



Communication Strategies

Overview

A communication strategy is a plan for providing information to specific audiences about a specific issue, event, or concern. A communication strategy serves as a blueprint for communicating effectively on a specific issue with the public, stakeholders, or even colleagues.

Generally, a communication strategy:

- Outlines the objectives or goals of the communication.
- Identifies key stakeholder groups and audiences and their concerns.
- Defines key messages to convey or key information to collect.
- Identifies potential communication methods and vehicles for communicating information for a specific purpose.
- Specifies how feedback on the strategy will be obtained.

Communication strategies are different from [*community involvement plans*](#) (CIPs), which are required under the National Contingency Plan (NCP). A CIP is a comprehensive site-specific plan for conveying and receiving information throughout the cleanup process in a manner that enables meaningful community involvement. A communication strategy can be one component of a CIP, but it addresses only a specific event, issue, or concern, such as an emergency response to a release, or communicating the specific risk at a site.

Why This Is Important

This activity is important because, while not required, developing a communication strategy can help the site team communicate effectively by defining key messages for any communication, identifying the concerns that may be raised, and ensuring that the proper audiences are reached when significant events or issues arise at a site.

*This and all tools in the Community Involvement Toolkit should be used in conjunction with the [**Community Involvement Handbook**](#), which provides guidance to EPA staff on how EPA typically plans and implements community involvement activities at Superfund sites.*

Implementation

You will develop several communication strategies during the Superfund cleanup process. Communication strategies for milestones and events that are known in advance can be developed in advance. Examples include announcing the public comment period for the record of decision or a construction completion. In other cases, you may have to develop a communication strategy for unforeseen events, such as an unexpected release at the site. In some cases, it is a good idea to develop a communication strategy for communicating risk, [*reuse and redevelopment planning*](#), or addressing specific technical issues related to a site. In any case, the basic approach is similar: outlining the issue and developing key messages, defining the key stakeholder audiences, identifying potential communication vehicles or methods, considering the resources available, and determining the feedback mechanisms that will allow you to monitor response to the communication. Refine your strategy, if appropriate, and evaluate the effort.

Communication strategies do not have to be formal written documents. They can simply involve thinking about a problem or issue and determining the best approach for communicating the message or information to the intended audience. This simple but mindful approach is useful for communications about uncomplicated issues at low-risk sites that have not generated a high level of public concern. However, at sites with high levels of public concern or site cleanup issues that are complex or potentially controversial, developing a more formal written strategy may be necessary to ensure that all key audiences are reached and key messages are communicated effectively.



Developing a Communication Strategy

The first step when developing a communication strategy is to define the purpose and the desired objectives for the communication. Ask: What is the issue to which EPA is responding? What action is EPA taking that we need to communicate? What do we want to accomplish by communicating this information? Objectives may include the following:

- Providing information.
- Increasing awareness.
- Encouraging action.
- Building consensus.
- Changing behavior.
- Promoting community participation.
- Resolving conflict.
- Asking for input.

Once the reason for communicating the message is determined, identify the audiences you want to reach and determine how to reach them. Keep in mind that the demographics, knowledge, and concerns of your audiences play important roles in determining the key messages. Ask the following questions:

- Who is involved, affected, or interested?
- Are there traditionally underrepresented groups that need to be reached?
- What information does each stakeholder already have?
- What information does each stakeholder need?
- What are the concerns of each stakeholder?
- How is each stakeholder likely to react?

Once the previous steps are completed, meet with the site remedial project manager (RPM), on-scene coordinator (OSC), or other members of the site team to discuss the communication challenges and develop the communication strategy. Discuss the issue at hand and overall community involvement goals and objectives. Brainstorm and prioritize potential messages. Rank messages by importance, timeliness, or other factors and choose one to three of the most important key messages to convey. Make sure that key messages have integrity and are clearly communicated.

Once key messages are identified, determine the best ways to communicate them. You may have different communication goals for different groups of people. This means that you might want to use different communication methods to reach them, which can include the following:

- Briefings.
- Exhibits.
- Email blast.
- Fact sheets.
- Internet.
- Mailings.
- Presentations.
- Translations of documents into other languages spoken by community members.
- Press conference or event.

