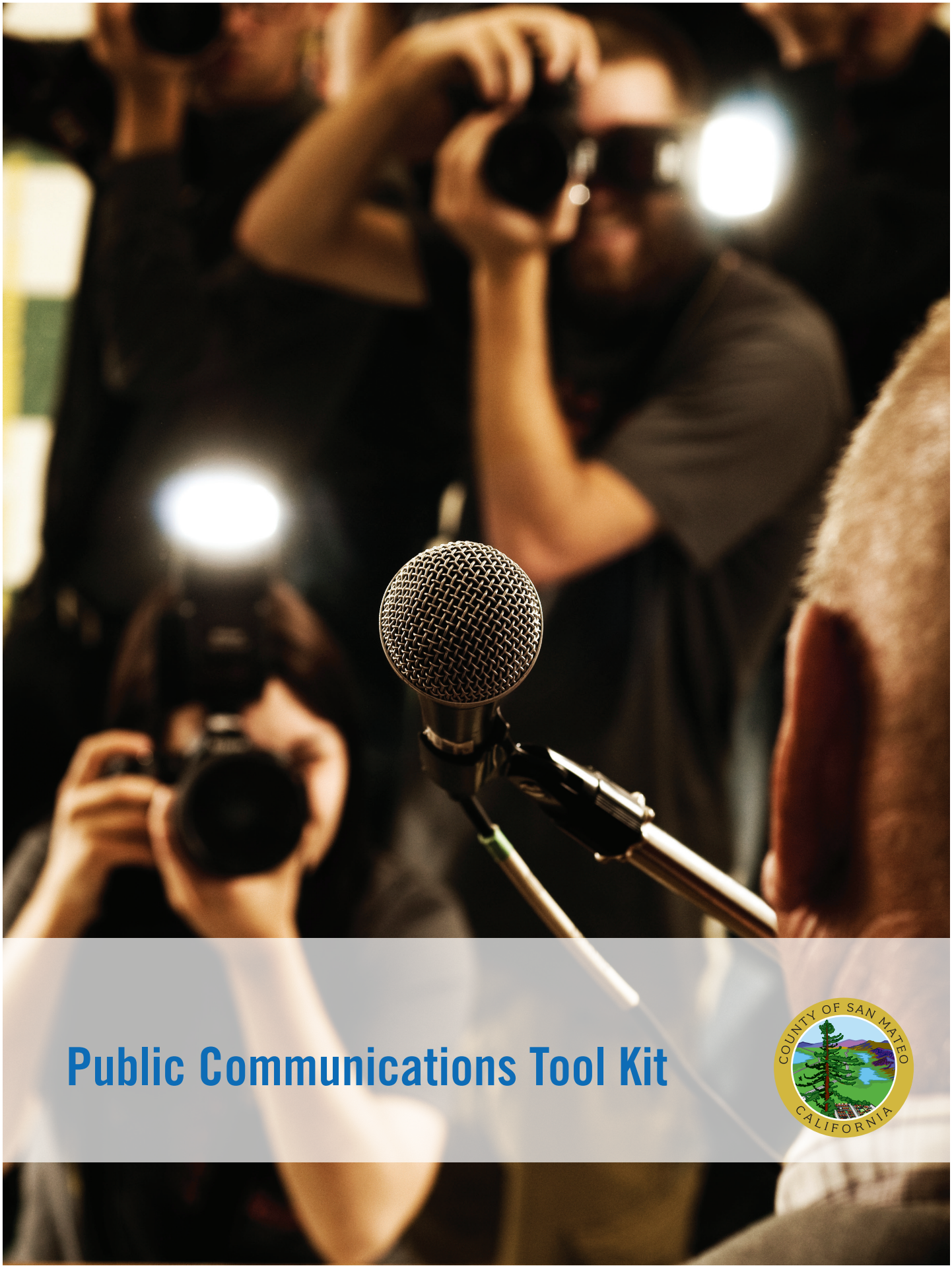

Public Communications Tool Kit

One of the goals of the San Mateo County Manager's Office is to offer assistance to each of the departments in how they can best provide timely, useful, and effective information to the public and the news media. By working together, the County Manager's Office and department staff can maximize the efficiency of communications efforts, amplify your key messages to targeted stakeholders, and offer a more consistent public image and perception of the County to its constituents.

The County Manager's Office offers a number of services to communications officers and department representatives. These include:

- Access to a comprehensive listing of media outlets, journalists, community/ stakeholder groups, and elected officials
- Assistance with scripting, shooting, editing, and distributing short videos
- Professional writing and copy-editing
- Help with community outreach strategy
- Posting information to www.smcgov.org, County blogs and social media sites, and calendar listings
- Listing of local video producers and professional photographers
- Templates and style guide
- Media training and consulting
- Access to a digital photo library
- Crisis communications training and consulting

In addition, this Public Communications Tool Kit provides some of the key elements you can use to kick-start your communications efforts. Some of you are already experienced in public communications; others may be new to that role. In either case, you'll find useful guidelines, planning steps, and other tools that will assist in more effectively getting your information to the people you want to reach.

Public Communications Tool Kit

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Building Your Strategic Communications Plan

A strategic communications plan gives you a practical guideline for your department's communications efforts around specific issues, incidents, departmental activities/opportunities, general informational or perception outreach, or whatever the subject matter may be. It will help to focus your efforts, and make implementation more strategic and effective. As you go through these steps, keep in mind how these communications efforts fit with or support the mission or stated objective of your department and/or the County.

