ACS Technologies®

Crafting Your Church's
COMMUNICATIONS
PLAN

A Step-by-Step Blueprint to Tell Your Story Better

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Why Every ChurchNeeds a Communications Plan

No one would ever try to build a house without a blueprint. A blueprint helps you understand the structure of the house before you start to build it. It ensures that every element—from the foundation to the roof—fits together seamlessly and purposefully.

That's what a church's communications plan does as well. It provides you with needed structure so you know how each piece of your communication fits together, and you can do a better job telling your church's story.

What is a communications plan?

A communications plan is a strategic framework that guides your church to convey its messages, values, and information to your congregation and the broader community. It's the blueprint for your church communications.

Every church will put together a communications plan a bit differently. There is no one-size-for-it approach for the perfect plan. But generally speaking, church communications plans will include these elements:

- Communications goals
- Target audiences
- Core messages
- Preferred communications channels
- Branding guide
- Technology guide

All of these communication elements are evergreen. You may need to tinker with each from year to year, but you shouldn't need to make wholesale changes. Then, you can use it to build time-sensitive pieces like a content calendar and a budget.

Why does your church need a church communications plan?

In today's complicated communications world, a clear blueprint to move your church communications forward isn't optional. Here's why.

1. It clarifies your messaging. Clarity is critical when you're communicating today. Because a communications plan defines your communications objectives and priorities, it makes it easier for anyone on your team to be on the same page when communicating.

2. It provides for more consistent messaging. You likely are communicating on many different fronts at the moment. It's hard to make sure everything you say agrees. A communications plan provides everyone with the key messages, prime channels, and strategic methods the church will use to tell its story. Because everyone works off the same plan, the communication is more consistent.

3. It optimizes your use of resources. You have limited resources. No organization has the resources needed to communicate haphazardly. A communications plan helps you focus your resources on messages and channels you have the best chance to use well.

You need a communications plan. Read through this guide to discover how to put one together.

Laying the Foundation

Every good blueprint starts with a foundation. A strong foundation ensures whatever is built won't crumble when disaster strikes.

A good foundation for your communication plan begins with looking at your church through wide-angle lenses. You need to back out and look at the church as a whole. Your church's mission and values are the guiding principles for telling your church's story.

From a practical standpoint, that means your church's mission statement and values should be on the very first page of your plan. Since it'll guide everything that follows, it needs to be clarified upfront.
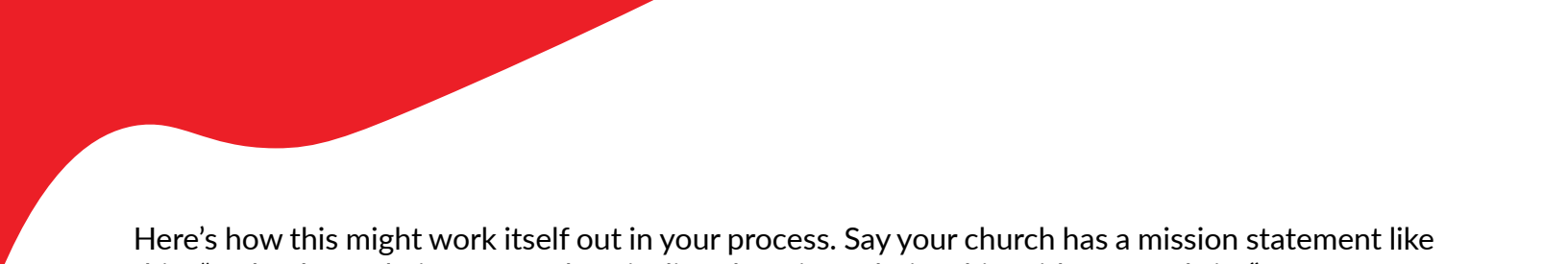
But your mission and values shouldn't just be in a figurehead place at the front; they need to guide the rest of your process, as well. As your team creates the rest of the elements, constantly ask whether the pieces of your plan align with the mission and values of the church. The church's senior leadership should also be involved in reviewing the document and ensuring it fits within the church's mission and values.

