



Elevating Early Childhood Outreach in Arizona

How First Things First became a highly effective communicator for the state's youngest residents.

Who: First Things First, a state-wide, quasi-government agency

What: Charged with community outreach to raise awareness of early childhood issues, but needed help to move beyond a handful of familiar tactics

Where: Arizona

When: 2011-2013

How: Advocacy & Communication Solutions, LLC (ACS) creates a highly customized, research-driven, comprehensive, three-year communications plan and helps guide its implementation

Result: First Things First meets and exceeds goals for outreach in its first three years and engages ACS for a second three-year plan

"Many organizations make the mistake of jumping straight into tactics without thinking about a real strategy. But an effective public outreach campaign requires a much deeper level of engagement that expands beyond traditional marketing. It takes a few years in the trenches to understand how to make it work and create a plan of action that will actually be effective."

In 2006, Arizona voters approved a broad, new statewide commitment to promoting early childhood development. Funded with millions in taxes from cigarette sales, a new quasi-government agency, First Things First (FTF), was charged with improving the quality of and access to early childhood development and health programs; increasing access to preventative health and health screenings through age five; offering parent and family support and education regarding early childhood development and literacy; providing professional development and training of providers; and increasing coordination of early childhood development and health programs. FTF also was required, by law, to conduct community outreach and build awareness for early childhood issues. While the FTF staff and board were experts in the area of early childhood, they needed help to share that expertise and build relationships across multiple Arizona communities. To help them close the gap and fulfill the charge of conducting successful community outreach, they called on Advocacy & Communication Solutions, LLC (ACS).

"Like many human services or social service agencies, FTF was pushed to deliver meaningful communication and community relations outcomes," says ACS co-founder and President Lori McClung. "That can be nerve-racking when it comes to outreach, because the task of building public will is easily overwhelming. Many organizations make the mistake of jumping straight into tactics without thinking about a real strategy. But an effective public outreach campaign requires a much deeper level of engagement that expands beyond traditional marketing. It takes a few years in the trenches to understand how to make it work and create a plan of action that will actually be effective."

Fortunately, McClung and ACS co-founder and Vice President Scarlett Boudier had the years of experience necessary to provide FTF with its first-ever community outreach plan — one that was realistic, measurable and highly effective. Rather than supplying an off-the-shelf, cookie-cutter plan, ACS created one that was highly customized for FTF's situation, needs and implementation capacity.

Broad Success Requires Deep Understanding

"Every organization is different, so no two outreach plans should ever be alike," says McClung. "Creating a plan that's tailored to a specific organization takes an investment of time and research up front, but it delivers a hefty return on that investment in terms of effectiveness."

McClung and Boudier focused on creating a data-driven plan that FTF could use both to hone in on key audiences and to create meaningful measures of accountability and success. One of the key ways that McClung and Boudier gathered information was through a series of strategy sessions with FTF's staff, leadership, board and stakeholders. In each session, McClung and Boudier dug deep to learn more about FTF's work in early childhood, but they also concentrated on learning everything they could about the organization's capacity, including challenges and gaps that the plan would ultimately need to address.

"We view our work as a partnership," McClung explains. "Our strategy sessions ensure that everyone is on the same page, and understands the roles, expectations and outcomes that we're all agreeing to. We become subject matter experts for our clients and experts on the internal and external environments in which they operate."

Elevating Early Childhood Outreach in Arizona, continued

We continue in-depth strategy sessions at several stages in our process to ensure that we're creating a plan that's the best fit and most effective for their unique needs and capacity. That's something a cookie-cutter plan can never do."

In addition to strategy sessions, the ACS team conducted qualitative and quantitative research.

Qualitative measures included several confidential interviews with key external stakeholders. "We used these to learn about the perceptions that existed about FTF, including their perceived strengths and weaknesses," Boudier explains. "These interviews help us find the common threads upon which to build messages, as well as the hidden anomalies or gaps that could present challenges down the road."

As part of the qualitative phase, ACS also conducted an in-depth review of national research on early childhood messaging and its effectiveness, using key lessons learned to apply to FTF's current situation. "Looking at the national picture and latest best-practice findings helps us put our clients' work in a broader context. Many organizations skip this step, and therefore run the risk of creating a plan that's too myopic to have any long-term staying power," says Boudier.

After presenting findings from the qualitative research, ACS and its research partners began the quantitative research phase. Using questions created from the qualitative findings, the ACS team conducted phone surveys and focus groups to test awareness of FTF and its issues as well as levels of trust for FTF among various demographic groups. "Our work with FTF was interesting because in addition to reaching out to business leaders, rural and urban residents and other diverse communities, we also needed to engage various tribal groups," says McClung. "That's not a population that every early childhood organization works with, and it's another great example of why our in-depth approach works better than any off-the-shelf plan."

"The quantitative findings help us pinpoint exactly who our primary target audiences should be, who the most effective messengers will be, and what kinds of messages will generate the greatest positive response," says Boudier. "We use that data to work closely with our branding and marketing partners to develop a brand strategy and message platform that will resonate for grassroots outreach campaigns. They supply their creative marketing knowledge, and we supply our grassroots and political expertise. The result is a very targeted, very effective set of messages that drive results."

ACS often works with a variety of partners to provide a full suite of complementary expertise to clients, and allows clients to decide whether they prefer to communicate with those partners directly or through ACS alone. Either way, the experience is seamless and coordinated, and rooted in open and ongoing communication among all parties.

"Comprehensive" Plans Should be Comprehensible

ACS and its partners combined research, branding and messaging into a comprehensive, three-year plan for FTF. The FTF plan clearly identified outreach goals and objectives, defined target audiences for each objective, and included measurable benchmarks for evaluating FTF's progress in each objective. In addition, it provided a summary and explanation of the organization's research and message development work, to keep the "why" behind the plan constantly at FTF's fingertips.

"We strive to deliver community outreach plans that are comprehensive, but still easy to understand and implement," McClung explains. "While there's plenty of 'big picture' information in the FTF plan, there are also specific tactics with measurements and benchmarks tied to them. That makes it easier to concentrate on progressive portions of the plan, make assignments and promote accountability."

Implementation is Enhanced by Consistent Support

It's an all-too-common occurrence for consulting organizations to deliver plans that then languish on a shelf, but that's not the way ACS does business. McClung and Boudier provided intensive, ongoing support and guidance for FTF throughout the three-year life of the plan. That work included the creation of a staffing plan to ramp up outreach efforts, and training for community outreach staff. McClung and Boudier maintained constant communication through conference calls, on-site visits, and 24/7 phone and email conversations.

"We helped create the materials that staff would use, helped them set priorities, created a time management structure for doing plan tasks, provided a list of media connections and trained staff in how to make and maintain those media connections," says McClung. "We want to stay engaged with our clients because we want our plans to deliver results."

FTF saw the benefits of that relationship, and subsequently hired ACS to create a second three-year plan on the heels of the first. No doubt performance in the first three years contributed to that decision. FTF met and exceeded overall plan goals, increasing total awareness by 14 percentage points (20% to 34%) and increasing the number of individuals who strongly support FTF by 14 points (33% to 47%).

"While it's very gratifying to see how well FTF has done in terms of its benchmarks, one of the real joys is seeing how we've helped them become an organization that has made a sophisticated strategy a core part of their work," says McClung. "By helping FTF, we're helping change the future for many of Arizona's children. What could be more rewarding?"

[To Learn More](#) about working with Advocacy & Communication Solutions or about the experience of First Things First, please contact Lori McClung, President, at 877.372.0166, ext. 1 or lori@advocacyandcommunication.org