exposure for your site by choosing an address with a clear connection

Web and Email Design Resources

There are numerous resources for non-profits on the Web. The following sites are merely a recommended starting place for discounted software, nonprofit technology advice, support, and more:

General Support and Advice: Powered by CompuMentor, one of the nation's oldest and largest nonprofit technology assistance agencies, TechSoup.org (www.techsoup.org) offers nonprofits a one-stop resource for technology needs by providing free information, resources, and support. In addition to online information and resources, they offer a product philanthropy service called TechSoup Stock. There, nonprofits can access donated and discounted technology products, provided by corporate and nonprofit technology partners. Check out their "How To" section for many useful tips!

Fundraising & Email Support: Groundspring.org's (www.groundspring.org) mission is to improve the effectiveness of the nonprofit sector by providing information technology solutions that facilitate and enhance communication and engagement between nonprofit organizations and their stakeholders. Groundspring.org offers software tools

to your cause and placing it on all of your communications – from business cards, to emails, to letterhead, newsletters, press releases, adverts, and etc.

Web sites can be time intensive – the most effective “communications” sites require regular maintenance and content updates (we’ve all been irritated by sites that carry outdated information.) You’ll want to budget time, either weekly or monthly, to update your site. It takes time, but visitors will appreciate it. Consider putting a special “For the Media” section on your site where press releases, print-quality images, and useful contact information is available. Likewise, you’ll want to provide donation information and sign up for your email list – if you have one.

Many Web and E-mail services offer a variety of tools to help you evaluate the effectiveness of your electronic communications. In addition to counting the number of visitors your site records, you can track which pages they visited, how much time they spent there, and how they found your site. Some E-mail services allow you to track the success of your mailing campaigns – recording the number of E-mails sent, the number actually opened, clicked through, links followed, and forwards to friends. Compared to traditional postal communications, this is a remarkable tool.

Finally, it's important to note new Federal Anti-spam laws and privacy concerns. Consider your organization’s philosophy and either adopt or write tough privacy rules. This includes collection and sharing of E-mail addresses, frequency and content of E-mailings, and the ability to “unsubscribe” from lists. Remember, high communication standards – electronic and otherwise - are most appreciated when they are actually enforced.

Visit <http://www.greatlakesforever.org> to see the Great Lakes Forever Web site.

Public Events

Public events can be wonderful communications opportunities. Although this category traditionally suggests fundraising and membership-oriented functions, public events can almost always include some form of “media friendly” component. Events have the advantage of drawing resources together – giving staff, board members, and volunteers an opportunity to collaborate and celebrate the mission of the organization in a very tangible way.

In order to draw the media, you’ll want to offer them something unique. Local or national celebrities can be a wonderful draw, but so can citizen and volunteer actions – such as [BioBlitzes](#), Beach Clean-up Days, or restoration programs. Make sure that a staff member is assigned to host any media that show up for your events and be certain to have extra copies of media kits to give away. Likewise, events can create “photo ops” for local newspapers and television stations, so be prepared to

and services, training, and consulting that can help nonprofit organizations raise funds and communicate with their stakeholders online, and manage their operations more effectively.

Email Newsletters & Outreach: Constant Contact (www.constantcontact.com) is a web-based email campaign management solution designed and priced for small and medium sized associations, membership organizations and other nonprofit organizations. Constant Contact manages every aspect of your email campaign communications, making design of your electronic newsletters surprisingly easy (no special software is needed,) with contact management and evaluation tools built in. However, unlike the other two resources mentioned here, Constant Contact is a for-profit venture.

Web Site Hosting: There are far too many Web site hosting companies to make a recommendation. However, a good hosting company should provide you with visitor statistics using Urchin, Webalizer, or another tracking program, a technical support number with a human on the phone, and a reasonable rate - a local hosting company may even host your site for free. If you need a new host for your Web site, check with Consumer Reports or any number of computer magazines to see a rating of Web hosting companies to start your search.

Schedule Multiple Pathways for Increased Chances of Success

Biodiversity Project's Great Lakes

usher them towards images that reflect your core message – perhaps children planting a tree or learning to identify insects. And, when considering funding, always ask local newspapers and broadcasting stations if they’re interested in sponsoring your event

Forever (GLF) initiative registered the most activity when they had the most communications pathways engaged - activity on the GLF Web site and with the media peaked in late July and August 2004 while the following pathways were running simultaneously:

- Web site online
- Media kit & press releases in the hands of reporters
- Magazine ads running
- Radio ads running
- Public participation events running
- Beer coasters in restaurants
- Educational signs in coastal state parks
- Policy awareness postcards direct mailed to citizens
- Coverage in partner newsletters
- Coverage in Biodiversity Project newsletters

From the above list it's conceivable that a member of GLF's target audience could receive the GLF message in the following fashion: "While on vacation on Lake Superior, Jane Doe purchases a copy of Wisconsin Trails magazine - where she sees the GLF print ad. That day, she hears the GLF radio ad three times while driving in her car to the state park. At the park she notices the educational signs about protecting the Great Lakes. That evening, at a local restaurant, she's served a drink on a GLF coaster. Upon returning home from vacation, she finds a GLF postcard in the mail informing her of important public hearings. Curious, she visits the Web site and sends in her postcard. The next morning, she reads a story in her local paper about a Great Lakes BioBlitz and decides to attend. Little does she know, she's become a Great Lakes advocate."

With thoughtful planning, your communications pathways - even if you are running just two or three - will all converge on your target audience at the same time. Map your communications products and pathways in a calendar to be certain you are taking advantage of overlapping coverage.

– it guarantees at least some coverage of your program.

The downside of such events is that they can be a drain on finances and staff time. And, if expected outcomes aren't achieved – such as attendance numbers – morale can suffer. Unexpected weather, political events, or high profile competition (such as a big sporting event) make events a bit more risky as a communications tool. Therefore, in a communications campaign, public events might best be used as part of the effort, rather than the whole effort.

Novelty Items and Unexpected Pathways

Bumper stickers, key chains and people in chicken suits all fall under a category we're calling "novelty items." In some cases these are relatively traditional pathways, like bumper stickers, t-shirts, coffee mugs, and key chains. But, in other cases, they are rather unusual, like [bar coasters](#), skywriting, and stickers on bananas. Novelty pathways are the chance for your organization to be creative and express its message in its own particular style. Greenpeace is an excellent example of an organization that has garnered tremendous attention and done some excellent work using unexpected communications pathways – such as skydivers, and mountain climbers unfurling "no nukes" messages in prominent public locations.

The costs of such communications varies widely. You and your colleagues might consider performing "guerilla street theater" in the middle of a busy shopping mall. Writing and rehearsing would cost little, but then there are the chances you'll need bail money and a good attorney. Give away items, from traditional t-shirts and bumper stickers to original spins like the AIDS ribbon and the "Live Strong" yellow bracelets, can have tremendous "fad" appeal. Good design, the appropriate tone, and a reasonable distribution plan can make a simple "penny item" really stand out. As environmental groups, however, we should be especially vigilant about NOT creating more waste. Make sure that your give-away items aren't just destined to be

throw away items – unless they're biodegradable.

Photo Credits: Michigan Travel Bureau, US EPA Great Lakes National Program Office.