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Ways to Communicate Effectively

View communications as a ministry

1. Understand that church communications is about “formation,” not just “information.” The ministry of communication is about stewardship, evangelism, discipleship, and education.
2. Know that effective communication is required of every church leader.

Set clear communications policies

3. Establish a committee to oversee communication efforts, but also have a clearly designated point-person for day-to-day issues. Often In larger churches this will be a staff member.
4. Conduct a communications audit annually. Ask of every communications strategy, “What is its audience?”, “What is its mission?”, and “Is it effective?” Seek input from persons outside your congregation.
5. Develop a uniform design scheme to reinforce a sense of congregational identity and “brand” your church. Choose standard colors, type styles, and an easily identifiable, contemporary logo. If possible, enlist the help of a professional graphics designer.
6. Prepare a style sheet for written material with guidelines on punctuation, capitalization, abbreviations, the use of inclusive language, and how to list times and dates.
7. Make communications a line item in church budget.

Know and honor your audiences

8. Be sensitive, realistic, and respectful of your audiences. Begin not with “What do we want to tell people?” but rather, “What matters to the people with whom we are communicating?” Consider how your message relates to the felt and actual needs of your constituencies.
9. Don’t assume your audience will understand the context of your messages, the meaning of religious concepts, or be motivated to act on the information.
10. Listen. Communications is a two-way process. Gather data and feedback from your membership. Use a visitor’s card or attendance registry to collect information about visitors, including how they learned about your church. Consider an annual follow-up survey for visitors.
11. Conduct interviews or focus groups with people from outside your church. Ask about interests, what they do with their free time, what they value in life, and what they think about your church.

Prioritize your messages

12. Know that too many messages can overwhelm your congregation and can cancel each other out. Members often are poorly informed because they’ve been given too much information – not too little.



13. Create a communications calendar around important congregational and liturgical events. Ask: "what is the one important thing we want every member to know this week?" The newsletter cover, worship announcements, sermon, home-page, and other congregation-wide messages should focus on this.
14. Limit verbal announcements during worship. Don't raise items of church business that might make visitors feel like outsiders. Information relevant only to subgroups should be disseminated through more targeted means – post cards, emails, phone trees.
15. Maintain a comprehensive, up-to-date calendar of ALL meetings and activities on your website and in your Sunday bulletin where everyone knows to find it. Then no one can complain that their activity was not publicized. Plus, a full calendar communicates that a lot is happening in your church.

Create a user-friendly bulletin

16. Appreciate that your church bulletin is your most important piece of written communication. More people use Sunday church bulletins than read daily newspapers. Plus, it's one thing every visitor sees, so make it welcoming, clear, concise, and free of jargon.
17. Have as the most important goal helping people navigate the service and guiding them through Sunday morning activities. Provide clear information about hymnal or prayer books used. Clearly explain procedures for communion and other participatory acts of worship.
18. Remember that copyright laws require that church bulletins include notices of permission to use hymn texts, music, and other written material.
19. Limit the length of announcements printed in the bulletin. They should be much briefer and to-the-point than newsletter articles. Use inserts sparingly. Consider handing flyers out as people leave instead.

Make your newsletter appealing

20. Know that even with today's instantaneous communication, the newsletter is still important. It is your one shot at regularly reaching 100% of your members, including seniors, inactives, and infrequent attenders.
21. Use your newsletter to educate, build community, and create institutional loyalty. Focus on people, not just events. Celebrate accomplishments.
22. Focus on providing information that is useful and relevant to your readers. Avoid institutional jargon and insider references, particularly if your newsletter goes to non-members.
23. Keep the length reasonable. The average person will set aside something that looks like it takes more than a few minutes to read. If your newsletter runs too long, consider more frequent issues.
24. Make it easy to browse. Reserve the front page for the most timely and important items. Use active headlines, not headings. Put the most important information in the lead sentence of articles. Categorize topics consistently so readers know where to look for their particular interests.
25. Select a readable font size (not less than 10 pt.) and use no more than 2 or 3 different typefaces. Thirty-nine characters per line is optimal for readability. Don't over use boldface type, underlining, or upper case characters.



