

Communications 101

Developing a Local Communications Strategy that Works



Building Full Capacity Locals

MEA

Michigan Education Association

Dear Local Leader,

A full capacity local is one that is vibrant, relevant, strong and dedicated to member service. One critical component of such a local is an effective communications strategy that addresses both internal (members) and external (public) audiences. Key to the success of such a strategy is a well-trained, creative local communications committee led by an energetic, dedicated chairperson. This booklet contains all of the information you will need to develop such a committee and design such a strategy. As with all Building Full Capacity Locals (BFCL) publications, this one is a compilation of the best information and ideas from around the state and is designed to be adapted to fit the specific needs of your local.

For help with anything related to your local's communications plans, contact MEA's Public Affairs Department at 800-292-1934.

This booklet and other materials, information and support designed to help you develop the capacity of your local are available by contacting MEA Field Services 800-292-1934, ext. 2941 or by downloading at www.mea.org/bfcl.

This booklet is a compendium of publications and materials resulting from the talents and efforts of many current and past MEA leaders and staff.

Creating a Communications Committee

WANTED: a dynamic, energetic, talented, creative group of members who are dedicated to enhancing communication with members, parents, the media and the general public.

The first step in developing an effective communications strategy is to form a local communications committee led by a chairperson with the energy and time to dedicate to the job. Committee members should be representative of the local membership and should be up-beat, positive, creative and enthusiastic. Ideally, the committee should have a member from every building or work site. Try to limit the size of the committee to no more than seven people. Membership on this committee is a great way to get newer members involved. It will give them the opportunity to meet a lot of people and engage in a positive, non-threatening association undertaking. Further, newer members bring a host of creative ideas and skills that will make their participation invaluable.

Once the committee is in place, it is a good idea for committee members to assess where the local currently is in terms of an external and internal communications strategy. The communications section of the BFCL Self-Assessment is a great place to start. The results will provide a great starting point for the development of a comprehensive communications plan. In addition, the committee may want to survey the general membership to determine areas that members would like to see addressed and to measure the success of any existing communications plan.

When designing a communications strategy for the year, the committee should keep in mind that there are two audiences that must be addressed:

- the members or internal audience
- the public or external audience (parents, media, school board, community groups)

A good plan will contain components targeted at each of these groups.

Building Full Capacity Locals Self-Assessment

Communications—BFCL Indicator 2

Respond to the following statements by checking YES, SOMEWHAT, NO or DON'T KNOW

		YES	SOMEWHAT	NO	DON'T KNOW
1.	My local has an active communications (public relations) committee.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
2.	My local's long-range plan contains goals for internal and external communications.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
3.	Communications/public relations are a high priority for my local.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
4.	My local has a regularly updated local website.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
5.	My local has a regularly published newsletter.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
6.	The leadership team in my local has contact with the local media.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
7.	The community is familiar with my local and its functions.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
8.	The leaders in my local use email as a communications tool.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
9.	The leaders in my local utilize the MEA website, www.mea.org , Facebook and Twitter.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
10.	Members in my local are encouraged to use the MEA website, www.mea.org , Facebook and Twitter.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
11.	The leaders in my local are a part of mymea.org .	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
12.	My local has a specific plan for communicating with new members.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
13.	My local is actively involved in community and district activities.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
14.	My local provides planned opportunities for members to meet together to socialize.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
15.	My local provides planned training and professional development opportunities for members.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
16.	The leaders in my local understand how to communicate with the media.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
17.	My local's budget contains specific funds for communications/public relations activities.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
18.	My local provides specific programs for new members.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
19.	There is ongoing communication between leaders and members in my local.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
20.	The members in my local are regularly and frequently updated on local, state and national association activities and issues.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Message Development

The Heart of an Effective Communications Strategy

A strong, consistent message should be at the heart of your local's communications strategy. An effective message defines the association and lets its audiences know what it stands for—why people are proud to be association members. Once you have a message, the next step is to design an internal and external communications plan that will effectively market your message to members, the media and the community.

Why do you need a message? You need to define your association before someone else steps in and fills the void for you. If you allow others to define you before you do, you'll be doomed to being reactive rather than proactive because you can't count on someone else's message to be positive or accurate. To put it simply—you're forced to play by someone else's rules.

The association's message isn't a cute slogan. Its core message has to be in a framework that reflects the association's values and principles and is reflected in every association activity. It should also be original and a complete sentence.

