ALL TOGETHER NOW

How to Build an Effective Communication Toolkit

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Communication is most effective when it's amplified by others. For many nonprofits, engaging other organizations, supporters, and funders is critical to amplifying their messages and reaching their target audiences.

One of the best ways to ensure partners amplify your messages easily and effectively is by providing the resources they need to do so. Preparing communication materials with consistent messaging that are clear and easy to integrate into partners' communication channels increases the chances of others promoting your messages.

A communication toolkit can be a great way to do that. But making sure it's the right resource for your outreach, and that it's effective if you do use it, is critical. The following primer can help your organization determine if a toolkit is the right fit and build one that will successfully support your efforts.

What do we mean by a communication toolkit?

A communication toolkit is a written resource that provides sample content for use in a variety of contexts. Content might include social media graphics and captions, newsletter copy, website text, testimonial talking points, or podcast scripts among other items, depending on the purpose of the toolkit and the channels available to your partners.

There are many situations when a communication toolkit can be useful:

- **Raising awareness of programs or resources.** A toolkit gives your partners and supporters the resources they need to promote programs and ensure those they're intended to serve are aware of them. One example is the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Summer Nutrition Programs for Kids toolkit.

- **Increasing awareness of an issue-focused anniversary**. World Oceans Day, National Domestic Violence Awareness Month, and World Mental Health Day are just a few examples, but there may be others more closely related to your organization's work. This #BeThe1To social media campaign created by the 988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline is one example of using a toolkit to generate awareness of an issue related to a day or month of recognition.

- **Advocating for legislation to be passed**. When your organization and partners engage with policymakers, a communication toolkit can inform legislative testimony or conversations with decision makers. This Child Care Advocacy Toolkit created by ZERO TO THREE is one example.

- **Promoting an event or the launch of a new initiative**. You can expand your reach by engaging your network to promote your organization's work. This Strolling Thunder Toolkit was created by Advocates for Children of New Jersey to help parents of infants and toddlers advocate for their children's needs and promote their participation in the event.

When is it worth your time to build a communication toolkit?

Building a communication toolkit may not be the most appropriate resource for every scenario. So when does a communication toolkit make sense?

- ***When the goal is message amplification***. If you need your messages to reach a wider audience than your organization's communication channels could reach alone, a communication toolkit is an effective resource to engage your network of partners to help amplify your messages.

- ***When there's a clearly defined, built-in network of partners***. Your efforts are only effective if you can reach your target audiences. If there's an existing network of partners who are well-positioned to help do that, then a toolkit can be effective.

- ***When the barrier your partners face is time and capacity***. Oftentimes, nonprofits and foundations operate with small teams and tight budgets, making it difficult to engage in activities outside their scope of work. A communication toolkit makes message amplification fast and easy when it's tailored to your partners' voice and channels.

How do you build an effective communication toolkit?

Once you've determined that a toolkit will be an effective resource for you, there are some key steps that can help you make sure your toolkit is effective.

Step 1: Make strategic decisions about the toolkit and your audiences.
Before you dive in to developing content, there are a few strategic decisions you need to make:

- ***Who is your target audience and who are the best partners to help reach them?*** Your toolkit should have one primary audience. While it's tempting to try and create one that will work for various audiences, that makes it impossible to make sure you're developing content that will resonate best with your primary audience, and are targeting the right partners to get messages and content in front of your target audience.

- ***What assets do your partners have?*** Review what assets your partners have that would be useful to address in the toolkit. Assets may include communication channels (e.g., newsletters, social media platforms, blogs, podcasts), expertise (e.g., research, education,

advocacy experience, policymaking experience), connections (e.g., part of a network or coalition, press relationships, direct access to decision makers, large subscriber lists), or others.

- ***What do you want your partners to do with this toolkit?*** Get clear on the ask you have for those using the toolkit. Avoid including multiple asks, which risks partners picking one which may not be the most critical one. Make sure the ask is clear - introduce it early and call it out both through the framing and visually if possible.

- ***How long do you expect the toolkit to be useful?*** Decide whether the toolkit has a short-term use and will get sunsetted at some point, or if the goal is it will be evergreen. If the goal is that it's evergreen, you'll need to be thoughtful in drafting content so that it doesn't become outdated.

Step 2: Build the toolkit.

Once you have your strategic decisions made, use them to help you build your toolkit:

- ***Develop and prioritize content.*** Outline your toolkit and develop content. Use an editorial eye in developing the content - provide enough information for partners to use the resource, but don't overload it with too much detail or tangential information. If needed, link out to other resources where partners can explore more if interested.

