

The Health Communication Material Production Process

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Introduction

Health communication is the process of promoting health by disseminating messages through mass media, interpersonal channels, and events. At The Health Communication Unit (THCU), we use a 12-step process for conducting health-communication activities.

1. Project Management
2. Revisit Your Health Promotion Strategy
3. Analyze and Segment Audiences
4. Develop Inventory of Communication Resources
5. Set Communication Objectives
6. Select Channels and Vehicles
7. Combine and Sequence Communication Activities
8. Develop the Message Strategy
9. Develop Project Identity
10. Develop Materials
11. Implement Your Campaign
12. Complete the Campaign Evaluation

As you can see, producing the actual communication materials, such as pamphlets, radio ads, television PSAs, posters, or newspaper ads, is step 10 – very late in the process. By this stage you have a good understanding of your audience; clear goals and objectives are set; communication channels and vehicles are chosen; and the message information, style and appeal are outlined. However, even with all that background research and planning, it can still be tricky to create a message that is exciting, commands attention, and encourages audience engagement. Following is some information and advice about the “Who” and the “How and When” of the production process to help you produce effective and cost efficient communication materials.

The “Who” of Production: Building Your Production Team

Depending on what kind of communication materials you produce, you will encounter a variety of tasks on the way to a final product. For example, you may need to write, edit, develop graphics, design layouts, and print. The first important decision you will make about these tasks

is who will do them. This decision, and all others in the production process, will be guided by the Golden Rule of Production: Of low cost, speed, and high quality, you can only pick two!

Working on Your Own

When deciding what to do on your own, remember only to attempt production tasks that are within your range of core competencies. For example, you may feel it is reasonable for you to promote an event or develop a volunteer newsletter on your own. Writing and editing content for the web or for a press release are other tasks that people often choose to do on their own, as it can be more efficient than teaching someone else about your work.

Working with Others

For production tasks that are not within your core competencies (such as graphic design and layout, video and radio ad production, or paid advertising campaigns), you need to find someone to help you. If you are in doubt of what you are able to effectively do yourself, it is best to get assistance. You can learn a great deal from watching and next time you may feel comfortable doing it yourself. Working relationships can be categorized in a variety of ways including paid, unpaid, and direct and/or indirect/mediated.

Paid suppliers

A *paid* working relationship occurs when you, the client, have a contractual relationship with some type of supplier/professional to do some aspect of the work relating to producing your communication materials for a price. As a paid relationship involves precious money from your project budget, it is important to find the right person/organization for the job. One way of doing this is to issue a Request for Proposals (RFP). RFPs should

- ❑ include a clear description of the objective (target product or service);
- ❑ explain the strategies and procedures that you expect them to use;
- ❑ clearly explain any background information that you expect them to consider when doing their work, for example, research findings about your audience, the current situation vs. desired situation; and
- ❑ define deliverables and deadlines.

Though cost is always a factor, particularly in the non-profit world of health promotion, remember that a supplier should be chosen not just because they quote the lowest price but also because you feel they are best suited to get you the product or service you require. That being said, be sure to get all compensation details in writing before commencing work with a supplier. Your RFP can form the basis for a contract.

Unpaid suppliers

An unpaid relationship involves all people who are working with you to get your communication materials produced without using your project budget. This can include internal staff, volunteers, or other external people who have agreed to do a job for free. For example, a graphic designer that you work with frequently may agree to do some free work for you because of the large amount of business you bring her.

In most cases, unpaid working relationships warrant caution. Though they can save you money initially, they can sometimes cost you in other ways, such as speed or quality. In the case of volunteers, it is important to carefully match their experience and qualifications with their assignment. This might involve creating job descriptions and viewing resumes and portfolios before agreeing to let a volunteer take on a task. With other unpaid suppliers it may be difficult to get the final product that you want since they may not feel as accountable to you as to a paid supplier – remember, profit is a powerful motive to do high quality work!

Direct suppliers

Direct relationships involve situations when you, the client, interact directly with those involved in the production process (for example, printers and designers). Direct relationships can be paid or unpaid.

Indirect or mediated suppliers

Indirect or mediated relationships occur when you hire an organization or professional (for example an ad agency or public relations firm) to manage all aspects of the production process (i.e. you then have an indirect relationship with designers, printers, etc.). Indirect suppliers can be helpful in gaining outside insights and expertise that are not available within your organization.

Though the immediate response of most non-profit organizations is to say that they cannot afford such a relationship, in fact a strategic organizational plan can make use of an indirect supplier possible. The immediate contract might be relatively small, but if the supplier knows that a long-term relationship may result, they may be interested. Consider the scope of your communication production needs over a few years, throughout your entire organization. There is probably more work than you realize!

Final decisions on your production team

If you create a matrix of these four dimensions, you can see that there are actually four types of possible working relationships: paid and direct, paid and indirect, unpaid and direct, and unpaid and indirect (theoretically possible but rare). As you are assembling your production team from these possibilities, always keep the final product in mind. The over-riding factor in assembling

your production team should be whether or not it will result in a final product that is exciting, engaging, and otherwise appropriate for your audience.

The “How and When” of the Production Process

Regardless of who your production team is, always try to ensure that one person has the primary responsibility for managing the project. Contact with multiple people can be very confusing to suppliers, can result in many different types of mistakes, and can make suppliers less willing to work with you next time. It is also important to be clear, from the beginning, how the approval process in your organization works and to provide your suppliers with frequent updates. Remember, if the relationship is strong, the work will be strong. If the relationship is weak, the work will be weak.

Writing and Editing

Regardless of whether you do any necessary writing yourself or whether someone else does it for you, it is important to keep a few key points in mind.

