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COMMUNICATIONS GUIDE

FOR STATE DEPARTMENTS OF TRANSPORTATION

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This guide is the result of research undertaken as part of the National Cooperative Highway Research Program's (NCHRP) 20-99 series of studies. The objective of the two-year project was to provide recommendations to help state departments of transportation (DOTs) communications professionals effectively and strategically communicate the larger objectives of the agency. The research included a review of existing resources, surveys and interviews, as well as extensive consultation with an NCHRP panel made up of industry professionals.

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A WORD TO THE CEO

As a state department of transportation (DOT) Chief Executive, you know how important it is to communicate effectively with stakeholders and the public. Chances are you rely on your communications director to talk to the media, help “put out fires,” and manage department communications on a day-to-day basis. This guide is intended to help you and your communications unit:

- Develop a strategic framework and strategy for internal and external communications while identifying audiences and the appropriate messages and format for each.
- Utilize social media to engage customers “where they are”—increasingly, on mobile devices and at all hours. As customers move to new media, they expect government agencies to do the same.
- Tell the story of your DOT’s performance and its accomplishments in new and compelling ways. DOTs are under closer scrutiny from policy makers, stakeholders, taxpayers, and the public. Communications can help answer these growing demands for accountability.
- Create your own “newsroom” within the DOT and provide videos and other timely information to the media or directly to engaged customers.
- Improve employee engagement with a first-rate internal communications program that accounts for a diverse workforce including field staff.
- Achieve an integrated approach to all public-facing communications so messages are consistent—even across regions/districts.
- Develop or refresh the DOT “brand” and better communicate your mission to the public and stakeholders.

To be effective, your communications team needs to be led by a strong individual—and that person needs your ear and your support. He or she can serve as a trusted resource, advisor, strategist, and problem-solver—while setting a strategic framework for day-to-day messaging. This guide, based on national research, is intended to help your communications leader succeed in a changing and often challenging environment. You may find it of interest as well.



INTRODUCTION

A strong communications practice is essential to the operations of state departments of transportation (DOTs). Over time, it can help build trust among the agency's stakeholders, improve public understanding of the DOT's mission, and generate public support.

To be effective, a DOT communications team needs a strong leader, typically called communications director; the support of top management; and a skilled staff prepared to take on diverse tasks in a changing environment. Every DOT, however, is different. Some communications units lead almost all public-facing aspects of the department, from media relations and safety communications to project outreach and community relations, while in other DOTs some of these functions are handled separately by other divisions within the department.

Many DOTs have a decentralized, regional approach to communications, while others base their operations at headquarters. Other differences are due to variations in overall DOT functions. Some DOTs are mainly responsible for highways and others also oversee transit operations, airports, and motor vehicle services, each requiring different communications programs. The size of DOT communications units also varies widely.

Despite these differences in organization, size, and function, DOT communicators revealed in a nationwide survey and in dozens of interviews many common challenges, such as:

- What are the best ways to maximize the effectiveness of staff and funding resources?
- What are the best applications of new media tools as it relates to the core functions of the DOT?
- What are the best strategies to monitor performance and enhance the agency's public image?
- What are the most effective structure, organization, and reporting relationships for communications units?

This document discusses these issues and presents practices that DOTs are using to address these and other common challenges. As a general guide and toolkit (rather than a comprehensive manual), it covers effective ways to staff, strategize, and implement communications functions

and programs at a DOT, along with ways to analyze and strengthen current programs. The guide is intended as a resource for all DOTs, regardless of the size or structure of their communications units. It includes information targeted to communications directors and will also be of value to agency heads and communications staff.

The first national guidance on this topic in more than 20 years, the guide is based on research on the current state of the communications practice at state DOTs. The research, presented in a separate report, included a survey of all state DOT communications units, interviews with selected DOT Chief Executive Officers (CEOs) and division directors, case studies, a review of customer satisfaction surveys from all DOTs and an examination of each state's DOT website. In addition, the research included a review of emerging communications practices in the private sector, providing insight into effective approaches that may be of value to DOTs going forward.