By the way, if your church hasn't written out its mission and values, be careful creating a communications plan prior to doing so. Without those guiding principles, it will be hard to use the plan to develop a consistent voice for the church.

Identifying Communications Goals

It's critical that you have a firm understanding of the mission and values of your church before you begin ironing out your communications goals. They directly tie to your church communications goals.

In essence, your communications goals answer the question, "How will our church leverage communications to achieve our mission in a manner consistent with our values?"

Here's how this might work itself out in your process. Say your church has a mission statement like this: "To lead people into an authentic, life-changing relationship with Jesus Christ." Among your values are: "faith, transparency, gratitude, and community engagement."

One of your goals is to "develop regular content, through appropriate channels, that encourages spiritual growth within our congregation."

It's a goal that already aligns with your church's mission. Communication, in this instance, is a vehicle for the church to fulfill its mission. That's the kind of goal you're looking for.

But you still need to look at the goal through the lens of your church's values. You might simply adjust the goal to say, "Develop regular content, through appropriate channels, that encourages spiritual growth within our congregation, embodying our values of faith, transparency, gratitude, and community engagement."

Remember, if you're accustomed to creating goals with the SMART strategy (a great method, by the way), the goals in your church communications plan will be purposely a bit different. You'll want to create SMART goals from them on an annual or quarterly basis. Everything in your communications plan should be evergreen. You'll use this material in the plan to direct your annual goals.

For example, each year you'll take the goal described earlier and add elements to make it specific, measurable, attainable, timely, and relevant. It might look something like this.

"Within the next year, our church will develop and distribute weekly content that fosters spiritual growth among our congregation members, using at least three appropriate channels identified for their effectiveness in reaching our diverse community. This content will directly reflect our core values of faith, transparency, gratitude, and community engagement, aiming to achieve a 25% increase in engagement rates as measured by participation in church activities, feedback forms, and social media interaction."

You'll want to create something like this for each of your communications goals on a consistent basis (likely annually).

Crafting Your Core Messages

Your communications blueprint has a solid foundation with the clarification of your church's mission and the creation of communications goals, but it's still formless. You know where you're going, but know how you'll get there.

That's why you need core messages. Think of them as the load-bearing walls of the communications plan you're producing. They will support the structure of your plan by ensuring every message conveyed is robust, cohesive, and aligns with your church's mission and values.

Your church's core messages are the strategic statements that communicate the most important aspects of your church's identity, purpose, and values. They are easily repeated, and you hope something every member of your leadership and eventually your congregation hears so often they can repeat them by memory.

You have at least two options for crafting your core messages: a message-first approach and an audience-first approach. You'll notice that this guide organizes the process of crafting your messages first, but both approaches have merit.

Message-first approach

Using this approach, you draft your core messages first. While you always have your audience in mind (that's a core communications principle, of course), you're just considering them in a general sense. You're drafting core messages you want every person inside and outside the church to hear.

Look at your church mission and values and brainstorm messages that, if embraced, would help your congregation reach its mission and align with your values.

The more diverse your congregation and your community are, the more you'll struggle with this method.
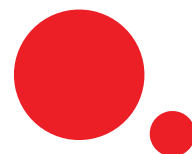
Audience-first approach

In an audience-first approach, your church will have already defined your audiences before beginning to craft your core messages. Each audience will have messages tailored to it. This approach will strengthen the personalization of your messages. Because your different audiences will have different needs and likely relate differently to your messages, it should increase engagement with your communications.

To create your core messages, you'll want to talk with members of each specific audience and seek to understand their unique challenges, spiritual journeys, and how they engage with your church. Look for themes that resonate with the audience, such as spiritual growth, community service, and generosity. Prioritize the themes that best communicate your church's mission and values.

Use those themes to build messages for each of your key audiences.

The drawback to this approach is that you may end up diluting your core messages because you'll have so many iterations of them.

Crafting your messages

Put in a considerable amount of time to carefully craft the messages. (Remember, they are the load-bearing walls holding up everything your church communicates to congregants and the community!) These need to be memorable and easy to communicate across multiple channels. Simplifying and clarifying every core message is essential. Keep refining them until you feel they are memorable.

