

Communications

Pennsylvania Parks and Forests Foundation

Develop a Communications Plan

Developing a communications plan is a priority for the group's annual planning meeting. Plans are updated every year and answer the following questions:

- Who needs to know about the group's specific programs and issues?
- How are the materials and announcements of key information disseminated throughout the group (internal communications) and to others who need to know about it (external communications)?

Key questions to ask when developing a communications plan

Your communications plan will ensure that the right information is communicated to the right people. To do this your plan must answer the following questions:

Who are your key audiences?

What information should be communicated to each of these audiences?

Friends Group officers, board members, committee chairs, other key leaders
Friends Group members (if applicable)
Friends Group volunteers
Local media
Local, state and national decision-makers
General public
Others (including partners, key influential people, stake holders
PPFF
DCNR

Internal communications

- Create a planning calendar that covers the first three to six months of the year that lists all board meetings, monthly meetings, scheduled trail or other work, annual special events, etc. Circulate it to your board and volunteers, post it on your website, publish it as a flyer or brochure and distribute to local outlets.
- Create an email distribution list and communicate regularly with your group leaders and volunteers who have access to email.
- Participate in PPF's email discussion group—this is designed for PPF chapters to talk to one another in a discussion format, ask questions, share and gather ideas. (To sign up go to Yahoo.com. From the main menu, click on "groups" (left side of page). On the next screen (Find a Group), type in the group name: friends-of-pa-parks-and_forests. The next screen will display the recent discussion. Click on button at bottom right in this screen which is "Join This Group." It will then ask you to create your Yahoo Id sign-in name which you will use to re-enter the discussion group whenever you wish.)
- Create a folder of orientation materials that can be given to new board members including your brochure, newsletter and any other information that will help orient them.

- Figure out a way to transfer the group's important papers to incoming Presidents. Develop a checklist of items that they are responsible for and should have during their tenure including: chapter handbook, PPF policies and procedures; copies of minutes; chapter creation paperwork (Article of Incorporation, MOU, etc.)

External Communications

Develop systems for outreach by regularly communicating information about your group's programs to your membership and the broader community including:

- Create a website and keep it updated. Local media regularly check websites for background information when covering your group's events and activities. It is an invaluable tool for keeping the public informed of the great work that you are doing, for recruiting volunteers, attracting new members, and raising funds.
- Develop a newsletter or other regular communications piece and post it on your website. Announce upcoming meetings or special events, list your chapter officers and contact information. Make sure to include local media to your distribution list including local newspaper editors, television and radio producers.
- If you have a membership, develop a membership brochure which describes your organization and its activities. (See sample attached.)
- Attend local events and set up an information table with information about your group and its activities.
- Develop an inexpensive table-top display that can easily be taken to meetings or conferences. (For example, purchase an acrylic 8 ½ x 11" holder and print out a copy of your groups name/logo to place on table top along with any other information about your group that you wish to distribute).
- Get the word out to the community. Make contacts with your local media by developing a media contact/distribution list. Send out regular news releases and media advisories for special events. (See publicity section for more details).
- Work with your park manager or district forester to submit your group's calendar items to the DCNR calendar and to PPF.

Develop a communications or outreach committee that can help you to brainstorm other creative ideas to attract public recognition of your activities as well as help you do some of the legwork! Remember, outside people may sit on committees.

Publicity

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Your Friends group's programs and activities can benefit from greater public awareness and wider community exposure through publicity. By using the media effectively, your group can develop an effective tool to communicate its message to the general public and gain visibility in the community. There is no better way to educate people about an issue you care about than to have it featured in your local media.

Why Communicate Your Message?

