WHAT IS A COMMUNICATIONS PLAN?

A communications plan is a document that guides all the communications efforts of your organization. It helps you strategically focus your future communications around a certain set of goals. The communications plan will help you tailor your message to specific audiences, and determine what materials and mediums are best used to communicate with those groups. A communications plan can be written for your entire organization, but also for a specific aspect of the program, a new project, participant recruitment, or anything else.

A communications plan has six main components:

1. Identify your goals: Set goals that will help you achieve the overarching goal or mission of your organization. How can strategic communications help work towards this outcome? For example, if the is to involve more women and youth in decisions of sexual and reproductive health, then your communications objective(s) should be a way to help facilitate this. Be specific and quantifiable – this could be anything from "we'd like to attract three major funding partners by the end of 2015," to "we want to recruit 50 participants for our next round of programming." Make sure your communications objectives are updated alongside your organizational goals.

2. Identify your audience groups: Who are you communicating to? Youth? Government officials? Potential funders? Identify each of these groups, and determine the assumptions you can make about those people. If you understand who your audience is and what motivates them, you're better able to tailor your message to achieve your goals. For example, these are some points you will want to determine:
- Demographics
- Language best spoken
- Access to technology
- Location
- Education level
- Attitudes and beliefs of your audience, especially regarding the issues your organization deals with (for example, if you are trying to empower youth, find out what your audience assumes youth are like)

3. Find your message: This is a call to action. What do you want each of your audience groups to do? Perhaps you want the 'youth' audience to sign up for programming, so you will want to tailor a clear, catchy message to convey that goal. Messages are most effective when they contain no more than three main points. An effective message might answer these three questions:
- Need statement: What is the need your program addresses?
- Program strategy: How is your program addressing that need?
- Call to action: What outcomes do you expect from your program? What still needs to be accomplished, and how can your audience help achieve

these results? What is in it for them?

4. Materials: What materials and channels do you have to convey that message to those specific audience groups? This can be anything from brochures to posters, social media to public outreach opportunities. Make educated choices based on the assumptions you noted about your audience.

For example, if you are wanting to share a message with out-of-school youth who don't have access to a computer, then you would not promote that message over social media or online. As you consider the most effective channels, take into account which ones are most relevant, credible, cost-efficient, and popular with your target audience.

5. Implementation: Based on the four components above, work out a timeline to put your plan into place. An implementation plan often includes greater details about each of the materials that has to be created, who is creating it, and what the timeframe is. Share the implementation plan with your entire team, so they know the status of materials, and can provide input. This can be best done through a shared Google Doc.

6. Evaluation: How effective have your communications been? Did you achieve the goal you set out in step one? Communications plans should be constantly updated, based on your overall organizational strategy, and the success/failure of different communications methods.