

Communication Planning for Sustainability and The 8-Step Communication Planning Model

Prepared by the Communication & Social Marketing Center

Introduction

No matter where you are in your grant cycle, creating and relying on a communication plan developed specifically for your grant site in collaboration with your partners and stakeholders can be a critical component of your initiative's long-term success. A well-considered plan can provide a strategic roadmap for your communication activities. This can be particularly true for Safe Schools/Healthy Students (SS/HS) initiatives embarking on a plan for sustainability.

Creating a communication plan for sustainability presents you and your partners with an opportunity to recommit as a team to sustaining success. Your plan will help uncover ways to deepen existing partnerships and develop new ones that hold the potential to help sustain—or even expand—critical functions of your initiative. Your plan will allow you to make the most of your coalition's limited time and resources. Having a plan in place can help alleviate the stress many grantees feel near the end of Federal funding—stress that's often accompanied by the question, “What on earth do we do now?”

Maybe you and your partners created a communication plan early in your grant cycle. We certainly hope so! If you did, now is the perfect time to revisit that process, since you'll be reaching out to new and different audiences to tell your story and generate support for the future.

Or, perhaps you and your partners have been communicating here and there to promote your initiative—a press release submitted to your local paper announcing your grant award way back when, a brochure that describes your programs and services, a Web site that's updated every once in a while. Possibly you have felt as though there has never been enough time to craft a larger plan. We understand those constraints. But we would suggest that the communication tactics you're occasionally using could have a much greater impact if created within the context of an overall strategy.

Perhaps you think it's too late to start a communication plan. We disagree. In fact, the Communication & Social Marketing (CSM) Center believes it's never too late—to think strategically about communication.

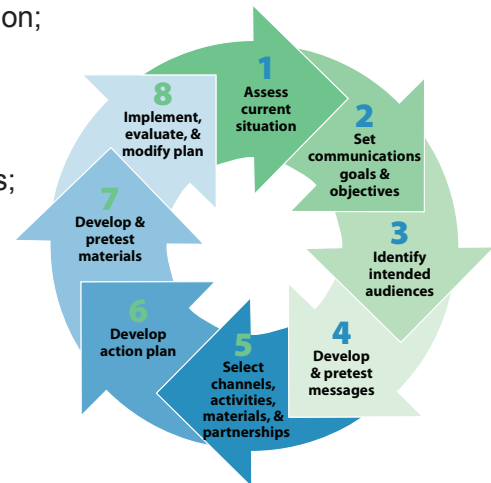
If you've attended a CSM Center training, you've been introduced to our 8-Step Communication Planning Model. This document returns to that model and is designed to provide you with the foundation for embarking on that planning process. We hope it will give you an appreciation for the potential value of planning communication to support your sustainability, and we hope you and your partners will choose to create the kind of plan that can truly help your initiative leave a lasting footprint in your community.

And remember—technical assistance (TA) for communication planning for sustainability is one of the many services offered by the CSM Center. Your communication specialist would be happy to work with you at any point to determine readiness for communication planning and help see you through the process.

The 8-Step Communication Planning Model

The CSM Center uses the 8-Step Communication Planning Model when providing TA in communication planning. This model provides an effective blueprint for communication planning, regardless of where you are in your grant cycle. It is based on the theory and practice of social marketing, which adapts commercial marketing techniques to influence people to take recommended action or make positive changes in their lives. The eight steps are:

1. Start with a thorough assessment of your current situation;
2. Set measurable communication goals and objectives;
3. Define your intended audiences;
4. Develop and pretest your messages to those audiences;
5. Select the best ways to deliver those messages;
6. Create an action plan for communications;
7. Develop and pretest any materials you create; and
8. Finally, implement your plan—evaluating and modifying as needed.



Before Beginning a Communication Plan for Sustainability

Your first task may be among the most difficult. Your initiative will need to identify those functions earmarked for sustainability. We urge you to include your TA specialist (TAS), evaluator, partners, and stakeholders in this often-challenging work. Tough decisions may have to be made, but SS/HS grantees can benefit by looking at their data for guidance: What's working well? What are the greatest needs?