This document offers a basic step-by-step communications planning process that you can apply to your issue, and includes simplified examples to help you visualize how you will approach your communications planning:

1. Setting your **Goal**
2. Identifying **Target Audience(s)**
3. Crafting **Key Messages**
4. Determining the appropriate **Communications Channels**
5. **Preparing materials**
6. Ideas for **Evaluating** the effectiveness of your program

STEP 1: YOUR GOAL

The first step in your plan is to outline the goal or objective you have in mind for the communications you will be delivering. Naming the issue, outlining desired results, and identifying key challenges will help you to stay on track and better prepare a successful program.

NAME THE SPECIFIC ISSUE REQUIRING COMMUNICATIONS EFFORTS

EXAMPLES: Publicizing a community meeting; recruiting applicants for a board or commission; notifying a neighborhood about possible water contamination; promoting a positive image for the department; publicizing housing assistance programs to those in need.

DESCRIBE THE DESIRED OUTCOME OF THE COMMUNICATIONS EFFORTS

EXAMPLES: Public participation in a meeting or event; gaining sign-ups for a program, or other behavior or involvement level; fully informing the target audience about an issue; increasing awareness and positive perception of an issue or of a department.

IDENTIFY THE PRIMARY CHALLENGES OR OBSTACLES TO ACHIEVING YOUR DESIRED OUTCOME

EXAMPLES: Multi-lingual audiences; budget constraints; existing low level of awareness, or negative perception; likely opposition to your issue from individuals or groups; lack of interest by the media.

STEP 2: YOUR TARGET AUDIENCE(S)

DESCRIBE WHO YOU ARE TRYING TO REACH WITH YOUR COMMUNICATIONS EFFORTS

You may want to reach the "general public" with your communications – and that is a vast audience. San Mateo County has approximately 250,000 households, and reaching everyone is nearly impossible unless you have a substantial outreach budget.

Instead, think about the public, or the audience, in segments, for example: voters; neighborhood activists; property owners; mothers of infants; renters; property owners with land next to streams; labor unions; teachers; owners of small businesses; elected officials; seniors. The list of potential audience segments goes on and on.

Think about the issue or event that you'd like to publicize, and list the key groups/stakeholders or individuals who you want to inform/engage/educate. If this is a possible controversial issue, be sure to include stakeholders from all sides of the issue. The purpose of identifying and segmenting your various audiences is to enable you to know which kinds of messaging and communications channels (tools) should be used to best reach each audience (reaching a senior audience would be accomplished through different communications channels than reaching a youth audience, for instance).

EXAMPLES: The general public; youth in a particular geographic area; families who are likely to need housing assistance; all households within a specific area; seniors requiring food assistance

To identify your target audience(s), think about which of the following are relevant to your goal, and list them:

- Is there a geographic area which defines your audience? Is it the entire County?
- Who will be using the information you wish to distribute, or who will be attending the event/activity you're promoting?
- Do you want to reach audiences who are already grouped by language, neighborhood, income level, or other demographic?
- Who will be impacted or helped by this issue? Keep in mind anyone who may be affected by potential unintended consequences.
- Who makes decisions about the issue, and who influences both the decision-makers and the key stakeholders?
- Who else should be "at the table" that's not already involved or informed (this may include stakeholders who disagree with your goal).

For each of your target audiences identified above, briefly describe their interest in the issue, how they'll be impacted/involved/affected, their general demographics, geographic location, etc. Also determine if any of these target audiences are similar enough to be grouped together. The resulting list and descriptions comprise your target audience(s).

STEP 3: YOUR KEY MESSAGE(S)

DESCRIBE THE THINGS YOU WANT YOUR AUDIENCES TO LEARN OR UNDERSTAND, OR WHAT BEHAVIOR YOU ARE TRYING TO INFLUENCE

The core of your communications plan is your key message or messages. A key message is a concise, strong, clear statement which delivers the essence of the information you wish to impart – to focus attention and influence the targeted audience to think, feel, or act in a desired manner.

A clearly articulated key message focuses attention on your issue. One way to describe a key message is: if your target audience takes *just one thing* away from your overall communications, what is that one thing you want them to remember? In addition, a key message can directly address the identified challenges related to your communications goal.

It's best to have at least three key messages around your issue, and they may be modified to fit different target audiences. Each key message should be short – perhaps one to three sentences – very much to the point, and able to be quickly delivered. Think sound bites. Together, the key messages should be consistent and encompass the core of the information you're trying to impart.

EXAMPLE
GOAL: Publicize a specific County housing assistance program, to ensure that those who may need that service are aware of it, and to have them call for information and ultimately to schedule a meeting with County staff.

TARGET AUDIENCE: Female heads of single parent households at a specified income level, who have in the past sought County assistance.

CHALLENGED: Reluctance to participate in program due to pride, distrust of government, and concern with program's complexity; uncertainty about the quality of affordable housing.

KEY MESSAGE 1: Everyone can use a helping hand sometime. County Program X can help you find affordable, clean, safe housing for you and your family. Call xxx-xxx-xxxx today to learn more.

KEY MESSAGE 2: County Program X helps simplify the process of finding affordable, clean, safe housing for you and your family. Call xxx-xxx-xxxx today to learn more about Program X. All calls are absolutely confidential – we're here to help.

KEY MESSAGE 3: When you need help finding affordable, safe, clean housing for your family, you can call staff at County Program X for a confidential talk about the services we provide. We simplify the process, we understand your needs, and we can help.

For all key messaging, be sure to develop and have available supporting data and facts which back-up your messages. This will be useful for decision makers, media, or members of the public who may ask for more information about the issue.