There are five elements to a good message:

- Simplicity
- Relevance
- Repetition
- Repetition
- Repetition

These elements are the guide to creating your message after you've asked your members some key questions: Who are we? What do we stand for? Of what value are we to students, the profession and the community? Use the answers to develop your message.

Remember, your message represents the association's principles and those of its members. You need to keep it simple, but make sure that you make it mean something.

Below are some messaging ideas that other groups have used. Keep in mind that one size doesn't fit all and that you will need to develop your own unique local message. Further, along with your message, you will need to provide substance in the form of talking points, examples and explanations so that your message doesn't just become a "catch phrase."

- My job makes a difference for kids.
- Dedicated teachers delivering quality education
- We do what's best for kids.
- We're all about kids.
- Parents + Students + Dedicated Employees = A Quality Education
- T.E.A.M. WORK—Together Everyone Makes a Difference
- Kids are our only priority.
- Support staff provides the framework for a quality education.

Internal Communications

Marketing the Association to Members

The goal of an internal communications plan should be to unify members in support and recognition of the importance and relevance of the association in their professional lives. Educating, updating and connecting with members on a regular basis are important parts of such a plan. It's never too early to start—don't wait for an impending crisis to begin the work of unifying members.

Check out www.mymea.org, Publications, New Member Tips, for K-12, ESP and Higher Ed new member tips.

Making Connections at the Building/Work Site Level

Part of a good internal communications plan includes making positive, frequent connections with members at the building level. This can be organized by the communications committee and implemented by either committee members or building/association representatives. The idea is to increase members' positive awareness of the association through positive contacts. Below is a sampling of creative ideas you might want to try.

- There should be an association bulletin board in each building that is kept current and used strictly for association news. It is very important that the information posted on it is meaningful and current. This might be a great place to post "member milestones" such as marriages, degree/certification achievements, and births.
- Post pictures of new members in the building on the association bulletin board along with information about them.
- Give each new member a contact information card containing information for getting in touch with local association officers, UniServ director and building representatives. Include numbers for MEA, MESSA and MEA Financial Services, too.
- Distribute copies of association meeting minutes to members.
- Provide PR "treats" along with notes in members' mailboxes:
 - Crunch Bars—It's crunch time! Hang in there!
 - Riesen Candy—Your dedication and caring are two "Riesens" why our school works!
 - Starburst—For a "burst" of energy when you're running low!
 - Payday—to celebrate an extra payday or ratification of a new contract
 - Peppermint patty—Thanks for your involve "mint"!
 - Any Halloween candy—No tricks—only treats from your association!
- Breakfast with the Building Reps. Hold short association meetings complete with bagels, donuts, etc., in the morning to share information and seek input from members.

- Ask local businesses to donate certificates, discounts or coupons as rewards for your members.
- Create “tissue issues”—short messages about bargaining, MEA services or political action that can be posted on the doors of bathroom stalls.
- Make sure every member has information—home email, building assignment, work assignment, cell phone number—on file with the association.

Creating a Local Newsletter that Members Will Want to Read

All local associations—no matter their size—need to communicate effectively with their members. One great way to do so is through a regularly published association newsletter that contains articles and information of interest to members.

Newsletter Contents

Successful newsletters are fairly short (one page front and back is best), succinct and contain information that members are motivated to read. Members tend to be interested in the following topics in a newsletter:

- Issues directly affecting members
- Stories about other members in the local
- Recognition of members
- Common questions
- Opinions
- Important calendar dates
- Jokes, recipes, cartoons
- Educational information and websites
- Professional development information
- Contract interpretation
- Bargaining information
- District benefits

Newsletter Circulation

Make your newsletter available to all members using the association website, and hard copies. Cross market the newsletter via email, Facebook and Twitter.

External Communications

Marketing Your Association's Message to the Public

The news is full of negative stories about public schools and public school employees.

Critics of the association work hard to undermine public education by talking about it in abstract terms—average test scores, per pupil expenditures, comparisons to other nations, etc. Association members fighting to maintain a reasonable standard of living are portrayed as “money grubbing” and self-interested. Public perception can get even more negative when local school employees are engaged in protracted and difficult bargaining.

An external communications plan can be a very effective way to shift the focus away from the messages of public school critics. The goal of external communications is to get YOUR message out to the public—that association members are highly qualified, dedicated professionals who are totally committed to providing Michigan's children with a high-quality education.

A good external communications plan focuses on your association's message. It needs to highlight the professionalism and dedication of members and needs to focus on the positive contributions that members make to the students. It needs to include the media, parents and the community. What follows are ideas you may want to include in your local's external communications plan.