Make sure your key leaders and communications practitioners on your team are in agreement about these messages. All of your communications deliverables should be judged on how well they communicate these messages. You'll want to make sure everyone agrees on the messages the church will be communicating regularly.

For example, looking back at the mission statement from earlier in the guide, "leading people into an authentic, life-changing relationship with Jesus Christ," you might consider the following communications messages:

- Everyone matters to God.

- Jesus changes us completely when we have a relationship with him.

- We are open and honest about our journeys of faith, seeking to support others and to be supported as we share both our triumphs and failures when following Jesus.

You have a lot of flexibility with the format and content of these messages. Just make sure they are consistent, tied to your church's mission, and aligned with your church's values and doctrinal commitments.

Again, it's critical that you bring your church's leadership, particularly anyone responsible for communicating to the congregation as a whole, into the development of these messages. Teaching and preaching are a big part of communication in a church setting. Make sure all communicators are not only on board but equally invested in these messages.

Defining Your Audience

Building a structure—whether a house, a business, or a public park— without a site survey would be a disaster that could lead to a weak foundation, legal and zoning failures, and expensive budgetary disasters. You need to understand the terrain so you have a good idea of the challenges and opportunities of the terrain.

The same is true for understanding your audience as you're developing a communication plan. Communication always involves both a sender and a receiver. Defining your audience is about understanding the receiver.

When you understand your audience, you'll be much more likely to make your core messages stick.

Crafting your messages

Notice that you're not looking for just one audience. Every church has at least two (and extremely likely more than two).

At the most basic level, you have both an internal and external audience. Your communications plan must consider the differences in communicating with your congregants and your outside community. Everything from your choice of channels to the words you choose will be impacted by this distinction. In fact, even if you're using a message-first process, you may have to adjust your core messages depending on whether you're communicating to church members or the community.

You may also decide to split up your "inside the church" audience into different audiences, depending on how engaged they are.

Each of those two broad audiences includes a number of smaller audiences divided by gender, race, socioeconomics, age, etc. Each of these smaller audiences needs to get the same core messages, but you'll likely need to communicate with them using different words and through different channels.

Putting these audiences into your plan

1. Prioritize your audiences. Every person in your congregation and your community matters, but your church can't (and shouldn't try) to communicate to everyone equally. You have only so many resources. You want to focus on those resources where you can have the greatest impact.

Pick a specific number of audiences (based on your available resources) and write them into your plan. Some may be the large macro-level audiences, such as your congregation and your community. Others may be demographically or geographically based.

For example, a list of your top five audiences may be community, congregation, youth, seniors, and young families.

Consider making a spreadsheet to better organize this.

2. Spend some time learning about each of these audiences. If possible, organize some formal conversations with these audiences (called focus groups). Ask them about the effectiveness of your church's current communications. But most importantly, try to learn about the kinds of messaging that resonate with them. If you've already crafted core messages, share them with the focus groups and gauge their response. Make sure to also clearly understand the kinds of channels (social media, websites, print, etc.) that best communicate with them.

Even if you can't gather a traditional focus group for each of your audiences, spend time listening to people from each group. Visit Sunday School classes and/or small groups. Schedule a lunch with leaders from a particular audience. Do what you can to listen to as many voices as possible in key audiences you may be less familiar with.

Supplement focus groups with quantitative information about the groups through surveys and community research. Tools like MissionInsite can give you insights into the messages and channels that are important to people in your community.

3. Analyze the needs of each segment. After you've talked to people from each audience, review the trends you discovered. Describe each audience, noting any key characteristics. Particularly note the unique needs and the preferred communication channels, and the communication styles of these audiences.

If any adjustments to the core messages need to be made regularly with this group, note it in the text.

4. Write your thoughts into the plan. Take all the insights you've gathered in the previous steps and write out a short description of your top audiences. Include what you know about their preferred channels and the types of messages that resonate with them.

Choosing the Right Communications Channels

Good contractors choose the right building materials for the right purposes. Why? Using materials that don't fit the environment or the design leads to a sub-par building.

The same is true for the communication channels you use. We all know we have a much wider selection of channels to choose from than ever before. But not every channel will serve your purposes and engage with your target audiences.

