



Partnering with Non-profits, Philanthropic Organizations and Government Agencies

## Engagement & Communication

### Use the Summer Slump to Get Ahead on Your Engagement Strategy

Summer might feel like a good time to slow down: legislators are on recess, offices are working at a slower pace, and people are taking vacations. It's a perfect time, however, for you to sharpen your communication tools and ramp up your engagement strategy so you're ready to hit the ground running in the fall.

Remember, engagement and communication go hand-in-hand. You certainly can't engage your audiences without an effective communication strategy.

You can be asking yourself: how do I deliver the kind of communication that rallies the masses behind our cause? What resources do I need to be successful? Where do you start?

**ACS breaks it down for you here.**



#### IN THIS NEWSLETTER

[Communication First](#)

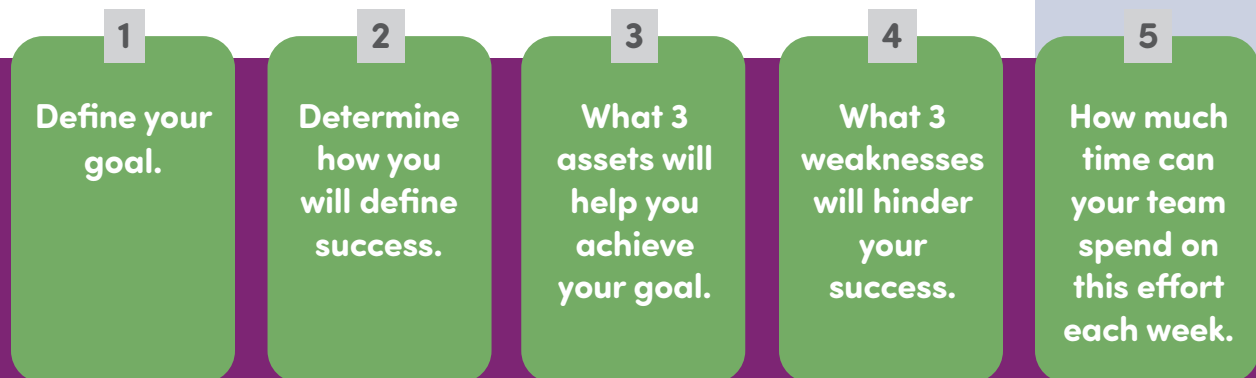
[Community Engagement](#)

## What You Say Matters, So Start with Communication First

Remember that vintage Head & Shoulders commercial that appealed to paranoid consumers who had dandruff by saying, “Because you never get a second chance to make a first impression”? The time-tested adage applies to communication as much as it does interpersonal relations. That’s why it’s critical that your messages and communication vehicles grab attention as much as they align with your goals.

Strategic communication is purposeful, informed, deliverable, and measurable. Thinking strategically about your organization’s communication will help you connect with your audience in a targeted way, use informed approaches to deliver your message, and achieve the maximum impact with respect to your capacity.

### Get started by setting your strategy:



### Bonus Tip:

Remember, ideal goals are **SMART**: specific, measurable, attainable, results-focused, and time-specific.

Next, draft your messages by pondering these questions:

1

Who is your audience?

2

What are the best ways to reach these audiences?

3

Determine what does your audience care most about?

4

Determine what are the key words and phrases that are important for these audiences to understand?

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Determine what are the industry jargon terms you need to eliminate? (check out our eblast on "[Giving Jargon the Boot](#)")

### What Makes A Memorable Message?

Memorable messages are easy to understand, paint a mental picture, evoke an emotional response, and stick with your audiences. Use your on-the-job experience to demonstrate to people why they need to support your cause. Data helps, too, but don't overdo it—two to three data points are all you need.

## Community Engagement: Is It a Process Or an Outcome?

Actually, community engagement is both a process and an outcome.

It's a process organizations and individuals use to educate voters/supporters/decision-makers about their cause, mission, or issue and entice them to support it. It's the rallying cry.

It's an outcome when people are willing, ready, and able to get behind that cause's shared vision and take action.

Before you begin, determine the specific goals or objectives to be achieved. Have a clear understanding of why the strategy is being implemented and how the strategy will be executed.

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## Now get started:

1

### Determine the purpose

Articulate why you want to engage your community. What will be different as a result of community engagement? What do you want to learn or achieve as a result of the process? Is there a change that will come about as a result of this work? Identify the goal of a community engagement process among key stakeholders.