The numerous benefits of effective publicity include:

- **Generating support** for your group's issues and programs.
- **Improving cooperation** with local officials, educators, and other local conservation groups.
- **Increasing chapter membership** through greater exposure.
- **Attracting new members and volunteers**—the lifeblood of local environmental stewardship efforts.
- **Increasing attendance** at your programs and events.
- **Promoting your projects and programs to potential funders**, including foundation and agency staff, businesses and individuals. Projects cost money, and getting the word out will increase the viability of your work among organizations and individuals who can help you cover your expenses.
- **Educating public officials about the benefits of local projects.** Let them know why your group and its projects are important to the community. Explain why public officials should care about your project and why they should support programs and policies that make your work possible.
- **Reaching out to the community—let the public know about your good work and invite them to participate in your programs and events.** It's up to you to develop a strategy for regularly communicating your group's activities to the public so that they know who you are, what you are doing and how they can get involved!

Working with the Media

Get to know the media outlets in your area and create a list of media contacts including:

Newspapers—daily, weekly, college

You will want to include any environmental or outdoor reporters that may be on staff, however, you may have messages that are appropriate for another reporter's beat.

Consider adding:

Outdoor/tourism reporters

Health, consumer affairs and science reporters

More often than not, your message is probably considered “softer” news, more story-like news vs. hard, breaking news. In this case you will want to contact a feature reporter or a reporter who writes for the “Living”, “Outdoor” or “Community” section. Editorial writers can also be an important part of your list.

Newspapers publish a regular calendar of events—depending on the paper they can run weekly, monthly, quarterly, and as a special supplement to the newspaper. Contact your paper to find out the particular deadlines and add this information to your contact list.

Magazines—including local, regional and statewide

Magazines are always looking for exemplary conservation projects and environmental leaders to profile. However, magazines need more lead time – often three to four months. Contact the magazine to find out when you need to submit your article and photos. In addition to articles, remember to submit letters to the editor and calendar events to local and regional magazines.

Community, organizational, school and business and other organizations newsletters—print and on-line.

Television and radio stations including free community calendars

Do not wait for the media to come to you. Reach out to media outlets to inform them about what you are doing, invite them to speak with you, and ask them to tour the project you are working on.

Other ideas for working with the media:

- Identify and ***develop relationships*** with key contacts in the media. For example, find out the environmental beat reporter for the major local newspaper and become a resource for them on matters related to your projects.
- Meet with newspaper editors. Educate them about your projects.
- Pick a positive, out-going member of your group to be your spokesperson with the media.
- ***Localize*** the story—tie the story to the community.
- ***Be creative***. Make the story interesting to readers, viewers, and listeners. Show how it is unique.
- Be ***timely*** in your communication with the media. Get your stories to them as soon as possible.
- ***Invite the media to your local events***. Send out a ***media advisory*** a week before the event. Provide directions to the event. (See example.)
- After the event, follow up with the members of the media who did not attend. Tell them what happened at the event. Give them any hand-outs that you distributed.
- Send interesting photographs with captions to newspapers. Include local people, but do not make the photos appear crowded. Heads should appear no smaller than the size of a nickel in the photo. Include the following information in the captions: who, what, when, where, and why. Make sure names and titles are spelled correctly and make sure that you have signed photo releases of all identifiable faces.
- Tell reporters about future events.
- After the event, thank reporters for coming, but do not try to tell them what to write.
- Write press releases, letters to the editor, and op-ed pieces (see next section).

Writing a Press Release, Letter to the Editor, or Op-Ed Piece

A **press release** is designed to provide newspapers, television and radio news departments with detailed information from which they can write an article or develop a story. A **letter to the editor** is usually limited to about 300 words and allows the author to take a stand on an issue. It should be well-researched and include information to support the author's position. An **op-ed** is a 600-900 word essay that appears opposite the editorial page and gives the author the chance to educate the public and advocate a strong position. Similar principles apply to writing all three pieces.

- Think about the **interests of the public**. Why would the public be interested in the story?
- Start with your **key message**. Begin with the important information. The lead sentence should tell the essence of your story. The first paragraph should tell the reader who, what, when, where, why, and how.
- **Keep it simple** and concise. Write for no higher than an eighth grade reading level. Do not use jargon or clichés.
- **Use facts and figures** to support your main point. Include information that will be relevant and understandable to the audience. Make sure the data is accurate.
- Include the date, title, contact person or author, and contact information.