That makes choosing the right ones and clarifying those channels in your communications plan crucial.

Types of channels

Every potential channel you use has strengths and weaknesses. Understanding those strengths and weaknesses helps you leverage them to engage various audiences.

● **Website -** Your website is likely your most important communications tool. Along with your mobile app, it acts as a hub for all of your communications.

It's available to anyone with an internet connection but only on a "push" basis. That means a person has to take the initiative to seek out the information rather than you "pushing" the content to them through email or other channels. In the past, most church leaders assumed that the Web was a great way to communicate with young people in the church but not seniors. But today, web communication crosses all generations.

● **Mobile App -** For churches that use it well, the mobile app has the potential to replace the website as the church communications hub. For the most part, anything you can communicate on your website, you can also share on your app. Plus, thanks to notifications, you can push those messages out to users. Because signing into mobile apps tends to be a smoother experience, it's easier to provide a personalized experience and a secure environment for private communications and giving.

Most churches will need to lean on outside vendors to provide a mobile app. Depending on your desired features, apps can become expensive. While most people today (regardless of age or socio-economic status) have access to a smartphone, people use their phones differently. Some people won't feel comfortable with giving on their mobile devices or going to your app for important information about the church.

● **Email-** It's relatively easy and inexpensive to engage people with social media. Unlike your church website, you're pushing content to your congregants and community. You also have unparalleled opportunities to segment your communications to specific audiences. With the right software, you can easily send emails to people of specific ages, genders, geographic locations, and more.

Anyone with an email inbox knows the problem with email. Most people get way more emails than they can possibly read or respond to. Even the best email marketers only get an open rate of 25 percent or so. For many, that rate is much lower. Many organizations depend on the ability to send out a massive number of emails to get an adequate response.

● **Text messages (SMS) -** Text messages have some of the highest open rates among communications channels. (Some people suggest up to 98 percent.) Plus, nearly everyone these days can receive them on their smartphones. You can also get information to your congregants in seconds through SMS messages.

But texts must be short. Some messages can't be condensed into just a few sentences. Plus, you're limited in your ability to integrate images and videos into SMS messages.

● **Social Media -** Social media isn't monolithic. Each platform (Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, etc.) has its own strengths and weaknesses. But generally, social media's strength is its ability to create engagement. Using ads, you have an even stronger opportunity to segment your audience, so you reach out to the specific people you're trying to reach. It can be particularly effective in reaching out beyond your current congregation.

While you have the ability to target your communications with social media, you can't control who sees your post or your ad. Social media isn't precise. Just because a person follows your social media feed doesn't mean their unique algorithms will put your message in front of them.

● **Church Bulletin -** Your church bulletin puts your most important messages in the hands of every person who worships with you weekly. Of course, you have no guarantee that people will open the bulletin, read it, and make note of what you need them to know. In most church contexts, the church bulletin is still a powerful tool.

But the larger your church grows, the more expensive it becomes to print paper bulletins. Churches across the country have experimented (some successfully) with digital bulletins and/or digital companions to their print bulletins to cut down on costs. Some have leveraged their mobile app in many of the ways they once used a printed bulletin.

Of course, there are many more potential communication channels for your church to consider. New channels become available every year. Always be on the lookout for channels that seem popular with the audiences you want to reach.

Building audiences into your plan

The channels section of your communications plan describes how your church will employ these channels. Here are a few tips as you begin to do this.

● **Include a broad mix of communications channels.** Even in the most monolithic churches, no single channel will reach everyone.

● **Write strategically (not specifically) about channels in your plan.** While it's important to plan specifically how you'll use these channels, your evergreen communications plan isn't the place for that. It's a place for describing strategy.

So, instead of saying you'll leverage email to send out a weekly newsletter on Thursday, say you'll use email to consistently engage your congregation with helpful, informative messages.

● **Define how you'll adapt to new channels.** New channels will come and go on a regular basis. Include in your guide how you'll prioritize and engage with new channels as they become available.

Building in Brand Guidelines

We've all seen buildings that look like every piece had a different designer. The colors don't match. The materials seem like they're from different decades. Just as a building's disjointed appearance can turn off visitors, a church's communications can suffer from an inconsistent presentation.

