

A background network diagram consisting of various sized blue circular nodes connected by thin grey lines, creating a complex web-like structure. The nodes are distributed across the slide, with a higher density in the top and bottom left areas.

Regional Networks: Network Communications Plan

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Presentation Purpose and Contents

This presentation is to the Regional Networks Coordinating Committee, on January 8th, 2016.

It's purpose is to present the best practice of Network Communications Planning and development, including:

- What the practice is and looks like
- Why the practice is worthwhile
- Who should do it and when
- How to do it, with examples

Partner Networks	Network Participants	Representing
Green Cities California (GCC)	Linda Giannelli Pratt Erik Pearson Shannon Parry ALTERNATE- Susana Reyes	GCC Managing Director (Coordinator) Hayward, CA Santa Monica, CA Los Angeles, CA
Great Lakes	Matt Naud Matt Gray	Ann Arbor, MI Cleveland, OH
Heartland	T.O. Bowman Brenda Nations	Oklahoma City, OK Iowa City, IO
Michigan Green Communities (MGC)	Dave Norwood Sandra Diorka Jaime Kidwell-Brix	Dearborn, MI Delhi, MI MGC Coordinator (Coordinator)
New England Municipal Sustainability Network (NEMSN)	Troy Moon Cyndi Veit Kelsey O'Neil Virginia LeClair	Portland, ME EPA- (Coordinator) EPA- (Coordinator) Dedham, MA
Ohio, Kansas, Indiana (OKI)	Larry Faulkin Lamees Mubaslat	Cincinnati, OH Montgomery County, OH
Prairie State Network (PSN)	Catherine Hurley Dan Hughes	Evanston, IL PSN Coordinator (Coordinator)
Southeast Sustainability Directors Network (SSDN)	Peter Nierengarten Robin Cox Meg Williams-Jamison	Fayetteville, AR Huntsville, AL SSDN Coordinator
Western Adaptation Alliance (WAA)	Tamara Lawless Ashley Perl	Flagstaff, AZ Aspen, CO

What is Network Communication Planning?

- **Networks are built on the exchange of information.**
 - Communications plans must be tailored to the specific needs of a network.
 - Effective networks stay ahead of their organization's communication needs and plan for the growth of their information infrastructure.
- **Strong communication practices not only effectively disseminate information, but also build relationships and trust between members.**
- **Regular communication with members helps to keep them invested in their work with the network.**
- **There are several communication methods that can be used by networks to meet their needs.**





Internal Vs. External Communication Methods



- *Internal Communication* is a way for networks to directly connect with individual members. Some examples of internal communication are meetings, teleconferences, direct e-mail, etc.



- *External Communication* is general information about the state of network. Some examples of external communication are annual reports, news letters, briefings, case studies, etc.

Face to Face Meetings

Relevance of In Person Meetings to Members and Network:

- F2F meetings are typically the highest valued experience members get from their network
- Member create strong connections to each other when they share experiences. This is essential to cultivate trust.
- Allows members to engage on a more personal level



Pro Tips

- An annual F2F network meeting is a MUST for long term sustainability of a network
- Leverage other times your members will be together. Is there an American Planning Association meeting in your region? EX: Pulse your members on USDN.org for who will be there and pull together a breakfast mtg. That 5 extra effort will weave members together through shared experiences.

Committees and Working Groups

Relevance of Work Groups and Network:

- Work Groups and Committees are a sub set of members focused on a specific topic or project.
- Committees are typically ongoing or ad hoc, and stand as a function of the network. Work groups are typically focused on projects and have a beginning and end.
- The self selecting nature of work groups engages members based on their interest which fosters value in the network
- Small groups enable members to collaborate which deepens their relationships and evolves your network

Pro Tips

- Work groups need clear purpose of else they may fizzle out. When a work group gets started, have the members determine: purpose, goals, activities, and timeline.
- Make sure progress of work groups gets relayed back to the full membership to remain inclusive and to demonstrate the value members

Teleconference and Meeting Minutes

Relevance of Teleconference Communication to Members and Network:

- Keep people engaged in the network between face to face meetings
- Allows members to speak directly about a specific topic and consider different approaches



Relevance of Meeting Minutes to Members and Network:

- Supports information transparency when available to all members
- Establishes a low commitment defined role for a member to engage in the network through



Pro Tip



E-Mail



Relevance of E-mail Communication to Members and Network:

- Can disseminate network information to members on a large scale
- Allows members to have an unobtrusive yet direct connection with other network members
- 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 or less connected members out of the conversation

Pro Tip

- **LESS IS MORE.** Always remember participating in a network is secondary to your members full time jobs. Don't clutter inboxes or your network communications might get tuned out.
- Determine minimal predictable uses for all members and stick to it.



Member Surveys



Relevance of Communication Through Survey to Members and Network:

- 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

Pro Tip

- Don't over survey your memberships or else they might

Network Webpage Space (Forum, Group Chat, Databases, etc.)