Frequently, sites will focus on sustaining jobs that have been funded by the grant, but we encourage you and your partners to remember that a goal of the SS/HS Initiative is to create lasting systemic community-supported change. This may mean that you and your partners will need to shift focus from sustaining individual positions to sustaining those functions that provide the meaningful support your children and families need.

We're Ready To Plan—What's First?

We believe that the most successful communication plans are crafted by a team that extends beyond the local SS/HS project director and staff members to include your evaluator, partners, and key stakeholders. Your stakeholders could consist of community agencies, business and faith-based partners, school leaders, and district administrators.

Consider bringing together those people who enthusiastically share your goal of creating schools and community in which families are supported and children are safe to make healthy choices in all areas of their lives. By inviting stakeholders into the communication planning process, you will achieve a level of buy-in for your sustainability efforts that may increase your chances for success.

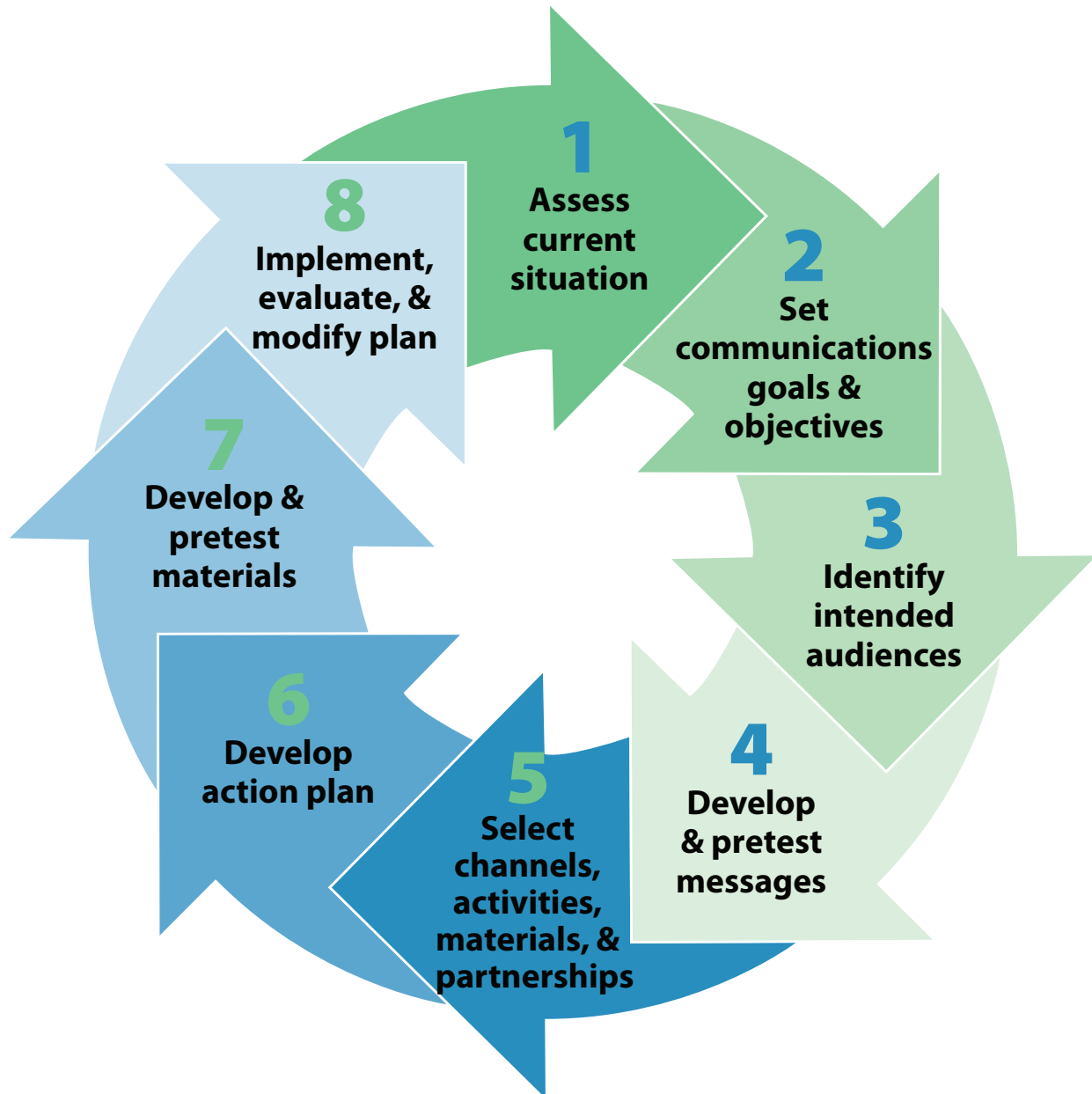
Can We Do This on Our Own?