Also identify the most appropriate communication vehicles for delivering your messages. Keep in mind that you may choose different vehicles to reach different stakeholder groups. Note that the reach and impact of your message will increase if the

Example 1: Opportunity for Public Review and Comment on Proposed Plan

One community involvement coordinator (CIC) developed a communication strategy for informing stakeholders about an opportunity to review and comment on the proposed cleanup plan. After identifying the message and defining the audience, the CIC planned a two-pronged approach. He decided to hold a public meeting to announce the opportunity, and then to invite interested parties to a public participation workshop. By holding the public meeting at a library on a Saturday afternoon, he captured a wider audience than if it had been scheduled it on a weeknight. He identified participants to invite to a workshop the following Saturday. The workshop included information about: (1) requirements for public review of and comment on site activities; (2) documents supporting the proposed plan and how the proposed plan was organized; and (3) how citizens could maximize their contributions. A workshop handout offered step-by-step instructions for reviewing the site information (including what to look for) and for filing comments.

The result: More than half of the workshop attendees submitted comments on the proposed cleanup plan.

(See Attachment 2 for an example of how this CIC could have used the communication strategy worksheet. Attachment 3 is a blank copy of the worksheet.)



same message is disseminated several times and via multiple methods. Here are a few options:

- Media, including cable TV, display ads, news releases, and press conferences (see [Media Relations](#) tool for more information).
- Electronic media, including email, e.g., listservs or website.
- [Social media](#), e.g., Facebook, Twitter.
- On-site activities.
- [Public availabilities/poster sessions](#) or open houses.
- Celebrations or special events.
- [Public meetings](#).
- Face-to-face meetings with key stakeholders.
- Focus groups.
- Workshops.

When developing a communication strategy, it is important to consider the resources available and the resources likely to be needed to implement the strategy. Know about the resources available and take potential resource limitations into consideration when developing the communication strategy. Many of the best communication strategies use very cost-effective communication mechanisms, while others require using considerable resources. For example, sending an email to the site mailing list can be done for little cost and can be a very effective way to communicate some messages to a specific audience. Holding a televised media event or a news conference may be much more resource intensive, but it may be the more effective strategy if television coverage is the preferred medium for conveying your message. Similarly, you may determine that you cannot rely on email to notify stakeholders of an upcoming event because many community members do not use email, or that notices delivered by regular mail will be more effective. (See Attachment 1.)

Determining When and How to Deliver Key Messages

In an emergency or sudden, unfolding event, messages should be delivered as quickly as possible. This is especially true when the goal is to alert community members to the situation and provide critical information about what to do and how to remain safe. For other communications, determine the best time for communicating the message to the intended audience. Is the best time to reach your intended audience likely to be on weekdays or weekends, mornings or evenings, at work, or at home?

Example 2: Deletion of the Site from the NPL

At a Superfund site where the cleanup was completed and it was possible to delete the site from the National Priorities List (NPL), the CIC crafted one final communication strategy. She knew that it was important to reach a broad audience. Key messages included announcing the site deletion and communicating that the successful site cleanup was due primarily to community partnerships and to an important technological advancement developed at the site that cut cleanup time by 50 percent. The CIC also realized that communicating a deletion from the NPL should include state and regional officials who could give the cleanup success the attention it deserved.

Once she had considered her audience and framed the key messages, this CIC reviewed the many delivery vehicles available. She decided that holding a news conference that included state and regional representatives would be the best way to attract media attention and provide the high visibility that the story warranted.

This communication strategy was very successful: The news conference resulted in front-page coverage in the major city newspaper, and the story was picked up by the local television station.

Keep in mind that community demographics play an important role in determining the best methods for message delivery. Older populations or communities in remote locations may not be comfortable with or have access to the internet. Some subgroups may prefer radio or a community newspaper to television as a news source. The interviews conducted for the site's CIP often provide important insights on the communication preferences of the affected community. Build in time for producing materials and providing advance notice of events.

