

Communicate Virtually Anything

Communications solutions for virtually any organizational challenge

8 Tips for Developing the Consummate Communications Plan

Everyone wants to know how long it will take you to complete that very visible communications project and you really have no idea where to start; these 8 tips can help develop the consummate communications plan.

1. Know exactly what you need to deliver

A seemingly simple communications assignment can contain lots of hidden pieces. A speech for an association meeting can also include the “about the speaker” blurb or the release announcing the event. A software Users’ Guide can also include a review of UI texts. A white paper on a product function can also include test plans to ensure the text is correct. So, make sure you know what people are expecting you to deliver. At SAP, I had 18 separate knowledge deliverables for each software release and my plan had to account for each of them.

2. Work back from when it’s due

This might take some detective work. For example, the speech you are writing for your CIO. Does she need it at the site where she is talking, a week before to practice, or a month ahead to get a synopsis in the association newsletter? Writers need deadlines – otherwise most of us would tinker and fine tune forever. Once the deadlines are set, think of them as your friends. They help define your resources – even if it’s just you. Rule of thumb: tight deadline write little; expansive deadline write lots. You have to own the deliverable set once you know what it is. Be the expert and, when necessary, let your management or stakeholders know you know exactly what you are doing and when you expect to have it completed.

3. Include all of the steps

Writing is only one step. There is the research. The outlines. The reviews. The production. The translation. The iterative drafts. You have to account for all of the steps in order to really understand what’s required to make your delivery. And you must let everyone know what is included in the plan. In most ways, this is that expectations thing. It also reinforces your position as the communications expert – even if you are only responsible for the authoring part.

4. Establish reviews at important stages

Writing projects need another set of eyes on them – and if possible more than one. This is another thing you need to build into the plan. It’s one of the steps I talked about earlier, but reviews are really important in order to get the best deliverable possible. The plan also details when you expect the review back in your hands. For more information on reviews, take a look at one of my earlier blog posts, [8 Tips on Getting Great Feedback on Your Latest Draft](#).

5. Plan on keeping everyone informed

The greeting where I worked was typically “Hey Dan. How’s it going?” You may also have this sort of “good morning” on your projects. This was not a rhetorical kind of greeting. They wanted an exact update right then. Or at least at the start. When I could rattle off the plan details whenever I was asked, people stopped asking and I could give updates to the stakeholders and my spate of managers at scheduled status meetings. Push for a status meeting – that will help you organize the time and give you targets to aim at for something new to report.

6. Do the math to create an initial plan

Now that you know the pieces and the dates you can do the math to get your first estimate. If you are doing a series of procedures, time yourself working on one or two to get a feel for the entire project. Then, do the math to get a starting position – 40 procedures at 4 days each means 160 days. Then get real. Does this feel like a 160 day writing project? Is there a learning curve here? Are all of the procedures like the ones you’ve started with? And remember, this is only the writing part. Remember all of the other steps – more steps mean more time. Doing something smaller? You still have parts you can break down. A 20 minute presentation? At 45 seconds per slide for the presentation you will need 30 slides to fill the time. Do an initial slide to get a time estimate and then do the math for your plan.

7. Fine-tune the plan as you go along

Planning is a process. Once you begin the work, you can continue updating the plan to make it better and better. Remember that 160 day project – after you worked on another 5 procedures were you still at the same time? Does your original estimate “feel” right now that you know more? This might take practice – but if you track your work you will have the data to help you fine tune the project plan. Is the project so small you are through with it before you can revisit the plan? In that case, how close was your delivery to reality? Based on your past project data, you can develop the planning experiences you can fall back on for your next project. With that knowledge, you can look at something and say, “Well, this is like the last thing I did and that took 20 days and I was off by a week, so this one should be in the neighborhood of 25 days.”

8. Don’t miss your dates

Now that you have the plan in place, it’s up to you to knock down each of the milestones. While some of the elements might be elastic, the ultimate delivery date is not. On large projects, my milestones were based on weekly status meetings – I knew what had to be done to meet my reporting requirements. Regardless, you did the math so you know how to spend your resource on a daily or weekly basis in order to hit your ultimate deliverable dates. When you work with urgency from a well thought out plan, you’ll have the resources you need to meet each date.