Some grantees prefer to work on this process in small increments with their partners. This introduction to the process is designed to get the planning process off on the right foot and keep you on track along the way. Other grantees request assistance in facilitating the communication planning process.

We'd Like Help! How Can We Request More Information or TA for Communication Planning for Sustainability?

The CSM Center is happy to help. Your communication specialist should be able to answer your questions about communication planning and can assist in your request for TA. Our toll-free number is 800-790-2647.

The 8-Step Communication Planning Model



Step 1: Assess Current Situation

Purpose: To realistically assess your situation and the challenges you face as you move toward sustainability. To articulate your successes to date, as well as your perceived challenges moving forward.

In this critical first step, you and your partners collectively paint a realistic picture of where you are right now. Why? Because you can't plan for the future if you aren't honest about where you are today. You will need to take a look at the facts, as well as the intangibles surrounding your initiative and community.

First, Ask the Right Questions

Start by asking the right questions—the answers will provide you with a strong reality check and will include both the hard truths and the intangibles surrounding your program. Let this list provide a point of departure for your collective thinking:

- Have you identified the functions you want to sustain?
- Are you serving the number of students and families you set out to serve?
- Are you effectively serving the variety of cultures in your community?
- Are your teachers and principals happy with your program? Are they “champions” yet?
- Is your superintendent seeing results? Have you been presenting to your school board regularly?
- Are you happy with your outcome data? Are they effectively driving decisions?
- Have you had any successful events around your initiative? Good media coverage?
- Are your partnerships committed to sustaining this work?
- How does money flow in your community? How is your competition funded?
- Whom else do you need on board to sustain your initiative? Do you see your mission aligning with other organizations in your community?

Then, Consider Conducting a SWOT Analysis

An analysis of your strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats (SWOT) is an excellent way to take stock of where your program is right now. It is an excellent structure for engaging in dialogue between partners, staff, and other stakeholders.

- **Strengths** are *internal* attributes of your program that can help achieve your objectives.
- **Weaknesses** are *internal* attributes of your program that can hinder your objectives.
- **Opportunities** are *external* conditions that can help achieve your objectives.
- **Threats** are *external* conditions that can hinder the program's performance.

Step 2: Set Communication Goals

Purpose: To articulate what it is that you would like people to do that they're not already doing in ways that are realistic and measurable.

Before tackling this step, you and your partners will need to identify those critical functions of your initiative that you'll work to sustain. Only then will you be truly ready to set communication goals that will serve your choices.

What characteristics make for a strong goal? Generally, the best communication goals meet these criteria:

- **Prioritize.** Your communication goals will focus on those functions that your partnership has chosen to sustain. Since it is virtually impossible to sustain every program, service, and position originally funded by your SS/HS grant, you'll want to concentrate on your established priorities for sustainability. Attempting to accomplish everything often means we succeed at nothing.
- **Are realistic.** Do your goals pass "the imagination test"? In other words, can you imagine reaching them? If you can't envision success, there's a good chance your goals are not realistic. When assessing the viability of your proposed goals, consider available resources and potential sources of support. For example, your school district may be facing severe budget cuts that make it unrealistic to expect continued district funding for your popular after-school programs. However, you may be able to develop partnerships with area businesses that would rather support after-school programs than see a return to increased numbers of kids loitering around their stores each weekday afternoon.
- **Are measurable.** Frame your goals in a way that will tell you whether you have succeeded. Move from general language to specific language. Instead of saying "Convince more adults to become mentors," quantify the outcome you want: "Persuade 25 working professionals to become middle school mentors in the next 12 months." When our goals are specific and measurable, we'll know if we've succeeded.
- **Engage, change behavior, or compel to action.** Raising awareness may be an important first step in your communication efforts, but your goal ultimately seeks to *change behavior* or *compel your audiences to take a specific action*. Sustainability goals often fall into the latter category (e.g., convincing State policymakers to sponsor antibullying legislation, or persuading local businesses to fund scholarships for your summer programs).