The media can play an important role in the communication process. If your communication strategy includes use of the media, work closely with your regional office of public affairs. Do necessary research in advance so you know which local media outlets to target. Know the media deadlines in advance and take these into consideration when timing your communication.



When planning face-to-face interactions with your audience, such as public meetings, it is important to schedule them after taking the community's needs into consideration. For instance, if most community members work during the day, schedule meetings in the early evening or on a Saturday afternoon.

Collecting Feedback

Collect feedback to assess the effectiveness of your messages and the ways you deliver them. Encourage your audience to provide feedback that will help you to evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of your communication strategy, how it can be improved, and what revisions to make to improve effectiveness. Note how many people attended a public meeting, monitor television station viewership numbers during the time

your story ran or count how many “hits” there were on a website news posting. Consider asking a few members of the audience for feedback in a one-on-one fashion. Review the feedback and use it to refine your communication strategy or future communications. (See the [Evaluating Community Involvement Activities](#) tool for additional information.)

Attachments

- Attachment 1: *Tips for Developing Effective Communication Strategies*
- Attachment 2: *Communication Strategy Worksheet Example*
- Attachment 3: *Blank Communication Strategy Worksheet*



Attachment 1: Guidelines for Developing Effective Communication Strategies

Refer to the following guidelines when drafting your communication strategy:

- Work with the remedial project manager (RPM) or on-scene coordinator (OSC) and the site team to define goals and objectives and to identify the most important ideas and messages to communicate. Limit the number of key messages to no more than three.
- Consult the site's community involvement plan (CIP) for information about the community, including their needs, concerns, interests, and expectations. A good CIP also often identifies the community's communication preferences.
- Coordinate with the regional office of public affairs.
- Collect feedback and document successes and lessons learned to determine how your strategy might be improved.
- Consult your communication strategy often to remind yourself of your goals, messages, and audiences.
- Revise your communication strategy if it is not producing results.
- Consider developing formal communication strategies for communicating risk, reaching out to specific audiences, or addressing milestones in the cleanup process and adding them as addenda to the site's CIP.





Attachment 2: Communication Strategy Worksheet Example

This example shows how to use the communication strategies worksheet to develop a communication strategy. It uses the information described in Example 1: Opportunity for Public Review and Comment on Proposed Plan (on page 3).

Section 1: Issue/Problem and Key messages

A. Description of the issue/problem:

Release of the proposed plan at Site A for public comment

B. The key messages to be communicated for this issue/problem:

Message 1: The proposed plan for Site A has been released for public comment.

Message 2: We will be holding a public meeting to answer questions about the proposed plan and comment process.

Message 3: At the public meeting you may sign up for a day-long workshop to guide you through the public comment process.

Section 2: Planning the Strategy: Audience and Communication Vehicle

Audience	Communication Vehicles
All key local and regional stakeholders	public notice, select media vehicles
Community Advisory Group/Technical Assistance Grant recipient group	public meeting, workshop
Local community members	public meeting; workshop; public notice; select media vehicles
State/local government	public notice; select media vehicle

Section 3: Implementation

Vehicle	Required Resources/Time
Workshop	Rent meeting room, prepare presentation materials, purchase and ship meeting supplies, and prepare briefing materials.
Public notice	Draft notice and contact local newspapers.
Public meeting	Secure meeting room, prepare meeting announcement and agenda, rent audiovisual equipment, prepare name badges, purchase and ship meeting supplies, and prepare evaluation form.
Select media vehicles	Determine media vehicles (TV, radio, internet or print) you plan to use, make telephone calls to establish relationships with media outlets, write and distribute the news release or public service announcement, and prepare handouts for the media.



Attachment 3: Blank Communication Strategy Worksheet

Section 1: Issue/Problem and Key messages

A. Description of the issue/problem:

B. The key messages to be communicated for this issue/problem:

Message 1:

Message 2:

Message 3:

Section 2: Planning the Strategy: Audience and Communication Vehicle

Audience	Communication Vehicles

Section 3: Implementation

Vehicle	Required Resources/Time