STEP 4: YOUR COMMUNICATIONS CHANNELS

WHAT ARE COMMUNICATIONS CHANNELS?

For most purposes, it is reasonable to refer to communications *channels* and communications *tools* interchangeably. In some cases it may be useful to differentiate:

CHANNELS: mediums through which you intend to deliver your key messages to your target audiences, such as print media, electronic media, social media, etc.

TOOLS: mechanisms used to display or deliver your messaging through your communications channels, such as news releases, social media posts, newspaper ads, fliers, brochures, door hangers, etc.

For clarity, this document will use the term "channels" to encompass both the media and the mechanisms.

HOW DO YOU DETERMINE WHICH CHANNELS TO USE?

You have articulated your goal, identified your target audiences, and written your key messages. The next step is determining the best way to *deliver those key messages to your target audiences.* Keep in mind that different audiences are often getting their information through different channels. You may also need to tailor your key message to fit a particular audience.

Think about each of your target audiences. Where are they getting their information, and how can you insert your messaging into that information flow?

EXAMPLE: Different communications channels for approaching different audiences

AUDIENCE	COMMUNICATIONS CHANNEL
High school students	Article or ad in student newspaper
Senior citizens	Flier at senior center
Software development professionals	News release or posting on online high-tech bulletin

You can see that you would not use the "senior channel" to reach the high school students; nor would you use the "software developer channel" to reach seniors; and clearly you would not use the "high school" channel to reach the senior audience.

At the same time, some broader channels (news releases to daily papers, for example) are appropriate for all target audiences – typically supplemented with other, more targeted channels.

EXAMPLE: One of your target audiences is "senior citizens" – ask yourself these questions:

WHERE DO THOSE SENIORS CONGREGATE?

SENIOR CENTER: provide a flier, post it, and present it during their lunch

SENIOR DISCOUNT MOVIES: insert a before-movie slide/advertisement, for the early "senior discount"

WHAT KIND OF PUBLICATIONS DO SENIORS READ OR ACCESS ONLINE?

TRADITIONAL NEWSPAPERS, LOCAL WEEKLY PAPER: use a news release to get your story in the paper; consider a display ad

SENIOR SERVICES WEBSITE: place a banner ad, or participate in the online discussion if applicable

WHAT EVENTS DO SENIORS PARTICIPATE IN?

BROADWAY BY THE BAY PERFORMANCE: publish an ad in the program

SENIOR SERVICES FAIR: have an information table at the event with your informational materials

Use this process for other target audiences: what if you're trying to reach a youth audience? A single-mother audience? The environmentally-conscious audience? You can see that these target audiences get information through different channels, they read different publications, engage in different activities, congregate at different locations; and so it makes sense that you'd need to use different channels to deliver your messages to each of them.

In many cases, you'll want to use multiple channels to ensure good coverage of your message. Typically, a news release to get wide coverage is recommended, supplemented by pushing your messaging through channels that are more likely to reach directly to your desired audience.

YOU HAVE MANY COMMUNICATIONS CHANNELS TO SELECT FROM!

Here is a list of communications channels and you can consider, depending on your audience, timing, capacity, and budget (others will come to mind when you start describing your target audiences):

TRADITIONAL MEDIA	SOCIAL MEDIA	COLLATERAL MATERIALS	SPECIALTY PUBLICATIONS AND WEBSITES	COMMUNITY-BASED AND PARTNERS
News Releases, Feature Stories	Facebook	Brochures	Alumni Groups	Information Table/ Events
Video News Releases	Twitter	Fliers	Trade Organizations	Community Meetings
Newspaper Ads	Instagram	Door Hangers	Hobbyist Organizations/Clubs	Govt/Public Access Tv
Public Service Announcements	Other Platforms, Websites, Blogs	Videos	Industry/Professional Organizations	Youth Sports Newsletter/ Email
Tv Ads, Interview	Smartphone Apps/ Texts	Fact Sheets	Chambers Of Commerce	Community, Senior, And Recreation Centers
Radio Ads, Interview Shows	Nextdoor	Posters	Online Calendar Listings	Non-Profits, Agencies, Business, Faith Or Other Organizations
Op-Eds, Letters To The Editor, Editorial Board	LinkedIn	Powerpoint		Local Gov't Newsletters/ E-Newsletters
Newspaper Calendar Listings		Talking Points		Libraries

You now have the core of your strategic communications plan – your goal, your target audiences, your key messages (tailored for different audiences), and your communications channels for each audience.

It will help to lay all this out in a document or spreadsheet so that you can easily see which messages are going to which audiences, through which channels and the timing of each – these are the tactics you'll use for your outreach. From this document you can also determine which tactic you can reasonably carry out based on your department's staff capacity and budget. You may not be able to implement all of the tactics, but having a variety to choose from helps to ensure you are reaching out to your audiences in the most efficient manner.

STEP 5: PREPARING YOUR MATERIALS

After determining which specific tactics you will be able to implement, it's time to prepare the materials which will carry your message through the communications channels. Write your news release, produce your flyer, create your brochures and display materials, plan your outreach event, etc. It is helpful for the "collateral materials" (flyers, brochures, ads, etc.) to have a professional designer assist, however some basic desktop publishing skills are often sufficient to prepare most such materials.

Later sections of this document provide some tips on news releases and dealing with the media, and on event planning. For all materials, be sure to utilize your key messages – modified per audience as needed – and use the right "tone." For some issues your tone may be fun, informal, and colorful; for others, the tone will be more serious, formal, and "just the facts."

With your materials in hand, you can implement your communications program, based on the timing you have outlined earlier.