Remember: Communication goals are *not* tactics!

Too often we make the mistake of thinking that a communication goal is to create a brochure or send out a quarterly newsletter. Great ideas, perhaps, but they're not goals. These are tactics—ideas that may or may not help you achieve your goals. You'll get to tactics in Step 5 of this planning process, but, for now, keep your focus on what you want to accomplish and what actions you would like others to take.

Step 3: Identify Intended Audiences

Purpose: To identify all potential intended audience segments for each communication goal. To prioritize those audience segments and learn as much as possible about them.

Now that you've identified your communication goals, it's time to identify the specific audiences you need to reach for each goal. In your grant's first years, you may have focused entirely on engaging parents, students, and teachers. Those audiences may still be important, but now you may want to focus on adding community partners, policymakers, and district leadership to your communication efforts. To put it another way, it's time to make a list of who else needs to be at the table to support your sustainability goals.

Segment Your Intended Audiences

Segmenting your audiences is a critical—and often overlooked—step to creating communication messages and materials that resonate. As an example, let's consider a typical intended audience group for sustainability: *local businesses*.

Let's say your communication goal is to obtain support for after-school programs. You know that local businesses are concerned with truancy in the hours that follow the school day, and you can illustrate the benefits of keeping youth occupied in the hours before parents get home from work. Your intended audience clearly would be local business leaders, but not all local business leaders will share the same level of interest in supporting your initiative. To create the most effective communication strategy, segment your broader intended audience into subgroups based on their needs, values, and/or mission. For example—

- Businesses that employ high school students after school hours or over the summers (they illustrate that they already value youth);
- Businesses in close proximity to your school campuses (may be most directly affected by elimination of after-school programs);
- Business leaders who have demonstrated an interest in investing in your community's children, particularly around the issues of education and health;
- Business leaders who are active in your chamber of commerce's community services committee; or
- Business leaders who have children enrolled in your schools.

Breaking down your general audience into segments helps you craft messages and materials tailored to them.

Next, Prioritize Your Audience Segments

You may now find that, instead of communicating to local businesses, you really need to communicate to five segments of your local business community. This may seem as though your work has increased, but it really hasn't. You can prioritize your intended audience segments and focus your efforts (strategically!) on those groups at the top of your list.

Finally, Do a Little Homework

Once you've identified and prioritized your intended audience segments, learn as much as you can about their missions, values, beliefs, and priorities. What sources of information do they trust? Are they aware of your initiative's work, and are they supportive of it? How do your goals for sustainability align with their concerns? What data might they need to see? What's the best way to reach them?

It's impossible to know too much about your intended audiences, and all of your findings will assist you in creating messages and materials that are more likely to persuade them to take the desired action. Research can be as simple as looking at Web sites for information on shared missions and priorities. It can also be as simple as reaching out to partners to ask for information or to find out if there are established relationships that may be important in your outreach efforts.

Since your goals for sustainability may mean you need to expand your partnerships, we encourage you to refer to the Partnership Development section of this Celebration Kit. Those tools can help you identify strong prospects for partnerships, open lines of communication, and develop those relationships.

Step 4: Develop and Pretest Messages

Purpose: To develop effective messages that will resonate with your intended audiences and compel them to think, feel, or act in ways that support your communication goals for sustainability.

The most effective messages appeal to both an audience's mind and heart. This is because the mind seeks information that logically points a path for us as we make decisions, but the heart must be moved for audiences to actually take action. Effective messages meet our audiences where they are by aligning with their values, beliefs, needs, problems, and priorities.

You and your team can develop messages to be used in many ways. Messages can convey why your SS/HS initiative truly matters. Your messages can serve as the underlying themes highlighted and repeated in your materials and activities. They can be used as the basis of your talking points, presentations, one-on-one discussions, or any other materials designed for your intended audiences. For example, an overarching message running through all of your materials might be that supporting your initiative's sustainability efforts is an investment in your community; the concept of investment could resonate with several different intended audiences, all of whom are affected by tight budgets and limited resources.

