

Select your Communications Mechanisms

News Release or Media Advisory

Send a news release or advisory to alert news/assignment editors to announcements, events or developments of wide community interest. Both a release and media advisory should include the 5W's (Who, What, When, Where, Why) and H (How). A release should have the most critical information in the first paragraph with facts of lesser importance in descending order. Include a statement or sound bite from a spokesperson. The media advisory can be a simple outline highlighting important information, availability of spokespeople and photo opportunities. Always include a contact and website for further information. Follow up with a phone call to make sure the piece was received, to pitch coverage for the event and to answer any questions.

Non-library Publications

Consider where your target groups, including your partner organizations, get their information. Ask if they would be willing to carry news or feature articles about the library in their newsletters or magazines. Offer to supply articles for legislators' district newsletters, the campus newspaper, alumni magazine, parent-teacher organization newsletter and other publications.

Op-eds and Letters-to-the-Editor

Op-eds and letters-to-the editor provide a forum for readers to express their views. Op-eds are guest opinion columns that appear opposite the paper's own editorials. Call the editor of the op-ed or editorial page and explain your idea briefly. Explain your library affiliation. Also ask about length—most op-eds are about 750 words. When submitting your copy, include a proposed headline to let the editor know your theme, but don't be surprised if the newspaper changes the actual headline or edits your op-ed for style or length. Send a copy of any pieces that appear to others you wish to influence such as elected officials, the college board of trustees or school board. Some radio and TV stations will air guest opinions. Call the news or public affairs director to inquire.

Partnerships and Coalitions

Recruiting other organizations with common concerns to endorse your position and publicize your cause is one of the most effective ways to communicate your message. Building a coalition of groups focused on a joint initiative can be particularly effective in gaining credibility and influence with legislators.

Publications

Print communications continue to be a primary source of information. Today, because of competition with other media and shortened attention spans, it's more important than ever that your publications be graphically attractive and to the point.

Most libraries have a core set of publications, such as an introductory brochure, calendar of activities, annual report and newsletters for staff and the public. Be sure to include them as well as any new fact sheets, flyers or brochures in your communication strategy.

Public Service Announcements (PSAs)

Most radio and TV stations have community calendars or public service announcements they offer free of charge to nonprofit community groups. These messages must focus on events or news of community interest. Contact information should be included. The spots generally run around 30 seconds (75 words) but may be shorter. They are run at the discretion of the station when free air time is available, which is generally not during prime time. Your spots should be written and submitted based on the type of audience you hope to reach—don't bother sending an announcement geared to seniors to the local rock station.

Radio and Television Talk Shows

Talk show producers are frequently looking for guest speakers. Send a letter pitching your topic, its relevance to their audience and the qualifications of the guest you are proposing. Follow up with a phone call. Make sure your spokesperson understands and is comfortable with the needs of the broadcast media and is prepared to adapt the message for a particular audience and to answer any difficult questions.

Speaking Engagements

Many groups look for speakers to address timely topics and how they relate to their communities or campuses. Seeking out speaking engagements with partners such as school, campus or community groups can be a particularly effective way to deliver your message. Most libraries have a listing of community organizations. Simply send a letter or make a phone call to program chairs of groups you wish to target. Library advocates may be especially helpful, both by reaching out to groups they belong to and as knowledgeable, enthusiastic speakers.

A draft script should be provided for speakers to personalize with their own experiences and examples. There should be a clear call to action, whether it's to call public officials, share the library message with three friends or contribute funds. Handouts and library advocate sign-up forms should be provided.

Special Events and Promotions

Special events can be designed to take the library message outside the library or to bring specific audiences, such as legislators or non-users, into the library. Activities such as an exhibit at a shopping mall, a "Why I Love My Library" contest, a postcard campaign or a rally provide a hook to get media attention and help educate the public. An event may be scheduled to focus attention on new Internet training for kids, celebrate an anniversary or kick off a new building or fundraising campaign. Make sure the event supports your key message and reaches one or more audiences you have targeted. Scheduling an event during National Library Week, Library Card Sign-up Month, Banned Books Week, Teen Read Week or other national observances can help attract media interest.

Story Pitch

Send a letter to a specific editor, producer or reporter. Briefly explain your story idea and why it's important. Include relevant examples, names of possible spokespeople and photo possibilities. Call back a few days later to check on the status and offer your assistance.