STEP 6: EVALUATION

It is useful to evaluate the effectiveness of your tactics so that you can refine them for future use, and present your results to departmental leadership and decision-makers.

If your goal in a specific communications program was to increase the number of sign-ups to a program, gain more applicants for a commission, or some other easily-identified metric, then evaluation is a fairly simple matter, so long as you can tie the results to your efforts ("In the 30 days after implementing our outreach program, we had 50 new sign-ups for our senior lunch program").

However, if your goal is to affect perception, awareness, or general knowledge around a particular issue, evaluation becomes more uncertain. It is difficult to evaluate what your target audience is thinking about your issue, in the absence of a validated survey of some sort (typically at a high cost).

You can perform more informal (less valid) surveys of members of your target audience, and use this and other anecdotal information to offer some supporting information about your communications results. Other methods include tallying the number of newspaper articles or other media coverage the issue received; and preparing a report outlining all of the tactics undertaken. But know that there are simply some issues of perception and awareness which will be difficult if not impossible to fully evaluate.



Media Relations: It Matters

WHY DO WE WORK WITH THE MEDIA?

As public servants it is one of our fundamental obligations to inform our constituents about what the County and its departments are doing, how we are spending the public's funds, and how we are carrying out the public's business. Most members of the media are dedicated to writing about and getting good, solid information to their readers; information their readers can use, or will find interesting, or is simply important enough that people need to know.

This can and does, of course, include putting a spotlight on our controversies, the mistakes we make, or our decisions that are being second-guessed. At the same time, on a day-to-day basis we have a need to communicate and inform and engage with the public about services, programs, events, issues, or other information. And the traditional media – including print, television, radio, and their online versions – is still the key way that people get their information about and from the County and other public agencies.

Therefore, if we are to effectively communicate with our constituents, we need to utilize the media as a primary communications channel.

WHEN DO WE WORK WITH THE MEDIA?

There are generally two types of situations that prompt contact with the media: 1) when we have a story, issue, event, or other information we want publicized - we seek out media attention in order to push our information through the media to reach our target audiences; 2) when a critical situation or emergency occurs, or a controversial issue arises, and the media comes to us to get information about it – and it is our obligation to respond to the media, as a means of informing the public about that situation.

WHAT DOES THE MEDIA WANT?

What we feel is newsworthy is not necessarily what the media thinks is newsworthy. That's why for any given story it's useful to find an angle, a hook, a different perspective, that will gain the interest of an editor or reporter and persuade them to give the issue some attention. When you are crafting your key messages around the issues for which you seek media coverage, try to infuse them with those elements which make the story more interesting and newsworthy to the media:

COMPELLING: Does it tell the audience something new? Does it affect many people? Does the issue demand attention? Is there conflict, emotion and passion?

INFORMATIVE: Does it provide key information people can use to make decisions?

LOCAL: Does it affect the lives of our residents or tell them about their local government? Does it shed light or add understanding to an issue that is of regional, statewide, national or international importance?

TIMELY: Is the issue of immediate interest? Can people use the information to make decisions about their lives?

INTERESTING: Is the issue out of the ordinary, unusual or otherwise different from the norm?

SIGNIFICANT: Is there a milestone, an anniversary, or an event that affects a wide number of people? Is the person or persons involved well known?

TIPS FOR WORKING WITH THE MEDIA

Keeping in mind these primary guidelines and tips for working with the media will help you to more effectively bring your messaging, through the media, to your target audiences and the general public:

- Always tell the truth.
- Speaking with the media is an opportunity to tell your story – to impart your key messages.
- Think about, write down, and commit to memory the two or three key messages that you want to get across to the reporter (and, by extension, to your target audiences).
- Stick to your key messages during the interview.
- Use that key message throughout the interview, whenever feasible – answer the question, then bridge your answer back to one of your key messages.
- *Don't say anything that you wouldn't want to see on a billboard!*
- Try to give your answers in short, succinct sound bites for easy digestion.
- Don't make jokes or make predictions or speculations.
- *There is no such thing as "off the record"* – comment as if *everything* you say is being recorded for use.
- Do not be led astray or speculate when asked "what if" questions.
- Do not, "no comment" – this invariably sounds like you're trying to hide something. If you truly cannot comment due to a legal matter, or you simply do not know the answer, explain that.
- Do not speak too fast. Pause from time to time. Offer to repeat key information.
- Stop talking once you have made your point. Many people are uncomfortable with silence and will try to fill the void. Avoid that temptation.
- If you get an unexpected media call, before consenting to an interview, ask the reporter what the story is about and who else the reporter is talking to. It's OK to tell them you'll call them back, then go and gather your information and develop your key messages.
- When a more controversial issue, prepare talking points for distribution to your management and elected officials, utilizing the key messages. This way, when a reporter calls someone else, the same messaging is delivered, consistently. An example of talking points is attached.

Also see the attached "Interview Worksheet" for assistance with preparing for a media interview.

DO YOUR RESEARCH AND IDENTIFY PUBLICATIONS THAT YOUR TARGET AUDIENCES READ.

Depending on the issue, it's not particularly effective to send hundreds of emails to every reporter and news desk you can find. Instead, narrow it down:

- Find the appropriate publication for your audience, and then identify a reporter or editor who covers your issue (senior issues, planning, technology, the environment, entertainment, education, labor relations, local politics, etc.)
- Write a personal email to that person, and paste your news release into the body of the email

It's advisable to copy/paste news release text into the body of an email, and NOT attach your news release as a PDF. Most reporters, and for that matter many members of the public, receive news and information on smartphones and tablets. You will improve the chances that your news release gets read if you make it as easy as possible for someone to read it. Don't make the reader have to click on your release and wait for it to load. Additionally, there are people who will not open attachments as a rule, for fear of viruses.

