



The Era of

# OPEN COMMUNICATION

A new age of communication has arrived:  
Is your district in the mix?

*Dorreen Dembski*

**T**oday's constant communication stream is the hallmark of the information age. Constant communication has had a dramatic impact on all organizations — including school districts.

It has created the expectation by our stakeholders, both internally and externally, for an open communication culture. Interactive communication is more than a post to a Facebook page. It is a strategic communication strategy, attended to consistently, across many platforms ranging from digital to print media, to face-to-face.

In this age, with the many resources available on the Internet, it is almost impossible for organizations to control information. People can

find information about your district whether you or someone else is presenting it. Is your district proactively providing information and including people in communication? The information age requires it. If you don't tell your district's story, someone else will surely shape it for you.

Communication is both a way of thinking and a way of doing. All organizations, your district included, should be communicating with and to stakeholders proactively, in ways that people want information. For example, the information age has brought with it an expectation by consumers for a good user experience.

## ■ Open Communication


User experience refers to the feeling people have when looking for infor-

mation. Is your information out there, in the mix of all available information so that your message can be found when people are searching? Easy accessibility to important information provides a positive user experience. If communication is inconsistent or if information is hard to find, this will create a negative or frustrating user experience. Today's information age requires a sustained communication effort with an emphasis on authentic, easily accessible information that uses multiple channels for communication.

This is in tune with the concept of open communication. Open communication is a way of thinking about communication that reflects a value of wanting to be accessible with the most information possible



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for the purpose of building trusting relationships. Building open communication and trusting relationships take time.

For people who subscribe to the idea that information can be controlled, or who worked or lived in a more controlled communication environment, accepting and developing a culture of open communication requires a paradigm shift. The shift is away from thinking that organizations can randomly

## THE COMMUNICATION CHECKLIST

- Make information easily accessible** — Accessibility to important information provides a positive user experience. If communication is inconsistent or if information is hard to find, this will create a negative or frustrating user experience.
- Communicate in all formats** — Organizations need to be in the mix of print, digital, online and face-to-face communication.
- Communicate consistently** — An effective approach to communication is sustained, purposeful, consistent, and strategic based on current, research-based practices.
- Have a strategy** — A good communications strategy includes attention to data, audience, and message, and uses many channels that are one-way, two-way.



communicate or communicate when there are events, such as a referendum or a crisis. Today's information age requires an integrated, purposeful, consistent, and sustained organizational communication effort through various channels to reach and interact with internal and external audiences on a regular basis.

Organizations should expect interactivity initiated by stakeholders in today's communication environment. This too, requires efforts to be strategically planned, with guidelines that are consistently implemented to reach intended audiences while anticipating that interactivity will follow. All of this requires board and leadership acknowledgment that communication is a formal function of the organization, one in which there are roles, responsibilities *and* *emerging* best practices.

### ■ Personalize It

Communication is occurring, with or without your organization and therefore, you don't control it, you participate in it. Nowhere is that more obvious than through social media. Social media is Facebook and Twitter, but it is also blogging, online reviews, Instagram, YouTube — the list goes on and on.

As an organization participates in communication, the communication tactics should be personalized to meet your customers where they are, when they are interested. For example, communicating about budget cuts may take a different strategy than the strategy required to attract parents of young children to your 4-year-old kindergarten program. Those of us in the communication field use the term "content strategy." A content strategy is placing the right story on the right mediums to be available to the targeted audience. That is a tenet of current best practice in communication. There is not a one-size-fits-all approach to communication. Because there are so many ways to communicate, it takes an organized,

thoughtful, research-based approach.

Organizations have to be flexible enough to view communication as an ongoing, multi-channel process that seeks to reach various audiences. Our audiences — and there are many of them for school districts — can discern useful information, use technology to access information and use the interactive nature of the Web to discuss information about your organization. People can and do talk to each other via social media communities, for example, or look online for the information they want. Therefore, your organization's messages need to be in the mix of the information people can find on their own, online.

### ■ Meeting Audiences Where They Are

The easy availability of information has created an expectation amongst stakeholders that your district is also using multiple channels of communication to provide a consistent flow of information in multiple formats. To further complicate your communication challenges, your customers aren't always interested in every topic you want to share.

The key idea is: *When people are interested in a topic, they want to be able to find the information.*

Research shows that when people are interested in a topic, they look at four or five sources for information. This requires attention to the idea of pushing information on a consistent basis rather than passively posting it on your website when thought of, for example. Your goal is to make your district the top-of-mind, trusted source of information. The tendency to search just-in-time when people are interested in a topic also requires having information accessible on multiple platforms.

Email, social media, websites, face-to-face, meetings, slide-shares on the website, etc. — these are examples of where people may or may not access information, when they are interested.



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## Random or inconsistent communication doesn't work. People lose interest in inconsistent communication efforts.

No doubt, face-to-face communication has to be part of your effort. In today's multi-channel world of communication, organizations need to be in the mix of print, digital, online and face-to-face communication to assure consistent information is available in many formats. It really is much harder to communicate in an open communication culture of today's information age than it was just a few years ago. But it is the new reality, and it requires someone to keep the organization's "eye" and efforts on district communication.

### Are You in or Standing By?

If your organization is already in the mix of face-to-face and interactive online communication: Good for you!

Then ask the next question. How effective is it and what are considerations for continuing your effective communication strategy? If your district is not yet focused on strategic communication through many channels, remember we are in the information age that has created an expectation of an open communication culture. Emerging best practices in communication strategies require an emphasis on regular organizational communication to build trust.

Random or inconsistent communication doesn't work. People lose interest in inconsistent communication efforts or will accuse your district of not communicating well. What is required is a supportive board and leadership team that values communication for the benefit it brings your

district and your stakeholders.

An effective approach to communication is sustained, purposeful, consistent, and strategic based on current, research-based practices. The components of strategic communication include some of same fundamental components that have long been the underpinnings of a strong communication program including attention to data, audience, and message, using many channels that are one-way, two-way.

What's new is the interactivity, responsiveness and multi-channel nature of communication today. It is an information age. Are you in it? ■

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