

The Communication Plan

A Useful but Underutilized Tool in the Small Business World

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Most entrepreneurs start with an idea that they develop into a Business Plan for their company. This Business Plan is needed to raise capital, acquire loans, determine operations, identify customer leads and plan for future growth. It is the roadmap for their company's success or failure. It normally follows that effective Business Plans lead to successful businesses and ineffective or nonexistent ones result in ineffective or failed businesses.

Communication is much the same. Most business communication starts with a thought that needs to be developed and organized in order to produce its desired outcome. Whether you are launching a new product, adjusting your pricing schedule, introducing a staff change, or conveying any other message about your company, you want it to be professional, well thought out and well timed. The tool that can guarantee your communications will be just that is a Communication Plan.

An effective Communication Plan has the following components which help you identify the key elements needed to deliver your message successfully:

- **Audience**
 - It is imperative to identify all of the various groups of people who need to be included on the communications. This could include, but might not be limited to, your investors, your customers, your employees and your vendors.
 - The content or extent of the message should be considered for each audience type. Rarely does a one-size-fits-all approach provide the best result.
- **Medium or Method**
 - The medium or method of communication will most likely vary by audience type.
 - Once your audience groups have been established you can determine the best method for communicating to each of them. In the case of a pricing schedule change, a meeting with employees, providing them with possible customer objections and the means to overcome those objections, prior to the roll-out to customers can help minimize negative customer impact to the change.
- **Objective**
 - Outlining your objectives for each phase of the communication plan helps keep your message relevant while accomplishing your goals.
- **Sender and Responsibility**
 - You want to make sure that the right person is the messenger. For example if a customer's sales representative is changing due to a business reorganization, this message might best be relayed by the business owner.

- In order to ensure that your communication plan is carried out successfully, make sure to assign responsibility for each piece.
- **Contingencies**
 - Even the best laid plans can be side-lined. Think through any potential contingencies ahead of time to give yourself a back-up plan.
- **Timeline**
 - Identify the appropriate sequence of communication and set target dates for each phase. This will ensure that your employees are well-informed prior to customer communications going out.

A Communication Plan doesn't have to be complicated, just well thought out. Taking some time in advance to consider the key elements above will produce much better results than indiscriminate communications. This tool will also help you differentiate the extent of communication needed based on the significance of the message, i.e. expanding into a new market would require a more extensive plan with both internal and external audiences versus the introduction of new office personnel that interacts solely with employees. Whatever message you need to convey, it will be more successful with the use of a Communication Plan and the more successful you are at communicating, the more successful your business will be.