Follow up on your email to a specific reporter with a phone call, asking if they have any questions or need further information, or offer to set up an interview with a content expert, if applicable.

Think of the different types of media/reporters as target audiences. You can, when feasible, tailor your pitch and news release to those different audiences (different types of reporters).

EXAMPLE: Your issue is a development project

MEDIA TYPE (AUDIENCE)	TAILORED "ANGLE" FOR THAT AUDIENCE
Transportation reporter	Benefits of building housing near a transit corridor
Environmental reporter	The project's "green" features
Education reporter	Impact on local schools due to the influx of families
Business or local news reporter	Number of jobs and tax dollars the project will generate
Technology reporter	The electronic/smart/wired features in the development

TIPS FOR WRITING AN EFFECTIVE NEWS RELEASE

THE GOAL - A SUCCESSFUL NEWS RELEASE

A successful news release is simply one which interests a reporter or editor enough for them to make the call for more information, and then translates into media coverage that provides your issue with added visibility. While your news release is written with the media in mind, it also has other audiences: your advocates, community groups, elected officials, and anyone else who has an interest or influence in your issue should also be on your news release list.

Reporters and editors receive dozens if not hundreds of news releases every day. Yours has a better chance to be at the top of the stack and gain attention if you make it just a little more interesting, a little different, a little more engaging than the others. What you feel is newsworthy may not be, to the reporter; conversely, what you feel is mundane, might very well generate the interest of a reporter. Don't try to second-guess – tell your story as best you can in the news release, find a unique or catchy angle and an interesting hook. Find a new perspective. Instead of "HR Workshop Scheduled" use "New Workshop Promises Inner Secrets of Human Resources." Depending on what's going on in the news that day, you may be surprised at what reporters will latch on to.

GETTING STARTED

Before you start to write, make sure you know the answer to these three questions:

WHAT ARE YOUR KEY MESSAGES?

It's the one big thing you want people to know. A key message must be concise and compelling. Keep it simple – what is your message, in just one sentence? Build from that.

WHAT WILL THE READER GAIN FROM YOUR NEWS?

Remember, you're not writing for your supervisor or an expert in the field. You're writing to inform the media's readers. What's in it for the reader? Why should they care?

WHAT'S YOUR OBJECTIVE/CALL TO ACTION?

What is it you want people to do with your information? What actions do you want them to take?

STRUCTURE OF A NEWS RELEASE

In a general sense, your news release should simply tell a story. And like any story, it works best if it has an introduction (the lead), a body, and a closing. The difference is that your lead, in the headline and the first paragraph, has to summarize most of the story right away because if you don't catch the reporter's interest right there, you may well lose them entirely.

THE LEAD - HEADLINE AND PARAGRAPH ONE

Your key message should be in your lead. Use the headline to give the overall hook of the story, and to offer a preview of the facts in the news release. Consider the headline the briefest of summaries.

EXAMPLES:
Public invited to attend State of the County address
Planning Commission to consider development proposal
Serve your community: apply for a San Mateo County Board or Commission

Then in paragraph one start with a strong, attention-grabbing statement, and the very basics of the issue/story. Here are some example leads:

- San Mateo County is a nearly $2 billion organization serving 750,000 residents – here's an opportunity to hear how the County is doing in serving those residents, learn about the past year's accomplishments, and gain insight into the challenges ahead.
- One of the largest development proposals in recent years is soon coming before the San Mateo County Planning Commission, and the community is invited to attend and participate in the discussion around what this project means for the County.
- Want to serve your community? The Board of Supervisors is accepting applications for openings on the Commission on Aging, Agricultural Advisory Committee, Commission on Disabilities and others.

SUBSEQUENT PARAGRAPHS

You have drawn in the reader with an enticing lead and the basic facts in your first paragraph. Continue with the body of the news release:

- The next paragraph or two can add some of the key overview details, more of the basic facts.
- If it's an event or activity, include the specifics of when, what time, and where. In general, you can use a couple of paragraphs to answer the basic questions of who, what, where, when, why, and how, along with a call to action if relevant.
- Include any admission prices or fees, reservation or other deadlines and hyperlinks to maps, if applicable.
- A colorful quote is often useful to express an opinion or claim, and use more informal language to reinforce your key message from a credible source. Here's an example from a past San Mateo County news release on a court ruling that upheld the County's right to exclude firearms from parks. *"The presence of guns ramps up the chances of deadly accidents and no one should have to worry that just around the corner some hiker with a gun is going to mistake you for a mountain lion."*
- Use your closing paragraph(s) to reiterate your key message, sum up why this is important to the readers, and restate your call to action or invitation.
- It's typical for the last paragraph to be a "boilerplate" – a brief description "about" the County or your department. This is useful not only as generic background for a reporter, but also can put out there an affirmative, optimistic, and encouraging statement, which will foster positive perception of the County/department.
- Finally, add contact information – who should the media call for more information. It's critical that you include a real person's telephone number and email address, not a switchboard number or generic email address. Your goal is get the media interested in your story, and make it as easy as possible for the reporter or anyone reading your news to contact you. Don't put obstacles in front of them!
- Now it's time to proofread. And then proofread again. A single mistake weakens your credibility. Check every number and every name.

See the sample news release for additional tips and guidelines.

GET THE RESULTS YOU DESIRE WITH THIS SAMPLE NEWS RELEASE

You can put a short informational subhead here if you wish

REDWOOD CITY, Calif. -- The success of a news release lives and dies with your opening sentence.