- ❑ Analyze your audience (who will be reading the information).
- ❑ Define your purpose for writing.
- ❑ Know the form the writing must take.
- ❑ Write with your audience in mind.
- ❑ Use clear titles, informative headings, and frequent summaries.
- ❑ Write naturally, the way you speak.
- ❑ Address the reader as “you.”
- ❑ Use the active voice.
- ❑ Keep your paragraphs short.
- ❑ Write in short, simple words and sentences.
- ❑ Focus on transitions and make your roadmap clear.
- ❑ Avoid abbreviations and acronyms and define all technical terms.
- ❑ Use lots of white space to make the piece less work for the reader.

Though writing is important, editing is even more important. When editing

- ❑ Allow the first draft to germinate for as long as possible.
- ❑ Read a clean, printed copy each time.
- ❑ Read to piece aloud to yourself.
- ❑ Ask someone else to read the piece (if it’s your own work).
- ❑ Edit for logic, content, tone, and style first.
- ❑ Edit for grammar, word use, and punctuation second.

Though thorough editing may slow you down a bit, particularly if you have multiple editors, it will result in a better product. Expect five to ten drafts before the product is in its final state.

The Creative Brief

The creative brief is the most important production document you will ever write. It should be used with your entire production team early in the process, regardless of whether they are paid or unpaid, direct or indirect. It limits the amount of research that suppliers have to do (thereby reducing your costs), helps manage relationships among suppliers, and provides the foundation for all production work. A complete creative brief should include

- ❑ clear project definitions (overview of what is expected);
- ❑ a definition of the target audience with any important background information that you have about that audience (e.g., their values, beliefs, behaviours);
- ❑ a short statement summarizing the most important action you want target audience to take as a result of the product;
- ❑ the single, most critical message you want the audience to hear or see;
- ❑ key support statements that may be used to develop the product (e.g., 3,000 kids start smoking every month in Ontario);
- ❑ information about the tone you want the product to use (e.g., playful, serious, fearful); and
- ❑ information about your identity standards (e.g., logo/s that will need to be displayed or other organizational requirements).

Editorial Production

Editorial production includes all media that use the printed word (e.g., web publishing, CD publishing). Editorial production has been vastly simplified in recent years. Most graphic designers will manage the production process at no or little additional cost, reducing the need for extensive editorial production knowledge. If you are working directly with editorial production suppliers you may want to consider the following.

- ❑ Consider whether your piece will be part of a series so that you can create synergy (e.g., design templates) and save dollars.
- ❑ Many graphic designers also offer web-design services.
- ❑ Edit, edit, and edit again BEFORE sending to print – any error, however slight, is costly to fix.
- ❑ Consult with your graphic designer about which software to create your document in.
- ❑ Graphics (illustrations or photographs) and decisions about colour, paper quality, etc., should always serve a strategic as well as design interest. For example, you may choose to sacrifice colour for the sake of cost but remember that if it won't grab the attention of your audience, there is no point. Always be aware of your audience needs. This does not always mean that more expensive is better. The point is not to make it look pretty but to get them to see or hear it.

- ❑ Client text is often “poured” into a template by designers. They will not read your work so do not “fall in love” with the finished piece. It is your job to continue to scan for errors of all kinds.
- ❑ Complete your detailed distribution plan prior to finalizing print quantity. Producing too much or too little can be an expensive error.
- ❑ Attend first press run and approve proofs – once printed, it is too late to ask for changes.

Closing Thoughts

As you are assembling your production team and working with them to develop the final product remember that every production decision you make communicates a message. You continually need to ask yourself is that the right message for the audience? Use your background research and planning and carefully manage your production team to create a message that is exciting, commands attention, and encourages audience engagement.

Related Resources

Clickz Today

<http://www.clickz.com/>

This website has a good article at http://www.clickz.com/design/creat_strat/article.php/833531 called “The Creative Brief...Usually it’s Neither.” Though written from a business perspective (the “other” side), it does provide some interesting insights. This site also has articles on a variety of other potentially useful topics, such as advertising and media strategies, writing for the web, and advertising on the web. The series on media strategies covers some particularly interesting topics such as negotiating pricing of advertising services.

Other sites that discuss writing creative briefs are MAP Marketing at <http://www.mapmarket.com.au/tips/brief> and AdCracker at <http://www.adcracker.com/brief/index.htm> (some content requires registration).

Red Sea Ad Agency

<http://www.redseacreative.com/questions.html>

Though I don’t know anything about the agency, and certainly don’t endorse them, they do provide some tips on writing a good creative brief. Their section on research is also interesting and they have a neat service where they provide a free general design consultation.

Editors Association of Canada

<http://www.editors.ca>

This site provides some good information on finding the right editor for your project and defines the different types of editorial skills that you might want (for example, did you know that there are editors who can find suitable photos and artwork to accompany your text?). They also have a comprehensive resource section with links to resources about topics such as citing internet sources, grammar, and style guides.

National Organization for Women Foundation

<http://www.nowfoundation.org/health/lybdkit/postercontest.html>

If you've ever thought of conducting a creative competition, rather than hiring an ad agency to save money, you might want to check out this site. It shows a sample creative competition ad (a real one, though the competition is over). It asks for "creative responses to the onslaught of negative images that impact women's health...looking for creative minds to respond to advertisers such as Phillip Morris who attempt to link cigarette smoking with women's liberation, thinness, glamour, and physical fitness – and whose result is a devastating increase in lung cancer among women. The campaign will fight back against the use of waif images and all of the industries that profit from women's dissatisfaction with their bodies." Prizes awarded totaled \$1100.00. This is much cheaper than hiring an ad agency, for all you cash strapped health promotion folks.

You might also want to check out the Institute of Canadian Advertising website at <http://www.ica-ad.com/> for ideas on where to post your ad (I recommend the links section of the site).