This guide addresses topics such as:

- Recommended staff roles and skill sets for today's DOT communications unit
- Best practices for communications planning and performance measurement
- Achieving a coordinated approach across DOT districts or regions
- Tips for operating with a small staff, building a department, hiring staff, and working with consultants
- Communicating effectively with DOT employees, including field staff
- Effective use of social media, videography, and other digital communications

Throughout the guide the reader will find "In Practice" sidebars—brief discussions of specific topics and examples of successful approaches in use by DOTs today.

Today's DOT communications landscape is complex. It includes diverse audiences along with traditional and new media tools to reach customers. Striking the right balance to efficiently and effectively communicate with members of the public is vital to customer safety and satisfaction and will help enhance the image of each DOT. It is hoped that this guide will help DOTs achieve that balance and experience success.

THE FOCUS OF EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATIONS PRACTICES

While it is recommended that this guide be read in its entirety, there is recognition of the time demands placed on department of transportation (DOT) professionals. As a “guide,” this document may commonly be used for reference. This summary and the infographic in Appendix 1 are quick-reference resources detailing the key elements for DOTs and, particularly, DOT communicators to focus on to ensure an effective communications practice.

THE PUBLIC

The needs and expectations of the public are the primary focus of state DOTs. The communications head is responsible for ensuring that members of DOT leadership are thinking in these terms. People are typically motivated by what is in their personal interest. For example, while the DOT thinks of safety in terms of numbers of fatalities statewide, an individual thinks about their personal safety on their commute home from work. The communications head should be the advocate for the public within the DOT.

THE RIGHT PEOPLE

The most crucial element of a successful communications practice is the staff implementing it. Hiring, developing, and retaining communications professionals dedicated to public service and proactively keeping members of the public informed is vitally important.

EMPLOYEES

Internal communications is sometimes an afterthought. An engaged and informed work force will produce positive results that get noticed by the public and improve perceptions of the department. Communications units are responsible for ensuring that a multi-dimensional approach is taken to keeping employees informed.

PUBLIC INFORMATION

Providing information to the public is the baseline goal of the communications head. This information includes “just-the-facts” communications such as road closures, traffic conditions, and construction impacts. These are day-to-day issues that could affect someone’s ability to get where they need to go. While the public may not always express appreciation for receiving this information, they will certainly notice when they do not receive it and their travels are delayed.



PROACTIVE COMMUNICATIONS

Proactive communications positions the DOT to be viewed positively by the public and helps keep it from simply reacting to negative stories. This approach to communications goes beyond providing necessary information to the public. A proactive strategy includes actively promoting the “good news” stories related to the agency. These stories might be cost savings, delivering projects ahead of schedule, accountability measures, or efforts to protect the environment.

PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT

The reality of the modern informational culture dictates that DOTs maintain a two-way dialogue with the public. Facebook, Twitter, mobile apps, and other tools allow for easy interaction. They have also created an expectation of interaction. Successful communications heads remain focused on a vibrant public engagement program.

TRADITIONAL METHODS

Social media and mobile devices have changed the landscape of communications. Traditional outreach strategies and tactics are still effective, however. News releases, websites, special events, phone calls, and in-person contacts all have value and a place in DOT communications.

EMERGING TRENDS AND TOOLS

Successful communications leads have a vision for the future. When Facebook and Twitter emerged as potential tools for communicators, they were not in wide use among the general population. Leaders with vision, however, saw the future utility of these tools and the need to begin using them. It is vital that communications heads stay abreast of new public engagement trends and tools.

CUSTOMER SERVICE

Ensuring that customers are responded to in a timely, courteous, and accurate manner should always be top of mind for communications leads at DOTs. In addition to customers who contact the agency through traditional means like the phone or e-mails, DOTs should also engage customers through Facebook, Twitter, and other social media sites where they are posting comments or questions regarding transportation. Customers might include members of the public, other agencies, businesses working with the DOT, the news media, and the contracting community.