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### Identify target audiences

Whom do you wish to reach? Why are they important to furthering your cause? Create a list of audiences and leaders or influencers for those audiences you can invite to attend your meetings, serve as advisors, or interact with your organization in other ways. Share this list with stakeholders and remember to ask yourself, "Who is not on this list but should be because they are directly affected by this work?"

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### Determine your approach

There are many community engagement models to choose from. Do some research to figure out which one will best suit your needs. One useful model is the Spectrum of Public Participation from the International Association for Public Participation, which details a five-part pathway from low to high public impact on decision-making (see [iap2.org/page/pillars](http://iap2.org/page/pillars) for more).

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### Tap into existing efforts

Consider how you may leverage local community assets, partner organizations, and existing initiatives to meet your goals. Understand existing efforts in the community—in schools, neighborhoods, nonprofits, government agencies, and more. No one wants to reinvent the wheel or waste time duplicating efforts. By learning about other successful efforts, you will discover ways to amplify or improve your own.

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### Define your methods

There are many ways to engage community members, and your efforts shouldn't be limited to just one. Concentrate on asking for input and engaging in conversation, rather than delivering your own agenda. Methods may include focus groups (guided discussion to provide feedback on priorities or perspectives), online surveys, paper surveys distributed at community events, one-on-one interviews (which can be done virtually), text messaging, and virtual group meetings.

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### Meet people where they are

Engaging community members works best when you meet them where they are, or at least make it easy for them to come to you. Host focus groups in geographically diverse places around your community where residents feel comfortable or regularly visit, such as schools or libraries. Hand out surveys where people frequently gather or pass through, like community centers or grocery stores. For online surveys, work with community agencies and organizations to obtain email addresses for your target audience. Consider non-traditional spaces for conversations like a local coffee shop.

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### Build partnerships

No single individual or entity can engage a community alone. You need partners to help carry the load and champions to help you carry the flag. Find those whose strengths and networks complement your own for broader reach and deeper resonance. Depending on your issue, identify organizational partners who can amplify your effort—for example, a school or university for an education issue, or a hospital for a health-related issue. In addition, look for “unlikely” partners whose voice in support of your cause will attract attention (such as a chamber of commerce promoting preschool or a church advocating for teen pregnancy prevention). Work with individuals who have a particular resource or expertise to bring to bear.

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### Communicate

Communication can make or break a community engagement effort. Think strategically about your communication. Understand *what* you want to communicate and *to whom*; then develop a clear message. Decide *who* should carry that message (a grassroots leader? an elected official? a business leader? youth? or someone completely unexpected?). Messages are best received when delivered by someone who is trusted; that trusted messenger differs within and between communities, so be thoughtful. *How* will your trusted messengers communicate? You may need to adapt or create materials about your effort, such as flyers, postcards, or media talking points. You also may need to consider how people you are working to engage share information—do they prefer social media and other online options, or do hard copies of information work better?

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### Staff up

Community engagement is constant and dynamic and is likely to require the undivided attention of a lead staff person. While there may be well-meaning and committed volunteers in the mix, assign or hire full-time staff if your budget allows. Ensure staff and volunteers are properly trained and supported to do this work (in some cases, community engagement staff are housed by organizational partners). If you use volunteers, be sure there is someone to train and organize their collective action, to gather and manage feedback, and to monitor to ensure best practices are being used in the engagement and/or there is fidelity to the engagement model chosen.

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### Set a timeline

Determine how long it will take you to get your community engagement effort off the ground and identify a “launch” date to motivate your team. You should also identify and share a clear end date to help everyone see the light at the end of the tunnel.

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### Measure success

What will success look like for your effort? How will you know when you're done? Identify short-, intermediate- and long-term outcomes and capture how you will measure progress toward and achievement of those outcomes.

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### Create a feedback loop

Authentic community engagement is not a one-way street. What will you do with the information that you gather from the community? Whether you share findings with the public or not, you should communicate with the community about how you are using their input. Showing them their input and participation is valuable helps create goodwill and fosters mutual trust.

Check out [12 Tips for Community Engagement](#) for these 12 tips and more

### Bonus Tip:

**BEST PRACTICE:** Authentic engagement is driven and led by community members. You may develop the questions, but community members must lead the conversation and identify related issues that are important to them. Ask them to define how engagement will feel most meaningful to them.

