Network Communications

Document Purpose

This document is designed to help a network develop its communication plan. It can be used by emerging networks to develop initial outreach, or by existing networks to rethink their communications.

It contains: Best Practice, Guidance, Worksheet Template, and an Appendix with examples.

Best Practice

Effective information exchange is the backbone of any successful network. Without it, members can become disconnected and lose their sense of value and place. Networks must create a strong communication infrastructure to keep members informed and engaged in current work. Clear and concise information exchange not only keeps members up to date, but also builds trust between members. It keeps individuals invested in the work. Furthermore, networks with a clear plan for communications can easily articulate opportunities for new or potential members to plug in and get involved.

This exchange can occur through personal communications between members (i.e., meeting in person, teleconference, e-mail, member surveys, or on a webpage space), or formal publications (i.e., annual reports, case studies, info sheets, newsletters, or briefings). Effective networks stay ahead of their organization's communication needs and plan for the growth of their information infrastructure. Networks are built on the concept that sharing information accelerates change; so, having strong communication systems is critical to network success.

Guidance

Information Exchange Methods within a network can take several shapes. The following tables show communication vehicles by the type of communication desired: internal or external.

Internal Network Member Communication	
Communication Type	**Relevance to Members and Network**
Meetings and Working Groups (in person)	- Creates connections between members through direct experience, and cultivates trust - Allows members to engage on a more personal level - Creates a face-to-face dialogue between members while working through issues - Can be difficult if members are geographically distant
Teleconference	- Less personal then face-to-face, but more practical in networks that cover large geographic areas - Allows members to speak directly about a specific topic and consider

	different approaches • Helps develop trust between members
Meeting Minutes	• Maintains a record of phone and in-person meetings • Supports information transparency when available to all members
E-mail	• Allows members to have an unobtrusive yet direct connection with other network members • Can allow members to work out details of issues and prepare for larger projects • Can disseminate network information to members on a large scale • Helps to keep members connected and engaged in network issues • Note: there is a distinction between direct emails between members and a list serve format email; the former are efficient but may leave new members of less connected members out of the conversation
Member Surveys	• Allows network leaders to gather information such as member preferences or content interests from members to facilitate decision making • Gives members a voice in network decisions and direction by giving structured feedback • Helps networks establish value propositions that members support
Network Webpage Space (Forum, Group Chat, Databases, etc.)	• Gives members easy access to network resources, as well as an archive of past conversations • Flexible medium to meet network information infrastructure needs • Can be tailored to the specific information requirement of network members, and still allow for growth of the network • Can be a streamlined way for a network to communicate with members and the public, and provide opportunities for members to share information with others in the network

External Network Publications	
Communication Type	**Relevance to Members and Network**
Annual Reports	• Provides members with an annual update on the overall state of the network • Can provide network transparency • Topics typically include: progress towards annual work plan goals, network impacts, state of the network and current projects, and future direction of the network; additional topics may be a list of partners, funders, and members; network events; and upcoming projects • Consolidates high-level information about the network with relevant impacts and serves as a document to share with current and potential funders; an annual report can be shortened to create a funder specific briefing document
Case Studies	• Provide committees and members with specific details about the implementation of a topic of interest to the network • Take an in depth look at a specific program or topic and investigate the effects

Informational Sheets	• Short documents that give specific information about a network topic • Quick to read, and easy to reference • Breaks down a topic in a way that all members can understand • Can be about an array of topics like network leadership, specific network programs, or general information for new members
Newsletters	• Regular publication that keeps members up to date on current network projects and upcoming events • Frequency of newsletters is dependent on the size and scope of the network. For example USDN provides weekly newsletters, your network may have capacity to develop biannual newsletters. • Can be printed or e-mailed
Briefings	• Takes a snapshot of a specific facet of the network • Can be created for funders, projects overviews, board meetings, etc.

Worksheet Template

1. How do members / potential members currently communicate (for example: phone, e-mail, meetings)?

2. What are the current barriers to communications, and what would be the most beneficial types of information sharing for your network (consider size and geographic reach, and content)?

