

FOR BUSY MANAGERS

9-step

COMMS PLAN



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Halo

Welcome

So, you've got an issue on the horizon – it might be politically sensitive or something that's going to be highly visible, go on for a long time and be highly disruptive. It might be happening locally, but you know it's got the potential to blow up city-wide, regionally or nationally.

It might be something to do with chopping down trees, closing down facilities, opening up a prison or a new rubbish dump, demolishing heritage buildings or closing off roads for long periods of time.

Whatever your project, you'll need a good comms plan to help you manage the issues and mitigate the risks. It's a companion document to your project plan and will help keep your communications on track so the right people know the right things at the right time.

And if you communicate with your communities early enough, you might just manage that issue more effectively than you'd hoped for.

Work through the plan framework that follows, using the headings to create your own comms plan.

You'll be surprised how everything falls into place just by following the steps.

Before you start you need to think about whether you are:

- literally just communicating information about your project – e.g. informing your audiences
- wanting more meaningful engagement and to know what people think about your project or idea – so they can help shape what you do
- consulting your community because you have a legal obligation to do so.

This comms plan works well for informing your audiences about what you're doing.

It doesn't provide the depth you'll need for meaningful engagement or consultation with your community – get in touch and we can help you with that.

FIRST THINGS FIRST

The title

Boring stuff first – your plan needs a title and a date. This might seem obvious but often when you're faced with an issue, the 'project' might not even have a name yet. Naming is important because often what you start with as a working title for a project is still in use many months or years later.

Spend time talking through the name and any issues around it, and make sure that if it gets turned into an acronym it's not going to cause you any additional grief.

Electronically file your plan in a place where it's easy to find, and use version control so you'll always know you're working with the latest version. This way, if you need someone else to pick up the work for you, it's easy for them to find, and carry on.



Background

This section is often overlooked but is really important. It provides the context for everything contained in your plan.

Make sure you include all the information you have about the issue and the project.

You need to think about the detail:

- What's the issue?
- How did it come about?
- When is it happening?
- Who's involved?
- Where is it happening?
- Who does it affect?
- Has anything similar happened before, and if so, what were the learnings?
- Is there anything peculiar or unusual about the issue that should be noted?
- Are there any political implications?

All the pertinent information about the issue/project should be contained in this section.

Done well, the background section will help with your written materials (social media posts, media releases, web pages, brochure content etc).

It's also useful to note what's worked well (and what hasn't!) if you've faced a similar issue in the past.

Spend plenty of time on this section and include any research or relevant observations.

Include an environmental scan of what else is happening at the same time and think about anything political that might affect your issue and what you're planning to do (e.g. new policies or legislation).

Risks & issues

In an ideal world, as well as a comms plan your project will have a project plan. Risks and issues for the project should be included in the project plan so you can focus on the ones specific to your communications.

However, in the real world you may not have a full project plan (if you have one at all) so your comms plan becomes even more important. If this is the case, you can go a bit deeper with identifying the risks and issues.

It's only useful to do this section if you spend time thinking through the mitigations to the risks and issues you've identified.

How can you manage these, so they don't cause you reputational risk?

It's time well spent though as identifying as many issues as possible up front, and dealing with them, will help your project run smoothly.

The things you're looking for are public perceptions, budget or time overruns that turn into political issues, anything sensitive affecting the environment, potential disasters etc.

Play devil's advocate and use lots of 'what if?' scenarios to flesh out all the issues.

Examples

Spend time thinking about your communications risks and issues and how to minimise them.

RISKS & ISSUES

MITIGATION

01 Issue: We have to remove a tree while we carry out construction work.

Risk: The community will be up in arms about the removal of another tree in their area.

Investigate your options first. Can you:

- Relocate the tree to a better location or transport it back into place once work is completed.
- Or plant a new tree afterwards if the old one is dangerous, not native, not significant...

Be clear about what is happening and why.

02 Issue: We need to dig up shop frontages and cordon off pedestrian access.

Risk: Businesses rely on pedestrian through-traffic for their bottom lines; this work could affect patronage.

Visit all the businesses to discuss their issues and what can be done to mitigate them.

Provide a promotional package to support them during the work. Hold events in the area to attract people to it.

03 Issue: We need to close down a popular facility due to declining numbers.

Risk: Those still using the facility love it and don't want to move – they may go public with their plight, damaging our reputation.

Engage early with all the key stakeholders.

Understand the issues. Work through how you can respond.

Give people time to get used to the changes and to come up with viable alternatives.

Objectives

What are you trying to achieve and how will you measure this?

Sometimes when you're dealing with an unpopular decision or managing a tricky issue the best you can hope for is that people understand the reasons for doing the work (or making that decision).