Telephone Tree

Having an established network of advocates who are willing to pick up the phone and call three friends is one of the fastest, easiest and cheapest ways to deliver your message, particularly when there's an essential vote the next day.

Web and Internet

Electronic media offer many new opportunities for delivering the library message to a wider audience. Make sure your library's website has an advocacy section with regular updates on library concerns as well as advocacy alerts, tips on how to be a library advocate and contact information for local officials. Ask partner groups to post articles or banners with links to the library's web page. Create an electronic mailing list for those who wish to receive action alerts and other news online. When posting action alerts, encourage recipients to "Please share this message with a friend."

E-Advocacy and Web 2.0

In recent years, a new trend of improved collaboration, multimedia and extremely current information has developed on the Internet. Dubbed "Web 2.0," it is by many accounts the future of the Internet. By its collaborative nature, Web 2.0 offers myriad possibilities for bringing people together using the web, and this has been great news for advocates, who can now support and promote their causes in ways not possible before. What follows is a brief list of Web 2.0 e-advocacy resources.

Websites: The original source of information on the Internet, websites are the most accurate and reliable sources available. They are typically created by authoritative sources, and, for those websites that have attained a reputation for excellence, they are quite often the best sources for information on advocacy: where to go, what to do, and how to do it.

The only drawback is that many websites aren't able to update their content as often as the news may demand. This can happen because only a handful of people—or sometimes even just one person—have control of a site's content, and often that person has purview over many other web pages as well. With that in mind, many have turned to blogs for the most recent information.

Blogs: What draws most people to blogs is their relevance and up-to-the-minute accuracy. Checking certain blogs on an hourly basis has become the norm for those interested in advocating for a cause, because the administrators of those blogs follow a wide range of news sources and are very adept at compiling them. For example, someone interested in technology news would likely read

TechCrunch.com, which compiles news from throughout the technology world into one easy-to-digest page. What many people dislike about blogs is that there are so many of them out there.

Indeed, it is often remarked that “everyone has a blog.” The only way to choose from the many blogs available is to do a little research to determine what blogs have developed the best reputations in the “blogosphere.” Or, as an alternative, only go to blogs that are under the umbrella of an established source, like ALA, which has a wide array of blogs on virtually all library topics.

Wikis: The fundamental element of wikis is collaboration; it is what makes a wiki a wiki and is its primary strength. For starters, a wiki is a type of web page that allows anyone to edit it. You don’t need experience with web design or code; all you have to do is click the “edit” button and type away. Wikis are ideal for projects in which input is needed from multiple parties. For example, the ALA Washington Office recently had a problem getting the most accurate and up-to-date information on federal libraries. There are federal libraries all over the country and gathering and posting news about them all was creating a bottleneck on the Washington Office’s website. To alleviate that, the office created the Federal Libraries wiki (<http://wikis.ala.org/fedlib>). Now, any of the stakeholders anywhere in the country can go to that page and update the information. The only caveat is that a wiki’s biggest strength is also its biggest weakness: because anyone can edit a wiki, the chances of false information being posted are significantly increased. In most cases, a primary editor or administrator is needed to keep an eye on the wiki and watch for inappropriate content or spam attacks.

Podcasts: Relatively new to the Internet, podcasts are simply a regularly updated audio file that is posted on a blog or website, designed to appeal to people on the go. Podcasts offer several unique opportunities. First, they give users a new way to connect with each other, especially younger ones who want their information in a new way, using iPods or other mp3 players. They also appeal to those who don’t have the time during the day to read web pages but are able to download a podcast and listen on the way to work, for example.

Second Life: Second Life is also relatively new to the Internet. It’s a virtual environment whereby users can create a “second life” by creating a three-dimensional representation of themselves (known as an avatar) in the online world. It has resulted in millions of people connecting with each other and created hundreds of new, real and virtual communities. Libraries are already located in Second Life, many on Cybrary City, one of several islands that are providing virtual library services. Traditional services—such as collection building, reference, and community gathering—have all been incorporated into this virtual world. In addition, the librarians of Second Life help new users acclimate themselves to Second Life and have begun hosting events and meetings.

With all that Web 2.0 has to offer, there is a way for any library advocate to get the information he or she needs, to connect with other like-minded believers and to promote those beliefs all across the globe.