- ***Make sure it's easy to navigate.*** This is especially important for longer toolkits. Include a table of contents and page numbers, number sections, and use consistent graphic indicators (like headings, definitions, and call-out boxes) to help partners navigate the toolkit.

- ***Tailor it to your partners' voice, if it includes communications resources.*** If your toolkit includes communications resources like messaging or template communication materials (e.g., social media posts, blog language, email), make sure that you're using your partners' voice. This will minimize the need for edits before they use the resources - and the risk that they'll be reworded in a confusing or misleading way.

Step 3: Make sure your partners can access and use your toolkit.

As you work on developing your toolkit, make sure that it will be accessible to your partners. Some questions to ask yourself to ensure accessibility include:

- Are you using acronyms or terms your partners or target audience won't be familiar with? If so, are you defining them or providing links to better understand them?
- If it's meant to be evergreen, do you have a plan for reviewing it and making necessary updates regularly so it doesn't become outdated?
- If it's an online only resource, are those with more limited bandwidth able to use it? Will it work on a mobile device?
- If you have a version that can be used offline (e.g., a downloadable or print copy), does it print ok? Are the images high enough quality?
- Is it in your partners' and target audience's primary language, or do you need to offer translated versions?

Step 4: Distribute the toolkit and make sure it reaches your partners.

Once your toolkit is ready, you can start distributing it. This is not always as simple as posting it to your website or blog. Some strategic outreach and activities can help increase the chances it will reach as many partners as possible. Potential activities include:

- Sharing through your organization's communications channels, including your blog, newsletter, and/or social media, if the toolkit doesn't include sensitive information like answers to tough questions.
- Sending via direct email to any contacts you have.
- Sharing it with other organizations and asking them to share with their networks.
- Sharing it through listservs that include potential partners.
- Printing copies and leaving them in places partners may visit.

How can you measure the effectiveness of a toolkit?

Once you've developed and released your toolkit, it can be helpful to evaluate whether it is effective in helping meet your goals. This can help you determine whether to invest time in developing toolkits in the future or to prioritize other activities.

A few ways to evaluate the outcomes of sharing your toolkit include:

- **_Track use of the toolkit components_**. This is easiest with public-facing content, such as sample blog posts, social media graphics, newsletter text, or letters to the editor. Note which elements were used most and which were used least.

- **_Ask your partners to share examples_**. If you distribute your toolkit to a large number of organizations, or if your toolkit includes content you can't easily track online (like talking points for legislative testimony, for example), invite your partners to tell you when and how they elected to use the toolkit. You could then share those experiences more broadly to inspire other organizations to engage.

- **_Track progress against your objectives_**. Did the toolkit have the impact you intended it to? For example, if your objective was to increase event registration by 20% from the previous year, compare the number of sign-ups this year to last year's. If your objective was to have 15 partner organizations use your messaging in conversations with the press, conduct a media scan to determine how many articles reflect the language from your toolkit.

Looking for examples?

Springboard has partnered with a lot of great organizations to develop toolkits. Below are some examples, along with some background so you can understand how the organizations made sure the toolkits were effective.

- **_FisheryProgress storytelling toolkit for improving fisheries._** [FisheryProgress](#) is a transparency platform for fisheries that are working to improve their sustainability. In order to secure the support and funding to make improvements, many fisheries need help to tell their story - what the challenges are in the fishery, what work has been done, where they have made progress already, and future activities planned that would benefit from support. They created a [toolkit](#) that those leading improvement efforts in the fishery can use to develop easy-to-understand and compelling stories about their impact. The toolkit lives on FisheryProgress' site, and was shared with project leads via emails.

- **_Children's Alliance of Kansas promotional toolkit for new initiative_**. [Children's Alliance of Kansas](#) is an advocacy organization that offers online training resources for caregivers and professionals on topics ranging from adoption to trauma-informed care, and advocates for public policy that addresses the complex needs of children, families,

and the workforce in the child welfare system. They launched a new training program for kinship caregivers and created a toolkit for the Kansas Department of Children and Families (DCF) to use to generate awareness and increase enrollment. DCF used sample newsletter text and a graphic from the toolkit in the social media post pictured below.

- ***Protecting Immigrant Families (PIF) Coalition media toolkit.*** The [PIF Coalition](#) joins together leading advocates for immigrants to protect and defend access to health care, nutrition programs, public services, and economic supports for immigrants and their families at the local, state, and federal level. They developed a template letter to the editor for their members to submit to state and local news outlets – which MomsRising used and was published in the [South Florida Sun-Sentinel](#) – describing the contributions immigrant families make to the U.S. economy and calling for an end to anti-immigrant rhetoric.

Looking for help?

Is your organization considering developing a toolkit? Contact us at hello@springboard.partners to talk more about how we can help!