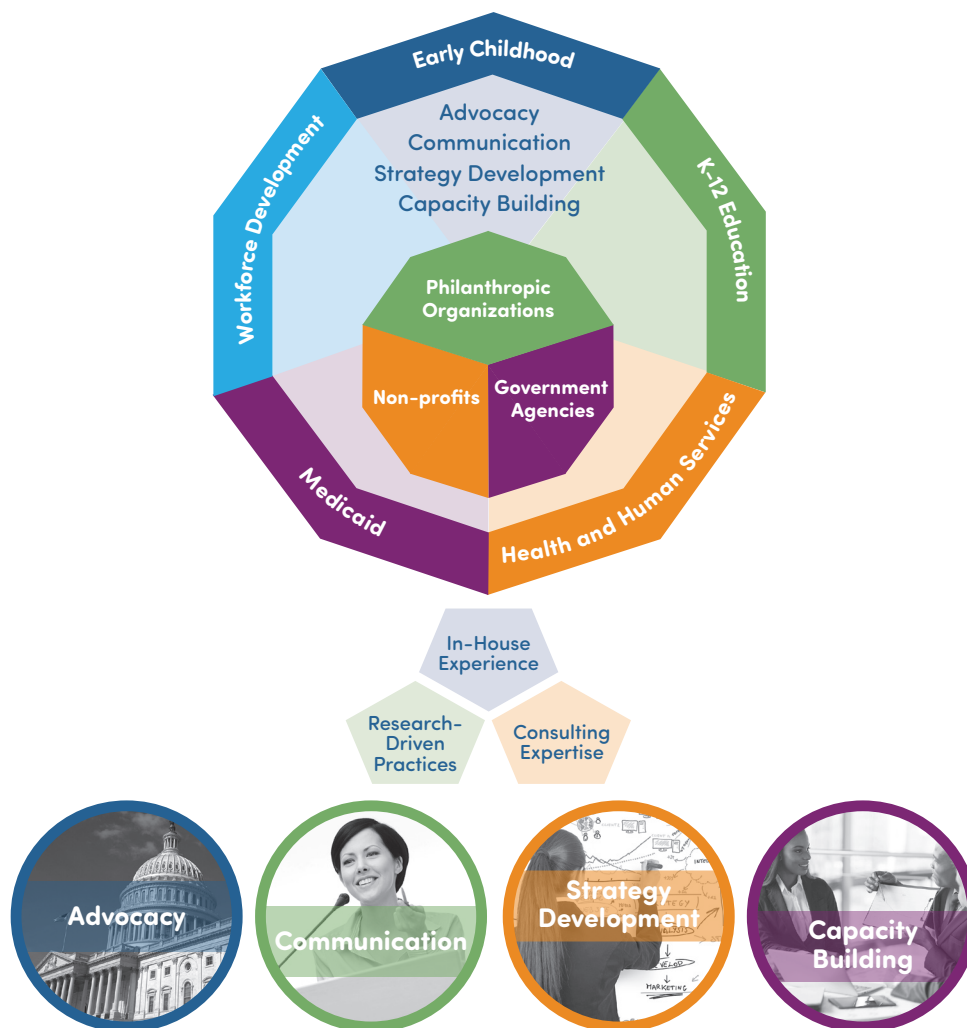
Community engagement is rarely easy, but it is a powerful way to change lives and futures in your community. By following these tips and best practices, you increase your chances to successfully engage your community and make lasting, positive changes on the issues you care about.

ACS has spent the last 17 years defining and refining the skills of communication and engagement. There's a whole section on the ACS website

dedicated to the numerous tools created by our team. If you need more help to take your communication and engagement strategy to the next level, visit our website at [advocacyandcommunication.org/tools-resources](http://advocacyandcommunication.org/tools-resources).

## 5 Goals of Community Engagement

1. Determine community needs or preferences.
2. Inform the community about an effort or issue.
3. Increase visibility for your organization or initiative.
4. Recruit partners and allies to join your effort.
5. Inform internal strategy or organizational direction.





# IN CASE YOU MISSED IT

## Winter 2021 Newsletter



## Spring 2021 Newsletter



## WANT MORE?

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