26. Strive for an appealing layout. Don't fear blank space. Don't over use clip art. The effective use of photos will make your publications more interesting, attractive, and personal. Look for action shots that "tell the story" and close-ups of people.
27. Use objective language. Avoid personal pronouns. Empower your editor to revise articles for clarity and brevity. Have someone not involved in the writing or editing do the proofreading.
28. Assign the role of newsletter editor to a single individual. Set deadlines and stick to them to encourage planning, allowing time for quality production and realistic mail delivery times.
29. Keep it fresh and interesting. Every time a story is re-run in your newsletter it should be different. Don't print meeting minutes. Instead, make them easily available on your website, a bulletin board, or by request.
30. Consider using an electronic update in addition to your printed newsletter. Limit this to immediate and timely concerns. Use it to draw people to your website.

Be present on the web

31. Establish at least a baseline web presence with a home page that is a "billboard on the information superhighway." Look at other church sites and consult your denomination for help before getting started.
32. Know that your website will be the first contact many new people will have with your church. Create a page newcomers can print with vital information – schedule, staff names, a map to the church.
33. Design a website with both members and visitors in mind. Most church website hits come from a church's members. Think of your website as a "community center for your congregation." Post sermons, newsletters, minutes, etc.
34. Select the photos on your website with care to convey a sense of welcome and belonging. Visitors will get the best sense of what your church is like from the pictures.
35. Keep your site fresh, lively, and interesting. Keep text brief and to the point. A happy picture of the pastor at a church event with a three or four sentence quote is more effective than a "welcome from the pastor" letter. Mission pages are a must.
36. Don't build a site that is too big to keep up-to-date. If you hire a web designer (or use a volunteer) to create the site, make sure you have a plan for updating the site. Invest in training for your church staff.
37. Have the right blend of technical savvy, design sense, and ministry knowledge among those responsible for the site. A techie who doesn't know the church can't produce a good site. Nor can a church staffer with little technical skill.
38. Put your web address on everything you print and on your exterior signage. Promote your site regularly.

Develop a media plan

39. Create a contact list of local news media – newspapers, community newsletters, list serves, local TV, and radio. Update it regularly. Be aware of media deadlines and production schedules.
40. Schedule an appointment to see the religion editor of your local paper. Try to establish a personal relationship.



41. Issue press releases regularly. Even if your stories aren't published at first, an editor will learn that things are happening at your church. Follow up the mailing of a press release with a phone call.
42. Develop a sense of what is newsworthy. Hint: It's not "Church holds Worship Service." Know that the news media are most interested in religion stories around the time of major religious holidays. Learn how to make "news" happen.
43. Plan in advance how to handle negative incidents or crises. Designate a spokesperson. Have plans for keeping members and denominational officials informed. Keep detailed records.
44. Send your newsletter to local opinion leaders -- city officials, community leaders, newspaper editors, other churches and synagogues, leaders of groups who use your facility.
45. Consider placing print ads someplace other than the religion page.

Communication through a wide variety of methods

46. Communicate with those who drive by. Signage should be readable from a distance, correctly positioned in relation to traffic, well-lit, and in good repair. Use banners, balloons, or yard signs to publicized special events. Keep your building and grounds in good repair.
47. Build a comprehensive photo archive. Take pictures at all church events. Ask members to contribute their shots. Ask a talented photographer to take stock photos of your building, sanctuary, and staff.
48. Make visual displays big, bold, and visually appealing. Bulletin boards should be changed frequently, so people won't stop looking. Use for new members, special activities, missions, spotlighting different ministries, new library books, service opportunities, missionary news, etc.
49. Invest in high-quality printed material. A basic brochure introducing your ministry and attractive welcome materials for visitors are standard operating tools.
50. Make sure your answering machine and voice mail are professional sounding and friendly. Include church location, service times, and a brief announcement of special events.

Other Resources

Associate Press Stylebook and Libel Manual Cambridge, MA: Perseus Publishing, 2002.

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