For intended audience members, effective messages will need to:

- Match their core values and beliefs and demonstrate how your issue is in alignment;
- Show the urgency of your issue;
- Put a face on the issue or program;
- Provide proof of your value, either through quantitative data or anecdotal evidence;
- Use language that makes simple sense and is free of jargon; and
- Include a call to action that clearly tells what you would like them to do.

Framing Your Message in Their Values

Consider how your audience might answer this question: “What kind of community do we want to live in?” Look at the table below for a small sample of the kinds of values that might be most important to your audience. As you consider what value to choose for your message frame, remember that your answer should be indisputably true for your audience. It should represent the big dream that they hold dear.

What kind of community do we want to live in? A community that is ...				
Thoughtful	Caring	Safe	Honest	Just
Diverse	Healthy	Respectful	Creative	Successful
Responsible	Fair	Optimistic	Wise	Hopeful
Equitable	Realistic	Educated	Family-focused	Authentic

By framing your message in their values, you establish immediate consensus with audiences—even those who may not believe in prevention—increasing the chances that the rest of your message will be well received. Creating a value-based frame for your message can significantly improve the likelihood that your audience will truly hear you because it illustrates that you and your audience share the same hopes for your community and its future.

State the Benefits

Your audience will want to know why your initiative benefits them, and it helps to be able to clearly define this in terms that will make sense to your audience. To anyone already involved with SS/HS, it may seem as though the greatest benefit comes from helping youth, but that might not be true for potential partners. For example—

- A local business might genuinely appreciate the free promotion you can give them with signage at your events and mentions in your newsletters and on your Web site;
- Your juvenile justice system may have more court cases than it can easily handle and would be able to lighten their load by partnering with you to find alternative solutions to juvenile offenses; or
- Mental health service providers might benefit from the increased client base that could come from partnering with you.

Overcome Their Barriers

Your audience will probably have reservations about what you are offering, and these barriers need to be overcome before your audience will say yes. An audience may feel that you are asking something that seems too expensive or too time consuming. It may not seem realistic or meaningful to them. This is your opportunity to explain how you are asking something that is easy for them to do.

As you are developing the message components that both outline benefits and overcome barriers, don't forget to review the findings you captured in Step 3—it will help you keep your focus on your audience's needs, wants, and preferences as you craft language. Both of these message components are also a natural fit for including specific quantitative data, anecdotal stories, or social math that will resonate with your audience and help make your case.

For example, your school board may have made a public commitment to trimming the budget while increasing test scores. They may be reluctant to add prevention services to the budget, and that's a barrier. Therefore, you may want your messages to board members to convey that prevention services can provide for more peaceful classroom climates in which all students have an improved opportunity to learn and grow. You might also use data to demonstrate that your programs are helping to keep more kids in school—and in most States, that means more funding dollars every day, for every school.

Call to Action

Now that you have delivered a compelling and customized message, what would you like your audience to do next? Remember that a great call to action does not have to move mountains all at once. If your audience has never heard of your program before, a call to action that requests a donation of goods or services may not be as realistic as a request for a followup meeting to go into greater detail about your solution.

Here is a list of common calls to action that may help guide your thinking:

- Take your next phone call;
- Write a letter/pick up the phone on your behalf;
- Introduce you to someone else;
- Invite you to speak in front of another group;
- Serve on an advisory board;
- Come to a meeting;
- Provide services to clients;
- Provide funding for sustainability; or
- *Change a behavior.*

In developing messages, remember: It's not what you want to tell them, it's what they are able to hear. This means aligning your message with their values and beliefs, overcoming barriers, and outlining benefits in ways that make sense to them.

Pretesting Messages

Before moving forward to develop materials or activities, we urge you to pretest your messages with just a few members of your intended audiences whenever possible to determine if the messages are persuasive. Ask for their input, and, if you find that your message doesn't have the impact you hoped for, use this feedback to adjust your message before you proceed to developing materials or presentations. You may have only one chance to make a good impression with your audience, and pretesting your message will help you get it right.

Step 5: Select Channels, Activities, Materials, and Partnerships

Purpose: To identify the most appropriate avenues for delivering your messages to your intended audiences.