MEASURING PERFORMANCE

Performance measures are vital to the success of communications efforts and to demonstrating results. These measures should be tracked and reported on a consistent basis. Results can also be shared with departmental leadership. In addition to formal performance measures, results can be demonstrated by sharing news stories, customer comments, and social media posts.

**EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATIONS FLOW
FROM AND REFLECT THE AGENCY'S
MISSION, VALUES, AND GOALS.**

FIRST PRINCIPLES

While every department of transportation (DOT) is different, several core principles emerged in research for this guide that apply in most situations. These “first principles” for DOT communications are woven throughout this guide and are derived from surveys and interviews with communications professionals. The principles are present in successful and effective communications units.

Effective communications flow from and reflect the agency’s mission, values, and goals. This is best accomplished when the communications director has the full support of the agency head and is involved in discussions of critical issues facing the agency.

LEADER-DRIVEN: Our research concluded that communication team’s success is driven primarily by leadership rather than structure or other factors. Leadership is responsible for establishing the direction of a DOT by clearly communicating the organization’s mission, objectives, and goals. Externally, strong leaders can establish and advance messaging that supports these goals among stakeholders. Internally, strong leaders can use strategic communications to foster trust, credibility, and openness with employees.

PROACTIVE: DOTs that are successful at keeping the public informed and driving positive public perceptions of the agency typically show a commitment to proactive communications. Rather than waiting to respond to inquiries from the news media, the DOT actively distributes information through the news media and directly to the public.

STRATEGIC: Effective communications programs are typically based on goals, defined through a planning process, and evaluated and improved over time through data gathering and performance measurement. There are many valid ways to plan and evaluate communications programs, but having some or all of these initiatives in place is consistent with high-achieving communications at DOTs.

CONSISTENT: Consistent messaging and use of the DOT’s brand go a long way to promote the agency’s image, but achieving a relevant approach to DOT communications goes beyond the brand. It can involve special efforts to achieve an integrated approach across diverse districts/regions, and new thinking about how to integrate the many public interactions occurring across DOT divisions so all “speak with one voice.”

RESPONSIVE: Customers expect timely responses to their questions and concerns. While this is nothing new, now that so many customers are online and on mobile devices, DOTs need to establish two-way dialogues on social media and other communications channels. This requires a customer service approach and new skills beyond those required in traditional public information.

ENGAGING: Today’s communications are often more visual and interactive than in the past. The public has become more discriminating about the information they want, and along with accuracy and timeliness, they expect information to be engaging. DOTs are responding with a stronger graphic focus, greater use of video, and content marketing that tells a story—even when communicating about basic safety issues or an upcoming roadway project.



**THERE MAY BE RECOGNITION OF THE NEED
FOR MORE COMMUNICATIONS, BUT LET'S
PUT A VALUE ON IT SO IT'S ACTUALLY
'BETTER' COMMUNICATIONS AS OPPOSED
TO JUST 'MORE.'**

— DOT COMMUNICATIONS DIRECTOR



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COMMUNICATIONS UNITS WITHIN DEPARTMENTS OF TRANSPORTATION

Communications units support the bottom line goals of state departments of transportation (DOTs). Messages, strategies, and tactics should flow from and reflect the agency's mission, values, and desired results expressed through strategic planning.

Defining the purpose of communications and establishing the communications unit as integral to the success of the DOT is important. A starting point for this success is identifying the roles of key leaders and staff in effective communications along with the responsibilities assigned to the communications unit.

ROLES

The success of communications programs at state departments of transportation, as is true for any other function within state DOTs, is primarily determined by the people implementing them. From the head of the agency through the communications director and their staff, roles need to be clearly defined.

Agency Head

The effectiveness of communications at a DOT is ultimately the responsibility of the agency head. Whether they are called director, secretary, or commissioner, the top leader at the agency has authority over every part of the DOT including the communications function. Selecting the best person to direct the communications unit and positioning that person for success is important.

Once the communications director is in place the DOT Chief Executive Officer (CEO), as the American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials (AASHTO) calls them, has the authority to create an environment in which they can succeed. The head of communications needs a seat at the leadership table alongside other top managers in the agency.

