

## **Communication in Networks: the Audience, the Message and the Channel**

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Through our hospital and healthcare networks we bring organizations together to improve health services in our identified regions. Each of our member organizations have their own board of directors, administrative teams, organizational cultures, and community cultures – yet a common thread pulls the members together – joining together to create efficiencies and opportunities through shared services to enhance the hospitals' bottom lines, as well as the patient care experience including quality, access, cost, and reliability. Working together to strengthen health care in our rural areas, we come together to derive a better value.

### **Communication is the element that maintains and sustains the relationships within our networks.**

Joining my network almost two years ago now, one of the things I routinely heard was, "We are a best kept secret." Honestly, I had to agree. When I saw the organization's notice in the local newspaper seeking a director, I tried to use the internet to research the organization. I found little to no presence on the internet at all, just a flat one page webpage with outdated information. Once hired, one of my first lines of business was to assess our communications needs and start developing communication strategies and tools to enhance the organization's presence and communication to key stakeholders.

One thing that has been very helpful to me is the National Cooperative of Health Networks (NCHN). Once I found the organization and its website, I began researching and stalking all of the member Network websites. What was the content? What were some of the programs and services they described? Did they post electronic newsletters? Some of the networks are large organizations with big teams – some small like mine, a one person shop. I hear it said often, "If you've seen one Network, you've seen one." That was apparent, but there were commonalities as well, and I gleaned a lot of information that was helpful to me.

### **Communication planning is not a linear process. It is more like a series of loops – defining the target audiences and their critical characteristics, and identifying available and effective communication channels.**

As you think about your Network, think about all of the different groups of people who are engaged and involved, as well as the groups and people you'd like to make sure know about your organization. Think of all of the different audiences it would be valuable for you to communicate with and why. When building your communications plan, objectives, goals and strategies, know that each audience may require a different strategy, channel or tool to effectively receive your information. It's important in building your stakeholder relationships to take the time to identify the person's style and preferences in communication channels and tools. Some options might include: Face-to-face, Telephonic, Emails, Blogs, Intranets, Letters, Minutes,

Texts, Tweets, Spreadsheets, Newsletters, LinkedIn, Video conferencing, Dropbox, YouTube and others.

My Network hosts 15 Peer Groups who meet regularly to share information, problem solve, develop strategies, create opportunities, and tackle projects. Each group takes minutes, but often, wants to share documents, policies and procedures, or protocols. Instead of email, the group determined using Dropbox to share files was a good way to communicate and a more effective place to store documents for joint access.

As the old saying goes, you need to know where you are going before you can know how to get there. You need to nail down your objectives.

What are you trying to achieve with your communication? Making sure your message is clear, concise and consistent are three important ingredients to your communication strategy. The following are a number of questions you might ask yourself in crafting your message.

- What are my communications goals?
- Do I want to educate?
- Do I want to create support?
- Do I want to get people to do something?
- Do I want to diffuse a situation?
- Do I want to improve my/our reputation?
- Who are my target audiences – primary and/or secondary?
- Who do I need to engage with to address issues or objectives?
- Who am I trying to affect or influence?
- How will I measure if my communications strategies are effective?
- What am I trying to achieve with each audience?

Getting back to my earlier comment about being the “Best Kept Secret”, it was important for me to develop some foundational channels of communication in my Network. I identified the primary audience as the internal teams of the hospital members and developed a website to give the organization a presence and base to communicate through. The second, phase of the communication strategy building an electronic newsletter that goes out to the hospital staff and other identified stakeholders in our region every other month. The website and the newsletters are linked. The content showcases projects we are working on, highlights a Peer Group and might showcase another item of interest. The Network is now becoming well known amongst the hospital teams and key regional stakeholders. We’re on the map so to speak and building a solid reputation. A third strategy has been to begin regional educational programs to improve quality. My hospitals are all using DNV for accreditation, and we host DNV trainings in our region. This provides a significant cost savings to educate our team and allows us to open doors and provides value to other hospitals who are not yet Network members. We’ve also begun a quarterly Nursing Grand Rounds program among our member hospitals to strengthen communication, processes and procedures in the continuum of care of low volume, high risk patients, who present to our rural Critical Access Hospitals’

emergency departments. Both of these educational tools enhance communication, build relationships and collaboration.

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*The Northwest Hospital Alliance exists to provide a regional cooperative approach to the delivery of rural health care in the northern counties of Idaho. Founded in 1991, the Hospital Alliance serves as a collaborative network to assist our members in offering high quality, cost effective health care in our communities. The Alliance is organized to ensure each hospital's autonomy, while providing support to address changes in the healthcare environment. The cornerstone of the network relationship is the preservation of community hospital independence and economic strength. Each member hospital maintains its organizational structure and the identity and image that have made it visible in the local community. Healthcare in rural communities is absolutely an essential component of quality of life for rural residents. Visit our website at [www.nwhospitalalliance.org](http://www.nwhospitalalliance.org).*

*Northwest Hospital Alliance has been a member of NCHN since 2012.*