Determining the most effective way(s) to reach your intended audiences means going back to the work you did in Step 3. Refresh your memory:

- What sources of information do they trust?
- Who or what might compel them to take the desired action on your behalf?
- How would they prefer to get your information?
- How and where do your intended audiences spend time? To what civic associations, faith-based groups, or other organizations do they belong?

Answers to these kinds of questions will help you deliver your messages effectively, but there are other considerations as well. You need to determine how you can ensure your communication will be:

- Considered to be culturally appropriate;
- Delivered to your intended audiences in a timely manner;
- Aligned with your budget and resources; and
- Tailored to your intended audiences' overall perceptions about youth violence prevention and support services.

This step guides you to select the channels, activities, and materials you will use to deliver your message. Below are just a few examples that may be relevant to your communication plan for sustainability and can help stimulate discussion with your partners.

Channels

Communication channels carry your messages to the intended audiences. Channels take many forms, and there is an almost-infinite list of possibilities. Some examples of channels include:

People (you, your champions)
Radio stations
Web sites
Email, listservs
Malls
Schools
Recreation centers
Supermarkets

Television stations
Newspapers
Community centers
Laundromats
Parks
Libraries
Nonprofit organizations
Restaurants

Activities, Events, and Materials

Activities and materials are the tactics and tools used to send messages through the channels. Some examples include:

Activities and Events

Open houses
News conferences
Community events
Conferences
One-on-one meetings
Public testimony
Award ceremonies
Presentations to groups
Family days
Red Ribbon Week

Materials

Factsheets
News releases
PowerPoint presentations
Web sites
Public service announcements/videos
Reports
Community report card
Flyers and brochures
Posters
Bookmarks
Other branded promotional items

How Often, and in How Many Ways, Should You Deliver Your Message?

Imagine a young child asking her parent for a new toy. That little girl would never ask just once for the toy—she would ask repeatedly, and she would get increasingly creative with how she would ask her parents. She might ask her mother in the morning, draw a picture of the new toy and put it on the refrigerator in the afternoon, and finish the day by getting her other siblings to ask their dad while he is relaxing after a long day. Parents might cringe at the thought of this, but you have to applaud the persistence and ingenuity of these young marketers who are oftentimes successful.

The same principle applies to you and your initiative. For example, your school district is far more likely to support your sustainability efforts if they have received regular updates from you and your staff for the past 3 years, rather than one PowerPoint presentation when you first won the grant. Similarly, a simple PowerPoint presentation might not convey the full impact of your SS/HS initiative to the board; a student or school resource officer telling the story of how the initiative has affected his or her life positively could be far more powerful.

This principle also applies to the business community, particularly in this challenging economic time. Local business leaders are more likely to assist your sustainability efforts if you have regularly communicated the benefits their business receives because of the SS/HS initiative. One-on-one meetings, newsletters, or perhaps an invitation to an event could communicate how their business benefits from lower truancy rates and a better educated and well-behaved workforce. Increased graduation and college attendance rates could also translate into better paying jobs for these SS/HS students, which means the students will have more money to spend in local stores down the road.

As you develop your messages and materials, we encourage you to incorporate meaningful evaluation data that help tell your story in a way that will resonate with your intended audiences. For a more indepth examination of this critical communication tool, please refer to the Communicating Evaluation Data section in this Celebration Kit.

Step 6: Develop Action Plan

Purpose: To determine where, when, and how each task will be done to successfully implement the communication plan for sustainability. To assign responsibility for each part of your plan.

The greatest communication plan in the world is just an interesting document without an action plan. This step makes sure that all of the hard work you've done sees the light of day.

A great action plan is good project management and makes the best use of everyone's time. We encourage shared participation in putting your plan on its feet. Commitment from staff members, partners, volunteers, and other champions tells your community that there is wide support for your goals—and it might encourage potential new partners to support your success as well.

Your action plan can be as simple or as complex as your needs require, but, at a minimum, your action plan should have the following essential information:

- Major activities and tasks;
- Intended date for completing each task; and
- Name of the person responsible for ensuring that each task is completed.