Members: The Face of the Local Association

Parents and the community need to know who your members are and how they are helping their children succeed in school. Members can turn their resumes into personal marketing brochures that will communicate their strengths, successes and standards. Improve your school's (and your association's) image by encouraging members to “toot their own horns” by using the following to help design personal brochures.

- Step 1: To give you a better idea of where to start, take a look at some of the samples that have been done by MEA members on the website.
- Step 2: Brainstorm! Make a list of great things you bring to your job. Include your love of children, educational background, hobbies, volunteer work, union activity, community involvement, why you chose to work in public education, etc. Write down three great qualities about your school. Include: academic programs, extracurricular activities, parent involvement programs, etc. Don't forget the teaching and learning climate—describe the atmosphere at your school and how you contribute to it. List specific examples of ways parents can help their child succeed in school. Check out the website for lists of words you will want to use and those you will want to avoid when creating your brochure.
- Step 3: Refine and produce your articles, and put your brochure together. The website has directions on how to design your brochure using Word. Be sure to check your spelling and grammar before you send anything out to the public! Also be mindful of good taste when choosing which personal details to share and which graphics to use.
- Step 4: Distribute your brochure. Be sure to give a copy to your local association's communications committee.

Presenting a Professional Image

The attitude and behavior of educators as well as their interaction with the entire school community can define the education profession's image as a whole. Below are time-tested, positive image-makers that members might want to try:

- Carry work around with you. Grading papers while waiting for an appointment helps you get your work done and it also sends the message that you care about what you do.
- Send home a list of books for parents to consider buying. Find out when student birthdays are, and at the beginning of each month send a note home suggesting books to purchase as birthday presents.
- Put together "survival" kits for students who transfer to your class in the middle of the year. Include class rules, homework expectations, topics to be covered for the year, etc.
- Do business in the community where you work. Frequent businesses owned by students' families.
- Carry business cards that you can give to businesses and parents.
- Incorporate personal items into your work space (within reason). Family pictures, plants and books reflect who you are as an individual.
- Send parents messages about how to support learning at home. Use letters, notes, email, newsletters or a website.
- Mail a positive note on a postcard once a week to a parent.
- Give students practical writing experience—have them write to community leaders about a class project that ties into a community activity or letters to the editor suggesting ways for dealing with community issues.
- Invite community members and local politicians to participate in class activities as speakers, etc.
- Contact the local media to get coverage for a special class activity or project.
- Get students involved as a group in a community charity or volunteer activity, such as connecting with seniors.

External Communications

Improving Community Relations

One of the best ways to market your association's message is to get involved in the community in which you work. Try some of these ideas:

- Serve on long-range and other district planning committees on which community members serve.
- Poll students about their favorite foods and adapt the cafeteria menu to accommodate their ideas. Highlight this on the menus sent home or posted on the district's website.
- Sponsor an adult field trip to the kitchen to discuss nutrition and show how food is prepared. Invite the media.
- Encourage local businesses to donate supplies to the school. Distribute Education Week items to local businesses.
- Round off your paychecks and use the cents to buy clothes, jackets, eyeglasses, gifts, etc., for needy children in the community.
- Establish an association fund to send children to band camp, summer programs, educational activities, etc., or select a local charity to support as an association.
- Survey your members to find out who is already involved in community activities.
- Honor vets on Memorial or Veterans Day.
- Invite grandparents and seniors to eat lunch at school.
- Work in the concession stand at school events wearing association buttons or T-shirts.
- Provide popcorn from your local at a school sporting event.
- Sponsor a float in the homecoming parade focusing on students and education.
- Establish a pen-pal program that pairs up your students with seniors living in the community.

Partnering with Parents

Try some of these ideas to establish a more meaningful relationship between your local association and parents.

- Distribute reflective stickers to students and provide a letter to parents explaining your concern for students coming to and going home from school in the dark.
- Publish a flyer or brochure stressing the importance of bus safety rules and mail it to parents.
- Send a letter to parents before Halloween explaining how to make it fun and safe.
- Hold a potluck dinner with parents, teachers, support staff and school board members.
- Send holiday greetings to parents. For longer vacation periods send home a "to-do" list of area museums and attractions that parents and students could visit together.
- Prepare and distribute a flyer on nutrition and how to help students make wise food selections.
- Prepare and distribute a flyer on poison control, basic first aid tips and emergency phone numbers.
- Encourage parents to visit the job site to "Walk a Day in My Shoes."