Strategic communications from the top of an organization are especially critical during organizational change, times of crisis, and when restructuring or implementing a new business process. Failure to communicate effectively during these times can lead to perceptions of failure in a larger sense on the part of the agency both internally and externally.

There are several key elements of building a communications strategy¹ in which the CEO could embrace and support the communications director:

1. A strong strategic foundation
 - Communications should be viewed as a strategic imperative for high performance and growth as an agency, rather than as a service.
 - It starts with the management at the top, with a clear mission, a statement of purpose, and objectives that convey the benefits that an integrated communications capability will bring to the organization.
 - Executive-level alignment and endorsement to achieve goals is needed.

¹ <http://blogs.hbr.org/2012/03/four-steps-to-building-a-strat/>

2. The right set of tools, including:
 - A communications plan with target audiences, key messages, dates, and initiatives.
 - Establishing communications standards in the form of style guides, toolkits, performance measures, and other planning to further support communications standards and set standards for all team members, regardless of location or function. At a minimum, some of these should include:
 - brand standards that outline “rules to create by” for the entire agency,
 - message frameworks that help communications staff deliver strong content, and
 - communications principles that will help guide staff performance.
3. The right team, including:
 - Assembling a team of people with the right skills, knowledge, and experience starts from the top, with a communications director (or leader), who can motivate and mentor employees. Appointing such a leader to an executive-level position will signal the importance of the communications role to the organization and also ensures that this role has a seat at the decision-making table during the process of formulating agency strategy and direction.
 - Leveraging external partners such as consultants for the newest strategies, methods, and technologies.

The CEO can establish proactive public outreach as an expectation and priority for all DOT employees with the communications director setting strategy and determining appropriate tactics.

Communications Lead

The communications director generally leads all public relations, engagement, and outreach for the DOT. This responsibility includes planning, strategy, staffing, implementation, and measurement. It is important that the person in this role be able to “own” the job by asserting their authority while building strong relationships with other departmental leadership through involvement and diplomacy.

This position serves as a trusted resource to the CEO, expected to be an advisor, strategist, messenger, speechwriter, and more. The communications lead should also help determine and shape the communications unit's organizational structure, processes and procedures, internal culture, and the way that information is communicated internally and externally.

Communications planning is an area that is sometimes missing at state DOTs. Typically, this lack of formal planning is because of more pressing issues that must be addressed on a day-to-day basis. The communications

director, however, leads this planning, so a key qualification is experience in developing nuts and bolts tools, such as strategic communications plans, communications manuals, crisis communications plans, performance measures, and style guides.

The communications director also helps to select the appropriate structure and staff for the communications unit. The structure will account for budgetary and political constraints, including civil service rules. It is best designed to facilitate proactive communications and quick responses to customers.

The staff at the DOT's headquarters generally provides specialization in areas such as social media, videography, and graphic design. District/regional communications staff are usually more generalized to provide a broad cross section of outreach, media relations, and customer services while being on the front lines of the DOT.

In all areas, however, the communications director is best served by empowering staff and delegating responsibilities to ensure long-term success. This approach can help raise morale, strengthen the capabilities of staff, and aid in career development. Ideally, it will also form the basis for succession planning for the communications director, managers, and specialists.

Implementing integrated communications strategies is an equally important, though less common skill, needed for the communications lead. Integrated communications allows an organization to coordinate information and feedback. It helps ensure employees, divisions, and all staff are speaking and acting consistently with “one voice” to all of an organization's internal and external constituents.

Performance measures related to communications should also be created in consultation with the CEO. These measures provide a way to determine if public outreach and engagement efforts are successful. Additionally, the performance measures establish communications as a core function of the department alongside other common DOT priority areas.

Communications Staff

Building an effective staff capable of proactive, strategic communications and timely responses to customers is the top priority for the communications director. These staff members must be team players and exemplify the integrated communications philosophy. Empowerment to operate in the absence of the director, who is typically focused on leadership duties, is important.

