



Reflections on Building a Strategic Approach to Foundation Communications

Today, foundations in the United States generally recognize communications as a core operational function, but for many years, philanthropy and communications mixed uneasily. Good works were meant to speak for themselves. Active outreach and communications were considered unnecessary publicity or conflated with unsavory self-promotion.

This began to change nearly 40 years ago. [Frank Karel, vice president for communications at The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation](#), formulated a different, more productive sense of what was possible for foundation communications. He reframed communications as a powerful, strategic complement to philanthropy's financial investments. He collaborated with colleagues in similar positions and with consultants around the country to develop new practices for convening, dissemination, and distribution—all carefully designed to advance foundations' mission, vision, and values. Together, they developed a strategic approach to communications focused not on publicity, but on amplifying a foundation's efficiency, legitimacy, and impact.

“What constitutes modern communications [in the philanthropic context] is much broader than many suppose,” wrote Sean Gibbons of the Communications Network, in the [Stanford Social Innovation Review](#). “Practiced at its highest level, communications is so much more than PR or marketing. Smart, strategic communications defines, cultivates, and understands important audiences. It listens. It crafts and shares clear, compelling stories. It builds relationships and deploys influence. It convenes. It designs. It analyzes data and gathers intelligence. It creates conversations.”

Constructing a More Robust Strategic Communications Function

Today, communications play a modest role at some foundations. Staff maintain a simple web site, produce a brief annual report, or generate a press release or two. However, many funders have expanded on Karel's vision and are finding unique ways to connect communications to their larger program strategy. The growth and ubiquity of digital and social media and their outsize influence have created even greater impetus for foundations to engage publicly around issues that matter to their work. The result is a wide range of strategically focused foundation or foundation-supported campaigns, reports, surveys, storytelling, blogs, and newsletters, as well as robust grantee training and technical assistance initiatives.

The output of a strategic communications approach can look very different from place to place. This should not be surprising, given that the philanthropic landscape is extremely diverse, and foundations have different cultures and goals. As Corinne Rieder, EdD, former President of The John A. Hartford Foundation, liked to say, “if you've seen one foundation, you've seen one foundation.” Some



organizations make a large investment in communications, with numerous staff people and even dedicated program areas. In other places, there may be a single, part-time person or consultant who helps foundation staff and grantees use communications to connect with important stakeholders and find more modest ways to support the organization's larger strategy.

There is no single set of guidelines or best practices to refer to when considering how to create or expand a foundation's communications practice. That said, one important question to consider is: In the service of its mission, how much should a foundation focus on raising its own voice and profile and how much should it seek to amplify the messaging and work of its grantees?

Elevating a foundation's voice and/or the voice of its grantees

In foundation communications, there are generally two main areas of investment.

The first focuses on building the foundation's own voice, that is, its capacity to communicate directly to its grantees, partners, and other community (and perhaps even) national stakeholder groups. The decision to invest in this type of communication reflects a recognition that, beyond the power of their grantmaking, foundations have unique, non-financial assets that can be put in play in the service of creating social good. It further reflects the fact that foundations often have unusual credibility to speak or convene others to speak on complex and even contentious issues. Because much of philanthropy is viewed as non-partisan or at least above the fray, a foundation's annual report, web site, newsletters, its meetings, the blogs or presentations from its leadership and staff, even its social media—may provide needed perspective and even play a leadership role that is all too often in short supply.

More ambitiously, within this approach, the foundation can also work to create its own intellectual capital, which can enhance public discourse on issues of importance to its programs. This can include supporting:

- Academic and other original research that deepens the evidence base on issues of concern to the foundation;
- Reports and studies that gather timely information and can be used to improve practice; and
- Surveys and polls that examine the point of view of the general public or of professionals in important sectors which can, in turn, create news, advance understanding, and influence policy conversations.

The foundation can use its own presentations and public communications to promote this new information. It may also develop and fund information or advocacy campaigns that put this new knowledge to work in coordinated, multi-tactic campaigns and initiatives designed to make a measurable difference in the attitudes or behaviors of key audiences.



All of this work presents opportunities to educate the broader world about a foundation's issues and the best available thinking. It can also generate important opportunities to engage government and civic leadership and create a fertile ground for cross-sector partnerships.

The second area of foundation investment centers around supporting the communications capacity of a foundation's grantees. This too can take a number of forms:

- ***Seeking grantees that demonstrate or possess a strong communications ability***
As foundations review proposals, they can prioritize potential grantees that demonstrate a recognizable communications track record or have staff and networks that can disseminate important messages and new information.
- ***Integrating robust communications lines into RFPs or grant guidelines***
Most foundations require an evaluation for each of their major (and even minor) grants. In the same vein, they can ask that each grant proposal include both a strong communications plan and a reasonable budget line that supports the implementation of that plan.
- ***Providing training and technical assistance to grantees***
This can include one-on-one consultations on specific issues or needs; webinars or workshops for grantees or groups of grantees; and/or creating online resources that can provide "just in time" communications help when grantees need it.
- ***Facilitating collaborative communications***
Foundations can gather grantees that are part of a larger initiative or an issue "ecosystem" to build needed connections, develop common messaging and tactics, and generate collective efforts to communicate broadly and consistently.

Most foundations with active communications programs develop a strategy that both amplifies the foundation's voice as well as raises the profile of its grantees. The balance should be determined by the particular foundation's history and culture and its grantmaking strategy. This balance may also evolve over time. For example, if a foundation's leadership prefers to start by investing in grantee communications, that experience may eventually lead to the foundation feeling more comfortable with the potential of a communications program that speaks more directly for the foundation.

Staffing considerations

Just as a communications program should be developed to fit a foundation's strategy, so should its staffing. The first question is whether communications should be managed by internal staff. For a major new investment in communications, hiring a senior manager with significant communications experience, particularly in a philanthropic or nonprofit context, is likely indicated. For more modest



investments, existing staff—e.g., a program director, program officer or even a grants manager—with some communications experience may be tapped to oversee the communications function.

External support can also be helpful. In some cases, a part-time employee, consultant, or consulting firm can handle the development of a strategic communications plan as well as the initial implementation of that plan's tactics. Outside support can be more easily scaled up or down as a foundation's needs grow and/or shrink over time. Using a consulting firm affords the foundation a wider range of skill sets than an individual staffer can provide (e.g., graphic design, video production, web design, media outreach, etc.) Consultants may also be used to offer additional support to grantees in the form of one-on-one consultation or group training. Some foundations will recommend a consultant to their grantees; others allow grantees to choose local consultants.

Realizing the Possibilities of a Strategic Approach to Communications

Grantmaking strategy is an essential aspect of philanthropic practice today. How foundations formulate and implement their grantmaking varies widely. In a world suffused with 24/7 news cycles, never-off social media, and a constant stream of instantly accessible information, communications can, and we argue, should be integrated into this broader, organizational strategy, in helping funders achieve the ambitious outcomes they seek.

Today more than ever, ideas matter, and foundations' ultimate impact will be at least partly determined by their ability to influence a wide range of community leaders, policymakers and people. During the last 40 years, philanthropy has first experimented with, and more recently, embraced a variety of communications approaches in the service of amplifying the benefits of its grantmaking. A strategic approach to communications presents powerful opportunities for philanthropy to leverage its financial investments and make important progress towards the transformative change it seeks.