3. As of now, what is the best way to contact potential members (for example: e-mail, phone)?

4. What type of member meetings would work best for your network (for example: annual face-to-face meetings, phone working groups, committee meetings)?

5. What elements within a website would be useful to the network and members (for example: databases, file sharing, group chat, forums)?

6. What would be the best way to survey members (for example: online, e-mail, hard-copy during a face to face meeting)?

7. What types of published documents would best benefit the network, and how frequently should they be released (for example: newsletters, reports, briefings)?

8. Who will be responsible for network communications, how can responsibility be shared, and can communications be simplified while still being impactful?

Appendix

The following table, taken from the 2015 State of the Networks Report Appendix, provides examples of how different networks communicate. In addition, a startup network survey is also included.

Communication Method	Implementation Tip	Peers to Learn From
Network Information Sharing Calls	These are regularly scheduled or ad hoc calls that all members are invited to. They provide opportunities for members to connect in between face to face meetings. These are often content focused calls that are organized by a leadership team or rotating responsibility can be assigned to various members.	USDN, Michigan, Heartland, SSDN
Network Newsletter	These can be informational about project highlights from member communities and/or network focused about upcoming network events or network projects. The opportunity to keep up to date through a newsletter is a low commitment activity for members to engage in.	USDN, Michigan, SSDN
USDN Website Regional Network Page	Regional networks can work with USDN to provide access to a page on the USDN website specific to their regional network. Through this page, members can post and answer questions, share documents and events, and generally keep in touch through a web feed. This page also provides access and connections to sustainability directors outside of the region.	Heartland, New England, SSDN
Leadership Member Circles	Each network leader is assigned a circle or members. That leader is charged with reaching out by phone and email 2-4 times a year to keep in touch, hear how they are doing and check in on how the network is working for them.	USDN, SSDN
Member Work Groups	Work groups come together typically around a content topic. Their purpose can be to share information, pursue a grant, and/or collaborate on a project.	USDN, Cascadia, Green Cities California, Western Adaptation Alliance, SSDN
External Facing Website	Through an externally facing website networks can communicate with the general public and funders about network activities and success stories.	USDN, Green Cities California, Michigan, SSDN

Heartland Network Kickoff Start-Up Survey

1. What is your position title?
2. Where is your position located within your city or county government organization?
3. How does your organization define the term "sustainability"?
4. How is your position funded?
5. If your position is funded via an Energy Efficiency & Conservation Block Grant (EECBG) formula grant, is there a specific expectation that you need to meet in order for your position to continue after the EECBG funding is exhausted? If so, what is that expectation?
6. Do you believe that participating in a network of your local government peers in the four-state region of Kansas, Nebraska, Missouri, & Iowa would be beneficial to you?
7. How formal or informal an organizational structure do you think the network should have?
8. What functions would you like the regional network to serve?
9. What services would you like the network to provide?
10. What media (email, conference calls, other) would work best for you to participate with your peers in the network?
11. How frequently would you like to schedule conference call meetings among the network participants?
12. Would you be interested in rotating the responsibility among the participants (including yourself) for convening the conference calls and developing the agendas?
13. Does your current budget situation limit your travel funding to participate in semi-annual or annual face-to-face network meetings?
14. If funding could be secured for travel (from EPA or other sources), would you be interested in semi-annual or annual face-to-face meetings of the network?
15. If so, what frequency of face-to-face meetings do you think would be most appropriate and beneficial?
16. A preliminary list of regional local government sustainability staff is attached. Do you know of others who should be included in the Heartland Local Government Sustainability Network? If so, please provide name(s) and contact information.
17. Do you have another name you would like to suggest rather than "Heartland Local Government Sustainability Network"?
18. Has your city/county developed an energy efficiency & conservation strategy, a climate protection plan, a sustainability plan, or some other policy document that provides a basis for sustainability efforts in your community?
19. Are you familiar with the STAR Community Index project initiated by ICLEI-Local Governments for Sustainability and the U.S. Green Building Council?