Communications staff are responsible for implementing communications plans and conducting day-to-day public engagement activities at an agency level, for business units, and at the project level. In many cases, they are the first point of contact for customers. Importantly, in most DOTs, district/regional communications staff work with both local and headquarters leadership.

Staff size is determined by a variety of factors, so the focus should be on having the right skill sets in place within the given context to produce demonstrable results. Roles are typically determined based on current communications needs, but when feasible, hiring managers can also focus on their long-term vision for an integrated communications team.

Traditionally, DOT communications staff focused on interaction with the news media. Former reporters, photographers, and copy editors have populated these units. While these functions still have a place, a direct line of engagement with the public now exists and the capabilities of communications staff should reflect this reality. Social media, websites, e-communications, audience targeting, video production, creative writing, and marketing functions need to be considered for staff positions.

Effective communications staffs are made up of experienced, career public relations or communications professionals, mid-career and entry-level communicators, and specialists in areas such as graphic design, marketing, or social media engagement. DOTs often have mid- to senior-level outreach staff in their districts/regions with the flexibility to respond to local needs with local knowledge.

There are persuasive arguments to be made for having district/regional staff report to the head of that particular region. These leaders are usually called regional/district engineers or administrators. Reporting to the head of the DOT region/district can provide the embedded communicator with a direct line to top area management and a better chance to be considered “part of the local team.”

Based on interviews with DOT communications directors, however, it is preferable to have all communications staff report to the communications director. District/regional outreach staff need to be focused on the overall communications messaging of the agency. They then determine the appropriate way to convey these messages at the local and regional level. The communications director needs the authority to hold district/regional staff accountable for staying on message and producing demonstrable

results that are aligned with the agency's mission, goals, and objectives. The communications director should be responsible for hiring all communications staff regardless of physical or organizational location.

RESPONSIBILITIES

The DOT communications unit is usually responsible for internal and external communications as well as customer service. Internal communications primarily relates to employee engagement. External communications includes direct outreach to the public, news media relations, marketing, and special events. Customer service relates to providing timely, courteous, and accurate information to members of the public, who contact the department and to actively seeking opportunities to engage customers in an ongoing dialogue.

Internal Communications

Employee communications is an important responsibility of the communications unit. When employees are informed and empowered, they can serve as ambassadors for the department in their communities, churches, clubs, and other public settings throughout the state.

Internal communications at a state DOT need to take into account the decentralized nature of the agency. Given employees who work in offices with consistent computer access and employees who work in the field with little access to computers, DOTs should mobilize a variety of methods to keep all agency staff informed and engaged.

Successful internal communications staff have:

- An ability to translate complex policy, management, and technical issues into easy-to-understand communications;
- Understanding of employee concerns gathered anecdotally as well as through surveys, focus groups, and other means;
- Empathy for the concerns of employees;
- Determination to meet deadlines and fulfill commitments made to employees regarding the distribution of information on a set schedule; and
- Versatility allowing for the production of publications, such as employee newsletters, mass distribution internal e-mails, and posts to the department intranet site.



External Communications

DOTs that are successful at keeping the public informed and driving positive public perceptions of the agency employ proactive communications. Rather than waiting to respond to news media inquiries or reacting to negative stories about the department, the DOT actively distributes information through the news media, social media, and directly to the public.

Effective DOT communications also include the willingness to explore methods that may be perceived as risky. For example, the first DOTs to use Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube to engage the public received warnings of the dangers of social media from departmental leaders, lawyers, information technology staff, human resources directors, and even members of communications staff. Today, all state DOTs report using at least one social media platform.

Successful external communications staff have:

- A commitment to transparency and proactively disseminating information to the public;
- A willingness to assess and take “risks” in order to try new communications strategies and tactics;
- Strong writing skills including an ability to write for a variety of different platforms;
- An ability to think strategically taking into account research, messaging, target audiences, and political sensitivities;
- A focus on what is important to the public;
- A desire to evolve and improve through performance and change management; and
- Strong verbal communications.