It's often difficult to come up with quantitative measures for communication objectives, but think about how you'll know if you've been successful.

Below is an example of objectives and measures for a project that's closing a school.

OBJECTIVE

MEASURE

01 Those attending the school and their families are involved in the decision and exploring the alternatives.

90% of families are met with or attend meetings.
Feedback received indicates families understand issues.
Active engagement from school community.

02 All stakeholders understand the decisions made.

Supportive engagement on social media and in the news media.

03 Families know their options for school alternatives.

100% of children enrolled in new schools before old school closes.

Stakeholders/ audiences/tools

Who are the people you want to communicate with? Some may have a vested interest like environmental groups, lobbyists or a particular demographic like young people. Others may be people you think need to know about changes coming.

It's important to identify all your audiences and stakeholders, including internal and external ones, and think about their interest in what you're doing and how you want to communicate or engage with them.

Your audiences may be from a particular demographic e.g. men who are business owners aged 25-40 years living in Auckland.

Or you may have a more general audience e.g. all mothers of pre-school children.

If you don't know who you're trying to communicate with, spend some time researching and working this out.

Also think about how your audience likes to find out about things.

You'll want to consider a raft of tools that might appeal to different audience segments. These can be things like:

- website
- signs
- posters
- newsletter
- social media
- letters
- radio
- newspapers
- meetings.

You'll want to choose a range of tools and tactics to reach as many of your target audiences as possible.

Example

Using the school closing example – who are your audiences, what is their interest in what's happening, and how will you reach them?



AUDIENCE

Who needs to know?

INTEREST

What's their particular concern or interest?

TACTICS

How will you reach them?

Board of trustees	Governance and decision-making	They'll be leading the communications planning and delivery
Teachers	Employment Welfare of students	One-on-one meetings Work through change management process using specialist HR/Ministry of Education support
Students Families of current students	What are the alternatives? Where will we go to school? How will we get there? Where are my friends going?	Meetings for families Info sheets Info signs/panels at the school Website Visits to new schools
School suppliers: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • IT • Phone • Stationery 	When is it happening? What does it mean for existing contracts?	Letters Follow-up phone calls

WHAT ARE YOU TRYING TO SAY?

Key messages

What are the top three to five messages you want people to understand?

These are sentences, not advertising straplines or slogans. For more complex projects you'll need generic messages relevant to everyone and some audience-specific messages as well.

EXAMPLE: Road works project

- We're continuing to improve pedestrian, motorist and cyclist safety in your area.
- We'll be widening the road and putting in a shared pathway between Lewis Street and Redwood Street.
- There will be diversions and stop/go traffic management in place while we work on the road.
- For your own safety and that of our contractors, please drive carefully in this area or use an alternative route.
- Work is expected to start on 1 July and take about six months to complete. Hours of work will generally be between 7am and 5pm weekdays and some Saturdays.



HOW WILL YOU GET YOUR MESSAGE ACROSS?

Strategy

What's your strategy? Will it be split into phases or segmented for different audiences?

Explain your overall strategy here. It's good to phase strategies depending on the projects.

EXAMPLE: Road works project

Phase 1: Internal

Communication within the organisation – so everyone knows what's happening and why.

Phase 2: Key stakeholders

Advised of the work and asked to identify any issues that need to be considered and addressed up front. Communicate with directly-affected neighbours and local businesses. This will be through face-to-face meetings, letterbox drops and public information sessions.

Phase 3: Broader communication with the wider city

Advertising on local social media sites, website information, a media release, general public information sessions.



Resources

You need to cost out the things you want to use to get your message across and prioritise what you can afford.

These are the tools and tactics you've identified earlier in the plan.

If you're getting materials produced (like posters or flyers) you'll need to factor in design and print costs.

ACTIVITY

QUOTE

Advertising placement: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• social media• newspaper• print• online	
Design work: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• posters• flyers• billboards• adverts	
Printing: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• signage• posters• flyers• billboards	
What else?	

Action plan

This is the most important part of the plan to ensure that things happen on time. Make sure that everyone who's responsible for an action knows about it, is happy to do it and keeps to task. You'll need to project manage this if there are multiple people responsible for the implementation of your plan.



DATE	ACTION	RESPONSIBILITY
	Agree comms plan	
	Book in designer and advertising	
	Draft content for posters and flyers	
	Approve posters and flyers	

WHAT'S NEXT?

Need more help?

Yippee! You now have everything you need to do your own basic comms plan. However, sometimes projects or issues are way more complex. You might need to do some serious stakeholder management, engage with your community on some changes or consult on a proposed new facility. Or maybe you'd just rather concentrate on building the thing - and get someone else to lead your communications. Give us a call and we can create your comms plan and then implement all the activities required to make things happen.

GET IN TOUCH WITH HALO TODAY



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