Press release specific format

- Include your logo (if you have one).
- Include date of release.
- Give contact information and make sure contact person is at the number on the release date.
- You want your release to read exactly like the ideal story you would like to see in the paper.
- Use the headline to convey the most important message of the story.
- The dateline (city, and sometimes state, where the story takes place) should be in capital letters.
- The first paragraph, or "lead" provides the main idea of the story.
- A quote from a key member of your group or expert should be included high in the story.
- Supporting paragraphs answer the how and what of the story and give the reader more details of the lead. All paragraphs in the release should be short and concise.
- If the release goes over one page, indicate this by adding the word "more" at the bottom of the page.
- On continuing pages, use a slug line at the top of the page to identify the release, as well as the date and page number. For example, "Page 2/PPFF Announces Grant Awards/August 11, 2006"
- If appropriate, include a web address where more information is available.
- All releases should end with a boilerplate that describes your organization. Mission statements are often adapted to this purpose.
- End all releases with ###, centered on the bottom of the page (see example format).

Media Advisories

The news advisory informs reporters of the time and place of a news event you will conduct such as a news conference or a public event including a workshop or demonstration.

Media Advisory format

- The title tells the recipient what the event is about.
- Give sufficient background information to make your story interesting, but be careful not to give away too much. You want the media to have to come to the event to get the story.
- Give the logistical information in “who,” “what,” “when,” “where” format.
- Be sure to include contact information
- If the event is at a specific location, give detailed directions and a map.
- Always try to include something to pique their interest, such as good visuals, diverse representation from local citizens, refreshments, costumes, celebrities, etc. or some sort of hook, such as a bag of trail mix for a trail opening, plant seeds for a garden unveiling, etc.
- For an upcoming event, make sure to get the point across that you have people for the writer to speak with. Include factual information to drive the importance of the story.
- Send the advisory out a week before the event and have the press release available for the media to pick up the day of the event.

Cautions:

If you question an action, call PPF before moving forward. As a non-profit organization, remember that we cannot support or endorse political candidates, or appear that we are supporting or endorsing a candidate.

(Some of the information presented here was adapted from National Audubon Society’s “Chapter Leader Guide,” 1993 and PA Organization for Watershed and Rivers “Communicating Your Message.”)

Sample Press Release Format

(On your letterhead, or create letterhead using your logo/group's name/address)

NEWS RELEASE

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

August 11, 2006

CONTACT: *Name of your group representative*
Your group name
Phone number where this person can be reached
Email address of this person
Website of your group, if applicable

TITLE IN BOLD

Town or City and date/year of news release

Write three to four succinct paragraphs detailing your event or project utilizing the guidelines provided above.

For more information on this project/event contact:

(Give complete Contact Person's information again, including phone number, email and website if applicable)

End with the boilerplate language you developed (using the organization's mission statement).

###

(placed at the end in the middle of the page, signifies there is no more to this release)

Sample Media Advisory format

Contact: Name of your group representative
Your group's name
Phone number of the contact above
Email of the contact
Your group's website

MEDIA ALERT/PHOTO OPPORTUNITY

YOUR CHAPTERS EVENT HERE

Brief summary statement of what the event's purpose is goes here.

WHO: Your groups name and any lead partners

WHAT: Your event.

WHEN: Make sure to list the day of the event, as well as the date and time, e.g. Friday, August 11 at 2:00 p.m.

WHERE: Where your event will be held and indicate that the directions follow. (Directions Attached)

CONTACT: List all contacts for the event here with name, title, phone number.

In a short paragraph briefly describe the event or project's details and any photo opportunities.

DIRECTIONS: Make sure to provide accurate directions from all major routes to your event.

From the East:

From the West:

From the North:

From the South:

###

(Three pound signs at the end of the text indicate that this is the end of your advisory.)