Sentence 1 should provide a "hook" or some interesting, different angle to the story, to draw readers in; keep it short and to the point. Your first paragraph can have more than one sentence, but no more than three, and they should all be short. Include your top key message!

Your second paragraph should provide the key basic information about your event or announcement or whatever the issue is – the very basic who, what, where, when, why, and how, and the call to action (if relevant). Don't go into too much detail, keep it short (you'll offer more detail later) – use two short paragraphs if needed. If there is a date, time, and place involved, make sure it's in this paragraph, to make it easy for the reporter to see that important detail – you can also put it in an indented block form for more visibility.

Event name
Event date and time
Event location, address

The next paragraph can include a colorful quote supporting one of your key messages. In many cases it's typical to write the quote you want, and then contact the person to whom it should be attributed for review, editing, and approval (a department director, elected official, or someone else with a position to lend credibility).

"It's somewhat surprising, but surveys show that the majority of San Mateo County residents prefer to get their information through traditional print and broadcast media," said Sam Mateo, the County's communications director. "Social media is also an extremely important and fast-growing source, and so we strive to ensure that important County information is available through all of those channels."

In the next paragraph(s), your news release can provide some important additional details and background. Keep your sentences short, do not use technical or bureaucratic jargon and bridge back to your key messages where possible. This section will be useful for a reporter desiring additional information about the issue – but don't count on them reading this far, that's why you have the basics up in paragraph 2.

Even reporters get overwhelmed by facing a news release which is completely covered in text, so keep your word count below 500 if possible. Express the interest, importance, need, or excitement of the issue at hand. Be yourself and be creative. Avoid hype (don't "oversell" it).

After you have written your first draft, go over it carefully and look for ways to cut words and clarify any confusing information. The goal is to write it in such a way that the average person understands it the first time through. You'll likely have an internal process for management review of news releases – make your first draft as good as it can be before it goes in for review and editing. Spell check and fact check! Check the spelling of people's names. If feasible, give your release to a colleague to read and edit.

Close the release with a reminder of the call for action or invitation, or reiterate the top key message.

The final paragraph is the "about" section, also referred to as a "boilerplate." It includes just 2-3 sentences about the County and/or your department. This is broad background information for the reporter, and is an opportunity to leave them with a positive statement about the County/department. The boilerplate should be the same in each of your news releases. San Mateo County, one of the nine counties in the Bay Area, covers most of the San Francisco Peninsula and includes many miles of accessible shoreline on both the bay and the ocean. It has a diverse population of 750,000 comprised of 20 individual cities plus significant unincorporated areas. Economically strong with a high average income, San Mateo County is considered part of Silicon Valley and is home to many high tech companies. Its beautiful hillside and shoreline communities, many parks, trails, and beaches, and wide range of opportunities and leisure activities make San Mateo County a key Bay Area destination for business and pleasure.

Be sure to include contact information, either at the start of the news release or at the end. Here's an example: For more information, contact San Mateo, San Mateo County Department, 650-xxx-xxxx, smateo@smcgov.org.

Interview Worksheet

If you are contacted by the media (or expect to be contacted) about a specific issue, use this worksheet to help prepare for the interview. Many of these elements are also used in creating your communications for any issue – here, there are some tips that are specific to an actual interview.

WHAT IS THE ISSUE/STORY:

YOUR 3 KEY MESSAGE(S)

The ideal message for an interview is 27 words or less delivered in 9 seconds with no more than 3 points

Practice all of these messages before the interview

1.

2.

3.

WHAT ARE THE THREE TOUGHEST QUESTIONS YOU MAY BE ASKED?

The most common questions are:

What happened?

What caused it to happen?

What does it mean?

What are you doing about it?

What is your opinion?

Have you told us all that you know?

Who is to blame?

QUESTION	RESPONSE (try to bridge all responses to a key message)
1.	
2.	
3.	

ADDITIONAL TIPS

DEVELOPING YOUR KEY MESSAGES

- Keep it simple. Make your persuasive point in 27 words or less within nine seconds with no more than three points.

FACED WITH A TOUGH QUESTION? USE THESE TERMS TO HELP YOU BRIDGE BACK INTO ONE OF YOUR KEY MESSAGES

- "It's important to look at the big picture …"
- "What matters most in this situation is … "
- "Let me put this into perspective by saying …"
- "Let's talk about what is happening now …"
- "Before we continue, let me take a step back and repeat that … "
- "That's a good question. What I can tell you is …"

IF ASKED "WHAT IF/WHAT MIGHT HAPPEN?"

- Repeat the question (without negatives)
- Bridge to "What is known"

Sample bridges:

- You've asked me what might happen if ….
- I believe there is value to talk about what is/what we know now…
- What we know now is ….
- State was is known factually and include a key message

OVERALL GUIDELINES FOR THE INTERVIEW

- Always tell the truth.
- Speaking with the media is an opportunity to tell your story – key messages
- Before an interview, ask the reporter what the story is about and who else the reporter is talking to.
- Think about one or two key points you want to get across to the reporter and, by extension, the public. What do you want the headline to say? Stick to your points during the interview. Do not be led astray or speculate when asked "What if" questions.
- Avoid "no comment." Explain what you are doing or what action you are taking. If you cannot comment due to a legal matter or you simply do not know the answer, explain that.
- Do not speak too fast. Pause from time to time. Offer to repeat key information.
- Say the most important thing you have to say first. Don't build to your conclusion.
- If you don't know the answer, say so and promise to get it.
- Especially for TV interviews: don't wear a white shirt, and don't wear sunglasses.