Below is a sample of one task in a basic action plan:

Task/Subtask	Due Date	Responsibility
Presentation to school board on supporting State legislation to fund school-based mental health services:		
• Draft and send letter to board chair asking for time to present at next board meeting;	April 15	James
• Meet with evaluator to get data on success of school-based mental health services;	March 1	James
• Draft and ensure adoption of messages to be presented to board;	March 5	James
• Select three spokespersons for presentation (e.g., parent, community partner, and project director);	March 8	Jane
• Develop a PowerPoint for use by project director;	March 12	John
• Draft 4-minute presentations by parent and community partner;	March 20	Jane
• Arrange for spokesperson rehearsals;	March 21	John
• Prepare packet of “leave behind” materials for board;	March 22	Joan
• Send out invitations to parents of students to attend;	March 29	Jane
• Communicate with school board office on logistics for presentation day;	April 2	John
• Ensure transportation to presentation site for spokespersons and selected invitees.	April 11	Joan

Step 7: Develop and Pretest Materials

Purpose: To ensure that your materials will resonate with intended audiences before they are produced and distributed.

Communication and social marketing professionals have learned many lessons over the years about what makes a communication program or social marketing campaign effective. One of the most important lessons is the value of pretesting messages and materials. Having representative members of the intended audience review your products before they are produced or distributed is essential to the success of your communication.

If you're tempted to skip pretesting, think about the potential pitfalls. Remember, we may think we fully understand our intended audience, but we probably don't. Pretesting can save us from making costly mistakes.

Pretesting helps you:

- Identify whether your messages and materials have any major flaws;
- Explore alternative messages and materials; and
- Fine-tune your messages and materials.

Typically, developing communication materials is a four-step process:

1. Develop prototype;
2. Review and pretest;
3. Revise and refine; and
4. Produce.

There are several ways to pretest messages and materials, including:

- Surveys;
- Focus groups;
- One-on-one interviews; and
- Advisory boards.

Admittedly, if you're planning a face-to-face meeting with an individual who represents a potential partner for sustainability, it's pretty difficult to pretest your message and materials with a member of your intended audience. In such a case, it's a good idea to rehearse your presentation and show your printed materials to someone who isn't connected with your initiative's work. While you may not be able to gauge the impact of your message and materials, you'll at least be able to make sure that you're presenting your information in a way that's easy for anyone to understand.

Don't forget—when creating communication materials, make certain to include time for pretesting in your action plan.

Step 8: Implement, Evaluate, and Modify Plan

Purpose: To determine if the plan is meeting your communication goal and, if not, to make appropriate and timely modifications to ensure success.

Managing a communication plan or social marketing campaign is an ongoing process. Implementation is only the beginning. Consider your communication plan a “living document” that’s revised and fine-tuned over time.

To ensure that your communication and social marketing efforts are effective and successful, you must specify how and when you will evaluate and, if necessary, modify your strategy and action plan. As you roll out your communication plan, we encourage you to create a feedback mechanism to monitor your plan’s success. If something in your program or campaign is not working, don’t just stay the course: Go ahead and make the modifications necessary to get back on track.

Think back to your goals (Step 2) as you assess the success of your efforts. Since your goals were measurable, you will know if your plan is working. For instance, if your goal was to persuade local businesses to provide funding for scholarships for your summer programs, you will know you’ve succeeded if you receive the funding.

But what if you’re not seeing the intended results of your plan? Use this step to:

- Determine which messages are not resonating with your intended audiences;
- Identify the channels, materials, activities, and partnerships that are not helping you to reach and engage your intended audiences; and
- Identify obstacles that you had not anticipated.

Your evaluation may also point you toward *new* audiences that can help you reach your goals—audiences you hadn’t recognized when you started this planning process. When this happens, you will want to start again with Step 3, learning as much as you can about these new audiences, then creating and pretesting messages and materials for *them*.

Congratulations!

By working through these steps, you and your partners have made a genuine commitment to the success and long-term sustainability of your SS/HS initiative. You are now thinking strategically to:

- Make the most of your available resources and your realities;
- Set realistic and actionable communication goals;
- Identify the specific intended audience segments that are most likely to support your efforts;
- Craft messages that resonate with those audiences; and
- Deliver those messages in ways that meet the needs and preferences of your audiences.

Additionally, you recognize that the best plans are worth no more than the paper on which they’re written unless they are implemented. Now, you are ready to:

- Make an action plan that assigns tasks and due dates;
- Create, pretest, and produce any materials; and
- Implement, evaluate, and modify your plan.