That's why brand guidelines are an indispensable part of any church's communications plan. Brand guidelines are the rules and standards that define how an organization presents itself through its logo, typography, colors, tone of voice, etc. These brand guidelines ensure that everyone is on the same page when it comes to how you communicate your messages.

Here's how you integrate brand guidelines into your communications plan.

1. Examine your church's mission and values. Your brand guidelines build upon all the work you've already done. Your church's mission and values are particularly critical in defining your brand identity. They should guide your direction moving forward.

2. Reflect on your notes from your audience focus groups. Take a look back at what you wrote about your audience. You want to make sure your branding instructions help to communicate with them.

3. Review your existing communications assets. Look at your logo, website, evergreen printed materials, videos, etc., and note the consistent elements (such as color scheme, typography, and logo usage) you want to continue. Note what needs to change as well.

4. Create your branding guidelines for your communications assets. Using what you've learned from the previous steps, outline your church's guidelines for using elements of your brand. Ensure you (at least) include information about how to use your logo (including where to get official copies), use of church name, appropriate color schemes, typography (both primary and secondary), tone, etc.

Be specific and describe as many different contexts as possible where these items appear. If you have outside ministries attached to your church (for example, a senior pastor's preaching ministry), describe where those guidelines are kept if they are not covered in the church's communication plan.

5. Describe the church's expectations of communication tone. Your brand already has a tone, but it may be inconsistent. Specify the personality that your church's communications should match. For example, your tone could be authoritative, humorous, friendly, welcoming, etc. Describe specific instances when you might want the tone to be different. For example, if your church's tone is humorous, you would want it to be different when announcing a funeral.

Give concrete examples that show the church's tone in action in a variety of communication channels. Also, give concrete examples of tones that don't fit the church brand.

6. Provide a mechanism for reporting inconsistent brand usage. Tell people how to respond when a person sees communications assets that don't reflect the brand. Emphasize that reporting information like this is important in helping the church communicate consistently. It's not about pointing fingers but about promoting clarity for everyone.

7. Review and update your guidelines periodically. The communications landscape changes regularly. Review these guidelines on an annual basis to determine whether you need to make any changes or additions. Detail the review procedure and identify the person responsible for overseeing it.

Your church's branding guidelines will help your church provide a consistent presence across channels and across audiences.

Leveraging Technology and Tools

If you were designing a house today, you could do it without electricity. You could do it without running water.

But why?

Technology helps you optimize the planning and operation of any new structure, including a house.

The same is true for your church's technology usage. Technology helps you optimize the reach and effectiveness of your communications.

Asking the right questions

Including technology in your plan helps your church to future-proof your communications. How? It provides clarity on your church's strategy for leveraging technology. While the future will bring new technology and new use cases to your communications, it still should stay aligned with your communications goals and your church values.

As you write technology into your plan, answer these questions.

1. What are our communications goals? Think about how technology can help you reach these goals.

2. What are our church values, and how do they relate to technology use? Church values like relevance, accessibility, stewardship, transparency, and community (and many other potential church values) relate heavily to how your church uses technology. Think through these implications before you craft the technology section of your plan.

3. Who are your core audiences, and how do they use technology? Different audiences (age, education level, socio-economic levels, etc.) engage with technology differently. But don't just focus on where your audiences are today. Think ahead about how your audiences may use technology in another decade.

4. What technologies are we currently using? Write all the ways you leverage technology today. Consider whether your current tools are helping you reach your goals.

5. How will we safeguard our congregants' privacy and digital security? Your church has a responsibility to steward the data you're given. Think through your church's obligations in security and privacy and how you'll care for data in your care.

6. How does/will your church interact with outside vendors to help with your communications? Communications technology is one area of your church you'll often partner with outside organizations for support. Consider which organizations you already partner with in technology, which ones you may in the future, and the values that guide (or should guide) these relationships.

Once you think through these questions, you'll be ready to write the technology portion of your plan.

Writing technology into your plan

Just like the other portions of your plan, your technology section should be evergreen. While you'll want to look through and possibly make revisions on an annual basis, the central principles shouldn't need to be changed.