- Stop talking once you have made your point. Many people are uncomfortable with silence and will try to fill the void. Avoid that temptation.
- Remember, every media interview presents an opportunity to deliver a message, to tell our story or make key points about the good things we are doing. But we must be ready and prepared to do this.
- Finally, interviews are not conversations or intellectual discussions and reporters are not looking for an education. They want basic information and a good quote or sound bite.
- When you give short answers you keep editorial control in your hands.



The Importance of Talking Points

Talking points are a great tool for preparing yourself to speak with the media; they are also very important for distribution to others in your department or organization who may also be contacted by the media. By working from a common set of talking points, all people authorized to speak with the media are literally on the same page with consistent key messages. There is much less chance of someone saying the wrong thing - a statement that is not an approved message, an uncertain or not well-thought out statement, or worse, a statement that actually contradicts one of your key messages.

Provide talking points to members of management and elected officials who may be contacted by the media. Even if you have a specified single spokesperson, others may be in a position where they feel they must comment (especially elected officials); having those talking points helps to ensure that in that case, they stay "on message."

Talking points are really just another version of your key messages – perhaps each key message is re-stated in a couple of different ways to provide some variety, and you may also want to add some additional detail based on what you feel the reporter may likely ask.

Talking points can be in very brief outline form which the speaker can use as a guide; or can be in complete sentence form, suitable to be read verbatim. It's not a bad idea to provide both, as some of your managers or elected officials may prefer one, or the other. In any case, try to keep the number of talking points to a minimum – five or six points are usually sufficient. However, if it is a complex issue, you may well need more than that. It's better to have too many and ensure the issue is well-covered, than to have too few.

EXAMPLE
ISSUE: Increase in hourly metered parking rates downtown (to increase "turnover" of high-demand spaces)

TALKING POINTS

- We understand and appreciate the concerns raised about the increase in hourly parking rates downtown
- The goal of increasing hourly parking rates is to increase "turnover" of spaces so that customers, clients, and other short-term visitors are able to park within reasonable vicinity of their destination
- Longer-term and all-day parkers are encouraged to park in one of the permit facilities or outside of the downtown core – just a short walk to the center of downtown - where hourly parking rates remain unchanged
- Our parking prices are still on the low side compared to other peninsula cities which charge for their downtown parking.
- For more information and parking maps showing locations of low cost parking, go to <website>
- Visitors are also encouraged to use car sharing, Bay Area Bike Share, transit, or other transportation alternatives
- Once again, we appreciate the concerns with increasing the prices of hourly metered parking – the rate increase in certain parking areas will ultimately benefit all, as more spaces will turn over in the high-demand area, while low-cost parking remains available just beyond that area



Crisis Communications Planning

"There is a massive difference between a crisis and a catastrophe …the effects of media coverage on public perception could be the deciding factor between the two."

BARBARA COCHRAN, PRESIDENT,
RADIO-TELEVISION NEWS DIRECTORS ASSOCIATION AND RADIO AND TELEVISION NEWS DIRECTORS FOUNDATION

Crisis communications refers to the methodology for communicating with the target audiences under the circumstances of a critical incident such as a major storm, flooding, massive power outage, or fire; or under a severe emergency situation such as earthquake, terrorism, plane crash, or similar major event.

Communicating under these circumstances differs from the day-to-day public communications primarily in terms of extremely short time frames, an inundation of media and others seeking information, the high potential for incorrect information being reported, and the overall stress, pressure, and anxiety of dealing with a crisis situation.

This document will get you started on some of the key steps you can take to help prepare a plan for communicating during a crisis. There may already be a robust crisis communications plan as part of your department's emergency operations plan, as well as at the County level – please see those plans for more specific information. This document does not include information on Public Information Officer staffing of an Emergency Operations Center during a crisis.

STEP 1: IDENTIFY THE TYPES OF CRISES YOU OR YOUR ORGANIZATION MAY FACE:

- The most likely crisis is….
- The second most likely crisis is….
- The third most likely crisis is….

STEP 2: IDENTIFY YOUR ORGANIZATION'S STAFF MEMBERS, BOARD MEMBERS, KEY VOLUNTEERS, AND OTHERS WITH INFLUENCE OVER YOUR ORGANIZATION

Gather titles, work, home and cell phone numbers, e-mail addresses. Keep this information on your computer and on a flash drive that you carry with you at all times (encrypt it if necessary). Use a spreadsheet to capture this information.

STEP 3: FORM A CRISIS RESPONSE TEAM

This team should consist of senior leadership as well as go-to staffers. The size of this team will depend on the size and complexity of your organization. This team will set policy before, during and after a crisis and lead the organization during a crisis. Keep a list of all members with you at all times along with contact information.

STEP 4: DEVELOP YOUR CRISIS STRATEGY BEFORE THE CRISIS STRIKES – START BY ANSWERING THESE QUESTIONS:

- Who will act as the primary and backup spokesperson during a crisis?
- How will you reach key personnel during a crisis?
- How will you contact the media during a crisis?
- How will you respond to media inquiries?
- Will you push out information via social media and your website or only respond to media requests?
- Identify who – during a crisis – must review and approve statements, news releases and other materials.

STEP 5: DEVELOP YOUR KEY MESSAGES FOR POTENTIAL SCENARIOS FOCUSING ON WHAT ACTIONS YOU ARE TAKING.



Guidelines for Preparing and Conducting News Conferences

Once your leadership staff have determined whether a news conference is warranted around a particular issue, it is appropriate to appoint a news conference moderator. This person could be you!

