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Evaluating your communications: Understanding and assessing your effectiveness

Assessment is an established component of education. Evaluations are standard practice when it comes to professional development or systems improvement. But far too often, we forget to measure or assess our communications effectiveness. Gauging the impact of communications can be hard. Our audiences receive information in a myriad of forms and from multiple sources. In many cases, we receive little to no feedback on how we are doing. However, with a little planning, outreach, and tracking, we can gather valuable information to help us improve our communications' effectiveness and impact.

Setting Communications Metrics

Clear communication goals and metrics should be part of your district's communication plan. You may even choose to have key communications or engagement metrics included in your district-wide strategic plan. Because of the multi-faceted nature of communications and community engagement campaigns, you will likely need to set a range of metrics to gauge your effectiveness.

Type of metrics you might consider include:

Activity Metrics: Activity metrics assess what you are doing. How well are you implementing your work plan? Are your activities aligned to your broader communications strategy and district goals?

Examples of activity metrics include frequency and timeliness of newsletter distribution, hitting targets for hosting community events, or achieving desired response times when responding to inquiries. Setting activity metrics can be valuable as they force you to think through what you want to do, how often, and to what end. Having a plan and system around your communication activity enables you to track your work and make adjustments as needed. However, this metric does not give any feedback about the impact of your communications.

Reach Metrics: Reach metrics help you determine who you are currently communicating with. Identifying your current audience can help pinpoint gaps in your outreach and identify potential audience groups you may wish to target.

Examples of reach metrics include social media follow/like rates, newsletter subscription rates, website visits, or community forum attendance rates. As with activity metrics, these numbers on their own do not show you how effective your communications are being. But they can help you identify current audiences and areas where you may need to do additional work.

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Engagement Metrics: Engagement metrics track when and how often your audience engages with you.

Examples of engagement metrics could include number of parent questions received per month, percent of parents attending parent-teacher conferences, or number of staff members attending voluntary training events. These metrics can be very valuable in tracking how effectively you are encouraging others to reach out and participate in your district's activities.

Impact Metrics: Impact metrics help you track the effectiveness of your communications on shifting attitudes, influencing behaviors, or prompting action.

Examples of impact metrics include success of a communications campaign (a bond measure, an attendance campaign, etc.), change in attitude toward a controversial policy adoption (school closure, new curriculum, etc.), or achieving a fundraising or community giving goal. Impact metrics look at what you are trying to achieve and gauge how your communications efforts contributed toward (or didn't) that desired outcome.

For each metric that you select, you will need to establish a tracking mechanism. Some tracking is pretty simple. Other elements take time. But, as with everything in our technology-rich world, there are tools to make it simpler. Tools like Google Analytics can help you quickly and easily track email or newsletter open and click-through rates to see what's being read and what's not. Online survey tools can aggregate and sort responses to make analysis quicker and easier. And as you review the results of your tracking, you will be able to see not only if you met your targets but also what areas you may need to focus on or adjust in order to improve your impact and effectiveness.

Gathering Direct Feedback

Sometimes the best way to get feedback on how you are doing is to simply ask someone — or more precisely, a bunch of someones. Conducting audience surveys, focus groups, and stakeholder interviews can provide valuable insight into what's working well, what could be improved, and what type of impact your communications are having.

In order to communicate effectively, we need to understand our audiences and what's important to them. Online surveys can be a wonderful tool to get feedback from a large number of people quickly and easily. An annual communications survey (separate ones by audience are generally best) can help assess what tools are being effective, how people feel about your communications efforts, and what people would like to see done differently.

However, building in time for personal conversations with stakeholders can be valuable when you have specific areas you want to improve on or concerns you want to address. Conducting a focus group or conducting individual interviews allows for a more in-depth conversation on a specific topic (boosting family engagement or improving the website user experience, for example).

As these means of gathering feedback can be time intensive, here are a few tips for making the most of your focus group or interview.

Focus on attitudes. Explore how people think about a problem. Stakeholders don't need to design your new newsletter format or select a color scheme for your website. But gathering feedback on their experiences, feelings, and challenges can help you improve the quality and impact of the communications you provide.

Have people give examples. Ask participants to share specific instances of when a communication worked particularly well. What was it that worked for them? Why did they find it effective? What was a specific message or strategy that didn't work for them or was a turnoff? Why? How could it have been better?

Ask about habits and preferences. Asking participants how they generally consume information can be illuminating. Do they access your website from their phones? How is that experience? Do they read the school flier or does it go straight in the recycling bin? Do they like getting text notifications or emails? Where do they go when they want to learn more?

Acting on Your Data

Now that you have solid quantitative and qualitative data about your communications efforts, what are you going to do about it? Asking people for feedback should indicate two things: that you care about what they have to say and that you are open to making changes.

A solid communications plan will include regular opportunities for review and revision. Take the time to look over your analytics, survey data, and other metrics and make a plan for improvement. And of course, make sure to communicate those changes back to the audience you had gathered feedback from. Showing people that you listened and changed based on their concerns builds credibility, trust and increases your chances for effective two-way communication down the line.

Additional Resources:

- **Measuring Communications: 4 Simple Metrics Internal Comms Should be Monitoring**

www.contactmonkey.com/blog/measure-communications

- Measuring the Success of Your Communications Strategy

www.thenonproffitimes.com/management-tips/measuring-the-success-of-your-communications-strategy

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