- Send congratulations to graduates and their parents.
- Publish a brochure on making the most of parent-teacher conferences that contains a schedule for parents to fill in with conference times/rooms.
- Provide information on how parents can best help their children prepare for state assessments.
- Attend PTO/PTA meetings. Participate and assist with projects and activities when possible. Keep your members updated.

All Politics are Local

Just about everything having to do with your job is decided by an elected or appointed political official. Because of this, it is very important that part of your external messaging strategy be directed at locally elected political officials—especially school board members.

Don't wait until an election to get your local involved in politics. Good, solid relationships are developed and nurtured over time.

The following ideas will help you get—and stay—connected.

- Invite your area's state legislators to visit schools to see the impact of laws they have passed.
- Invite school board members to eat lunch in the cafeteria or to ride on a school bus.
- Have representatives from your local association attend each regular meeting of the school board.
- Invite the mayor in to teach a lesson on city politics.
- Invite school board members to spend time in classrooms.
- Get involved in school board elections. Request a copy of MEA's "Electing Your Employer" school board election handbook for locals. Work with your local's political action committee to develop a winning strategy.
- Engage in MEA-sponsored lobbying activities.
- Invite legislators and/or school board members to speak at one of your local association meetings.
- Keep school board members updated on all of the ways your local association is involved in the community.
- Assign a member to "adopt" a board member and develop a regular working relationship.

External Communications

Marketing Your Message to the Media

Dealing with the news media is a critical component of any communications plan. The media holds immense power over public policy and public opinion. Your local association has important messages to convey to the public and the media is the vehicle for conveying those messages.

Carefully planned and ongoing media relations programs provide positive messages to the public. While your communications plan has to include preparation for negative news and crises, the emphasis should be on a long-term positive relationship with reporters and editors.

Make the effort to get to know your local media representatives on a personal basis and establish your local as a credible and reliable source of news.

Remember, newspapers, radio and television are businesses run for profit. They do not exist to make organizations or people look good. They run stories that will attract viewers/readers/listeners and advertisers. Some “news services” are actually run by think tanks, like the Mackinac Center, that are pushing their own agenda. As always, your best bet is to stay on your own message.

Getting Started

The best place to start is by getting to know what media outlets are in your area and who your local media representatives are. Create a list of local media contacts including relevant reporters, news directors and editors. Make it a special point to get to know the education reporter of your community newspaper. Your list should include contact information such as: names, phone numbers, fax numbers, email addresses and deadlines. You should also be aware of the requirements for submitting letters to the editor and opinion pieces to the newspapers. Further, be sure to know advertising specifications such as sizes of ads available, rates and deadlines for submission.

What Makes News?

Though it may be important to your local association and/or your members, not everything is newsworthy from the standpoint of reporters. If you want coverage for your local association, keep in mind that the following tend to generate media interest: controversy; dramatic human interest; groundbreaking or unprecedented announcements; localization of a national story, e.g., how a piece of legislation affects your district; special events; and strange bedfellows—unlikely allies coming together in solidarity on an issue.

Talking to the Media

The top three rules for successfully dealing with the media are:

1. **BE HONEST**
2. **BE PREPARED**
3. **STAY ON MESSAGE**

In addition, the following will help you to hold your own and get your accurate story out there:

- Know when deadlines are and remember that deadlines are huge to reporters.
- Do your homework on the reporters who will cover you.
- Don't be too detailed. Keep it simple and straightforward.
- Remember that reporters are not experts on your issue.
- Limit your message to three key points.
- Position yourself as one who is fighting *for* something—not against something.
- Know who your audience is and make sure your message connects with them.
- Always talk about common sense.
- Always call things by the same name.
- Personalize the story. Have names and contact information for actual people who are directly affected by the issues you are talking about.
- Put a face on your issue so people will remember.
- Be sure to relate your own experience to establish your credibility on the subject.
- Repeat, repeat, repeat your message. It's impossible to make your point too often.
- Never assume anything is "off the record."

External Communications

Advice from the Experts

The following is an advice list for educators when they deal with the media. It was taken from an email poll of members of the National Education Writers Association.

DO:

- ✓ Choose your spokesperson before you approach the media.
- ✓ Return phone calls promptly.
- ✓ Offer an after-hours phone number for follow-up questions.
- ✓ Find the answer to questions, or at least attempt to find them.
- ✓ Be aware of deadlines.
- ✓ Allow reporters to go into schools to talk to employees and students.
- ✓ Be willing to go “off the record” and provide background information vital to the story. (Be sure to understand what “off the record” means to each reporter.)
- ✓ Provide documents when requested.
- ✓ Know the state’s open meetings laws.
- ✓ Remember that reporters have a job to do.
- ✓ Remember that you don’t own the school system—the public does.