Every communications plan will tackle this section a bit differently, but elements should be in most plans.

- A guiding statement that describes the role technology has in your church's communications.

- The values that guide your church's technology usage.

- Simple description of broad technologies and their role in your communications strategy. (This doesn't need to be longer than a sentence for each.)

- A detailed description of your church's data privacy policy. (What is the process your church has in place to make sure you're safeguarding the data with which you're entrusted?)

Because of the nature of this part of the plan, involve your church IT director (or whoever is responsible for technology in your church) in drafting this section. At least consider letting him or her review your work.

Conclusion: Implementing Your Plan

Your blueprints for building a house are important, but they aren't the final product. You draw up plans so you can actually build the house.

In the same way, your communications plan won't do your church any good if it's just stuffed in a drawer somewhere. You need to implement it. To implement your plan effectively, consider these suggestions.

1. Include your church's leadership as early as possible. You need leadership buy-in to make the communications plan successful. In the best-case scenario, you've talked to your church leadership at the beginning of the process to ensure you understand how they see the future of the church and how communications fit in that vision. At the very least, don't move forward with the plan until they've seen, approved, and enthusiastically supported the plan.

2. Outline a timetable for implementation. Depending upon the plan, implementation likely won't be immediate. Write out milestones and goals for when different areas of the plan might be implemented.

3. Write out a communications process to support the communications plan. Your process clarifies how teams or committees in your church get communications support. For example, if the youth ministry wants to begin promoting summer camps, your process describes how they can get communications help in the process. Some will build this into their church communications plan itself, but it often needs to be more detailed than your communications plan will allow.

Writing this process out helps to make sure everyone understands it and agrees to it.
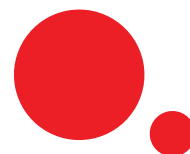
4. Define how current staff and volunteer leaders will learn about the plan. Just because you've written this plan out doesn't automatically mean everyone who needs to read it and use it will get it. You might need to set up a meeting where you train people in the plan. You might just need to distribute the plan and be available for questions. Think through how you want it to happen and talk to your church's leadership about how they would like to see it happen.

You'll also need a strategy for sharing the plan with future people brought onto the church team.

5. Plan for future adjustments. While the plan described in this guide is evergreen, you'll want/need to adjust it on a semi-regular basis as church strategy, staffing, and communications technology change. Build a process and timetable for reviewing the communications plan and ensuring it still fits the church's mission and values. Put those dates onto a church calendar as soon as you implement them.

Be patient as you implement your church's communications plan. It'll take some time. Rome wasn't built in a day and neither is an effective communications strategy.

Learn from the feedback. Make it better. Every piece of input can help you refine it.

But once you implement it, a clear communications plan can help guide you as you share your church's story for years to come.

Know, Reach, and Disciple Your Community

Introducing MissionInsite, an essential tool for driving growth and making impactful, data-driven decisions in faith-based organizations!

Unleash the power of MissionInsite, a web-based analytical tool meticulously crafted to empower your church, parish, denominational office, or diocese. Seamlessly blending community demographic insights with a treasure trove of data from various sources, including the exclusive American Beliefs Study by ACS Technologies, MissionInsite provides an unparalleled view of your community's dynamics.

Why settle for uncertainty when you can transform your approach? MissionInsite equips local churches with data to identify prospective members, tailor worship experiences, refine programs, amplify outreach efforts, optimize events, improve communication, and enhance pastoral care. It's your secret weapon for not just reaching but actively engaging your community while forging stronger connections with existing members.

Denominational offices take strategic planning to new heights with MissionInsite. Uncover potential church or parish locations, identify the perfect leadership for a congregation, and implement transformative programs across ministries. The result? A robust community of disciples.

If growth is a priority, MissionInsite isn't just a tool – it's a must-have. Elevate your ministries with informed decisions that drive expansion and impact. Don't just dream of a thriving future; make it a reality with MissionInsite.

Let's Talk

We know the challenges of switching or implementing new technology and how that can be intimidating. But we also know the unbelievable changes that have happened within churches that have partnered with us for their ministry needs. Let's connect and see how we can assist you in the greatest thing you do - grow God's Kingdom.

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