Customer Service

Ensuring that members of the public receive timely, courteous, and accurate responses to questions and concerns is another core responsibility of many communications units. Effective customer service promotes transparency, which can lead to greater trust in the agency. The public

should be able to contact the DOT easily through traditional means such as phone numbers, e-mails, and websites. Social media, text messaging, and mobile apps also are **sometimes** included in customer service efforts at DOTs. The public should receive timely responses from the DOT regardless of the medium used.

Successful customer service staff have:

- Empathy for the concerns of customers;
- Patience with difficult people and situations;
- An ability to remain composed and courteous;
- A commitment to responding quickly and accurately;
- An ability to communicate clearly, both verbally and in writing; and
- An ability to represent the DOT effectively.

RELEVANCE

Communications units at state DOTs contribute to the core functions of the department in many ways. Four areas stand out as most relevant to delivering the agency's mission—promoting employee engagement, keeping the public informed, driving positive public perceptions, and contributing to core functions.

Promoting Employee Engagement

Internal communications, done well, can lead to employees who feel more engaged in determining and delivering core functions of the DOT. The communications unit is vital to providing information to employees, in addition to ensuring that DOT staff has mechanisms to interact and provide feedback such as through an intranet site, closed social media sites, surveys and in-person meetings, and events. Collaborative tools such as file-sharing software can make work sharing easier. Engaged employees tend to be more productive, more likely to “buy-in” to departmental initiatives and prouder of the agency for which they work. As they interact with customers, engaged employees also may better embody the agency's values.



Communications staff role:

- Implement strategies and tactics to provide information to employees and encourage their feedback,
- Create opportunities for employees to interact with agency leadership and each other,
- Measure the level of engagement and report to agency leadership, and
- Support recognition programs and related events.

Keeping the Public Informed

Failure to notify the public about departmental operations that will impact traveler's ability to get from one place to another is likely to generate negative comments, bad news stories, and phone calls from elected officials. Effective communications teams manage expectations and are proactive with outreach. Quick responses to public comments are also important. The communications unit must first and foremost focus on keeping the public informed.

Communications staff role:

- Distribute information proactively to the public through the news media, social media, websites, e-mails, and other external facing platforms as appropriate;
- Ensure that information is timely, accurate, understandable, and pertinent to the audience;
- Identify targeted audiences and the best ways and messages to reach them; and
- Measure efforts, outcomes, and feedback and report results to agency leadership.

Driving Positive Public Perceptions

Proactive communications and public engagement goes beyond "pushing" information at the public. In addition to keeping the public informed, the communications unit promotes positive public perceptions of the DOT. This is typically done by identifying and distributing stories such as cost savings accomplished by the agency demonstrating wise use of taxpayer dollars. As these stories get covered by the news media and shared on social media sites, the image of the DOT may improve over time. With

a positive public image, the DOT is better positioned to deliver better transportation options and to get increased funding in the future.

Communications staff role:

- Survey the public and targeted stakeholders to determine perceptions of the agency;
- Identify positive stories to share with the public;
- Proactively distribute positive stories through the news media, social media, e-mails, and other platforms; and
- Pitch positive stories to the news media through direct contact.

Contributing to Core Functions

Core functions of the DOT such as building and maintaining transportation facilities; operating the transportation system; educating the public about safety and the importance of infrastructure; clearing snow; emergency response; and customer service can be advanced through effective communications. The communications unit should ensure their activities facilitate successful delivery of these core functions.

Communications staff role:

- Identify and address issues that might delay or derail agency initiatives;
- Address circumstances where motivated interest groups or individuals are actively criticizing the DOT;
- Involve departmental leaders and other appropriate staff in strategic communications planning;
- Leverage management meetings, phone calls, and e-mails to brief other DOT leaders and staff on emerging industry, national, and local communications issues and efforts;
- Obtain approval of news releases, fact sheets, articles, and other materials from leaders most directly responsible for the area about which the communication is targeted; and
- Distribute positive news stories, customer comments, and employee successes to agency leadership and staff as appropriate.