DO NOT:

- ✗ Lie. You will get caught!
- ✗ Refuse to comment.
- ✗ Hide from reporters.
- ✗ Speak to some reporters, but ignore others.
- ✗ Give an answer if you are not sure.
- ✗ Use educational jargon.
- ✗ Hide documents from reporters.
- ✗ Wait until there is a crisis before establishing a relationship with the media.
- ✗ Assume reporters are unprofessional or out to get you or your school.

Local Association Event Planning

Holding successful, well-attended association-hosted events is an important responsibility for a local communications committee. There are a number of different types of events in which your local might be interested:

- Member events such as a back-to-school gathering, new member orientation and after-school get-togethers.
- Local/community events that will give the association a positive presence in the community.
- Media events designed to get the media more involved in and educated about what goes on in classrooms and what members do every day.
- Partnership events that reflect the cooperative relationship between the association and the school district.
- Stakeholder events that involve students, staff, parents, the community and the media (reading activities held during National Reading Month every March are a good example of this).

Regardless of the event you choose to have, it is very important to have a detailed plan of action in place long before the event takes place. Use the form as a guide to help you plan your next association-hosted event.

A Great Event Starts with a Great Plan!

What is the event? _____

What is the goal/purpose of the event? _____

Who is the chairperson or contact person for the event? _____

Identify the things that need to be done before and during the event and who is in charge of each.
(You may need to establish committees to complete some of the work.)

Location: _____

Time: _____

Date: _____

Refreshments: _____

Prizes/giveaways: _____

Entertainment/activity: _____

Are there any rules/guidelines of which you need to be aware? _____

Costs associated with the event

From where are the funds coming to pay for the event? _____

What is the estimated total cost of the event? _____

Breakdown of costs:

Entertainment/activity _____

Facility rental _____

Refreshments _____

Publicity (invitations, flyers, etc.) _____

Decorations _____

Other costs _____

Marketing and the media

How will you notify people of the event? _____

How will you encourage people to attend? _____

How will you include the media (if applicable)? Who will deal with the media?

After the event

What worked well? _____

What didn't work? _____

If you were to do this again, what would you change? _____

Local Association Websites

An association website is an effective communication tool used by many local associations.

Before undertaking the design and maintenance of a website, you need to have a clear idea of who you are trying to reach and for what purpose.

- Who is your audience?
- What are you trying to accomplish?
- Why should someone visit your site?
- What information do you want to communicate?
- What reaction do you want from users?

Before you design your own website, think about the ones you visit regularly. You will find that they have the following in common:

- Clear, consistent organization and navigation (easy to use).
- Accurate, regularly updated content. Good content is your best marketing tool.
- Simple, clean design.

Top Tips for Starting a Local Website

- Establish your audience and your goals first—everything else depends on it!
- Content dictates design. You need to know what content will be on your website before you can figure out what it will look like.
- Set up a schedule on which your users can rely. Keep the information current—nothing kills a site faster than old, stale content.
- Legally borrow from other sources—MEA and NEA, state association communications, etc.
- Find a clear, consistent method of organizing your information and then stick to it. Have as many people as possible try out your organization and navigation set-up—if they don't get it, head back to the drawing board.
- Keep your design SIMPLE and CLEAN.
- Borrow ideas from other websites you like.
- Recruit someone who's willing to be responsible for creating and/or maintaining your site. Try asking a new or retired member to do it. Give them a small stipend for keeping the site up-to-date.
- Find a place to host your website.

The MEA Creative Projects Team can aid in developing a local association website. Resources available fall into two broad categories: training/consulting for local website development and resource networking among local association webmasters. Contact MEA Creative Projects at 800-292-1934 to find out more.

You've Got Connections!

The MEA Public Affairs Department is a group of talented, creative and dedicated people who want to help you develop and implement a successful local communications plan.

If you need it, just ask!

- Message development and management tailored to your association's needs.
- Targeted materials designed to help you connect with your new members.
- Crisis PR—we will help you develop a crisis strategy to communicate with members, the community and the media.
- Assorted local materials may be created through MEA Creative Projects. From business cards to placemats to flyers, our award-winning graphic artists serve your design needs free of cost and our in-house print shop features low prices and a large selection of stock. Request a job through your local field office.



MEA

Michigan Education Association

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*The mission of the MEA is to ensure that the education of our students and
the working environments of our members are of the highest quality.*



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