The news conference moderator will plan and implement the news conference, including coordinating participants, publicizing to the media, arranging for any written materials or displays, organizing site logistics, acting as the lead presenter, facilitating the question and answer process, and concluding the conference.

STEPS FOR PLANNING AND CONDUCTING A NEWS CONFERENCE

These guidelines are most relevant to an emergency or critical situation. Therefore the preparatory steps noted below may largely need to be performed simultaneously. It's also good to remain flexible and open to making changes as circumstances dictate.

1. LOCATION

Identify the location and determine whatever logistics may be necessary to utilize that site. The selected site should:

- Be easily accessible and near the site of the emergency incident (if not feasible, select an official County or departmental building).
- Have sufficient space for large news vans and other vehicles to park.
- Provide opportunity to view some visual aspect of the incident.
- Avoid background noise (such as a freeway or airport).

A podium with the County and/or departmental logo/shield should be provided. The podium should have room for media microphones.

A sound system may be needed, especially if the news conference is taking place outside or in a particularly large space.

Be aware of weather – if inclement weather, consider conducting the news conference indoors. If outdoors, supply a rain canopy for the speaking participants if needed; also be aware of the location of the sun, and ideally orient the podium with the sun to one side or the other, rather than with the sun either behind or facing the podium.

2. PUBLICITY

Publicize the conference to the media several hours in advance if possible (for a non-emergency news conference, at least one week notice to media). A news conference is not intended for an audience made up of members of the public, so publicity to the general public is typically not warranted.

3. PARTICIPANTS

- Assign appropriate "content experts" to participate and answer questions at the conference.
- Content experts may include County staff or outside agency staff who are involved and appropriate to the situation, for example in the event of a major fire with significant injuries, power outage, and traffic detours, content experts may include the Fire Chief, Police Chief, Community Development Director, Red Cross and/or hospital representative, PG&E representative, County Manager. In the event of a significant emergency situation, the Board President or other ranking elected official would participate.

4. WRITTEN MATERIALS

- A variety of written materials may be considered for use at the news conference, for the purpose of reiterating the primary information points, providing background, or illustrating the incident or issue.
- Standard materials in a press kit may include news release, fact sheet, backgrounders; include graphic display boards, or similar materials. Make press kits available to the media at the conference, and post on the County website.
- Prepare written speaking points/written statement (key messaging) for use by the moderator and by any other participants who may be making key statements or answering questions. These are internal documents and not for distribution to the media or public.
- Prepare a written list of questions (and answers) that the media is likely to ask, to aid the participants in providing consistent, pertinent, and succinct answers.

5. CONDUCTING THE CONFERENCE

PODIUM LINEUP: The moderator will stand at the podium, with the content experts standing in a row behind the moderator.

OPENING: The conference is opened by the moderator introducing himself/herself, spelling the last name (and first name if needed), and stating the purpose of the news conference (referencing the incident/event).

EXPRESSION OF SYMPATHY: If the situation is one where there has been major injury or loss of life, it's important to have an elected official (or highest ranking appointee) make a general statement expressing sympathy with the affected families and individuals; then turn it back over to the moderator to continue with the more detailed overview statement. If this is the case, the Board President or member, for example, could actually open the news conference, state the purpose, make the expressions of sympathy and concern, and then defer to the moderator to continue the news conference.

AGENDA

- The moderator will state the agenda for the news conference, for example: "We will make a statement concerning the (subject), provide background and details, followed by questions and answers."
- Plan on a specified time to end the news conference.

PREPARED STATEMENT

- The moderator will make the prepared statement or statements concerning the subject matter at hand.
- This statement should be prepared using the concepts of key messaging.

QUESTIONS

- After the full statement has been read, the moderator may call on media members for questions.
- Always repeat the question to ensure all attendees have heard it.

- The moderator can either answer the question if possible, or introduce an appropriate content expert who can answer the question and then turn it back over to the moderator.
- Each participant who speaks should give their name, and spell the last name (and first name if needed).
- Refer to written handouts or displays as appropriate.
- When reaching designated time limit, call for last two or three questions.

CLOSING

- Announce that this will be the final question.
- After answering the final question, firmly announce that this concludes the news conference.
- Let media know that they'll be updated at a subsequent news conference, and announce the scheduled time/location of that news conference (if known).
- Thank the media and all participants step away from the podium.

For news conferences that are not related to an emergency situation, many of the steps will be the same as above, with some exceptions that offer more flexibility:

- Planning can take place further in advance - two-to-three weeks.
- Schedule the news conference for a Tuesday, Wednesday, or Thursday.
- The scheduled start time of the news conference should be between 10 and 11 am, or between 1 and 3 pm.
- Publicity can take place a week or more prior to the news conference.
- Each speaker may be assigned a different key message that has been developed, to provide for some variety and interest, rather than the moderator making the entire statement.
- Each participant can fully develop their key message(s) and rehearse their statements.
- A press kit can be more thoughtfully prepared.
- Additional visuals can be prepared, including video or Power Point.



Event Planning

One item that is both a subject for publicity, and itself a communications channel, is the public event.

If you are delivering your messaging at someone else's event, festival, or other activity, you are using that event as a communications channel. Choose the events you'll attend with care, since they do require sometimes substantial time, to staff an information table for a number of hours or all day, for example.

Other times, you may be in the position of responsibility for coordinating an event yourself. This can be a daunting task, and will require you to build a team (or be part of a team) to handle the various tasks involved.

As a starting point, use the attached Event Planner tool to help identify all the issues which go into planning a successful public event.