Relevance of Webpage Space Communication to Members and Network:

- EX: USDN.org, google drive, basecamp
- 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 a streamlined way for members to share information with others in the network

Pro Tip

- People don't just magically start using these tools. You need to design a strategy to motivate use and then you need to positively communicate expectations.
- When motivating people to participate



A network diagram with blue nodes and connecting lines, serving as a background for the slide.

Any other Pro Tips
from the Group?

External Communication

External Communication:

The following are types of external communication used in networks. These formal publications disseminate network information to a large member audience.

1. Annual Reports
2. Case Studies
3. Informational Sheets
4. Newsletters
5. Briefings



Annual Reports

Relevance of Annual Reports to Members and Network:

- Provides members (and funders) with an annual update on the overall state of the network
- Topics typically include:
 - Progress towards annual work plan goals
 - Network impacts, state of the network and current projects
 - Future direction of the network
 - Interesting member survey data
 - 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

Pro Tip

- A one pager is better than nothing



Case Studies

Relevance of Case Studies to Members and Network:

- Provide committees and members with specific details about the implementation of a topic of interest to the network
- Takes an in depth look at a specific program or topic and investigate the effects
- Can be created for funders, projects overviews, board meetings, etc.



Pro Tip

- Telling the story of sustainability with examples from your region can help influence local decision makers
- Get creative to get it done. Is there a college near by with a writing program?
- Pick topics based on member interest and needs



Informational Sheets and Newsletters



Relevance of Informational Sheets to Members and Network:

- 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 projects, or general information for new members

Relevance of Newsletters to Members and Network:

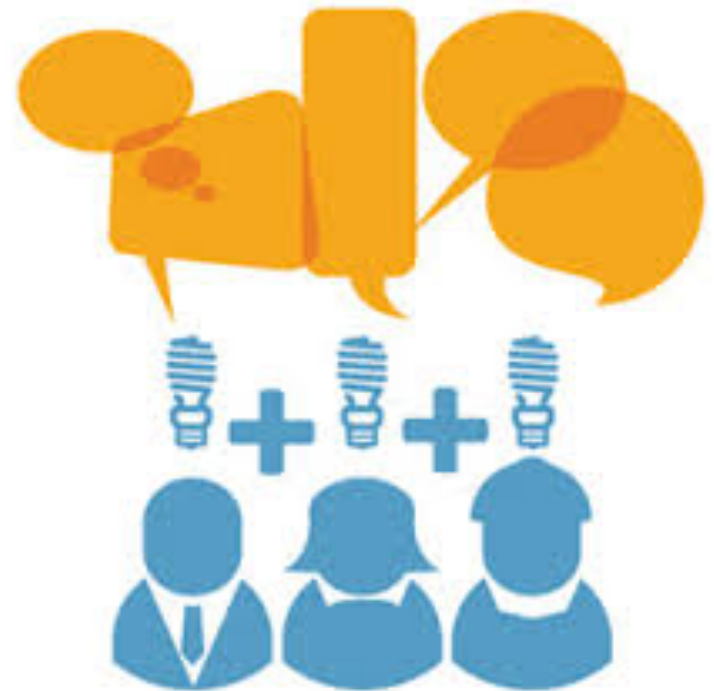
- Regular publication that keeps members up to date on current network projects and upcoming events
- Frequency of newsletters is dependent on the size and scope of the network. For example USDN provides weekly newsletters, your network may have capacity to develop biannual newsletters.
- Choose topics that interest your members. EX: member profiles help people get to know each other, feature your case studies here, alert members to important network deadlines like annual meetings and member surveys

Pro Tip



Why is Communication Planning Valuable to Regional Networks?

- Communication planning creates the foundation for how information is going to be exchanged by members.
 - The easier it is to communicate, the easier it is for members to be engaged in the network.
- Staying ahead of the communication needs of the network keeps members connected and plugged into the efforts of the network.
- Networks are built on the concept that sharing information accelerates change
 - Having strong communication systems is critical to network success.



Who Creates the Communications Plan?



- Communication needs can vary greatly between networks because of differences in size and stage of development.
- The members in leadership positions must identify what specific communication needs the network has and create a plan to meet them.
- This can be done by committee, or by designating a network coordinator to oversee internal and external communication.
- A tailored approach that addresses the obstacles faced by the network will help to create a clear path of communication for members and the network as a whole.

When Should a Network Create a Communication Plan?



- Networks are built on a foundation of shared ideas and communication.
 - A structured plan for network communication should be developed in conjunction with the formation of the network.
- Small networks can depend on telephone and e-mail communication to meet the needs of a small membership pool.
- It is critical in the early stages of network development that leaders are planning for increased communication needs and what that may consist of.
 - As networks grow, there will be a need for secure webpages, multi-day conferences, and a means to share and archive data.
 - This takes planning, regular maintenance, and designated hours/staff.



How to Build a Network Communications Plan



“The more intentional you are about planning for network capacities and building network infrastructure, the more rapidly and more effectively your network will evolve. Too many network organizers discover, rather than anticipate, the necessity of this work. Instead, develop 3-6 month plans for implementing the essential weaving, internal communications, coordination, and other capacities the network will inevitably need.” (USDN Guidebook 2.0)

- Assess your network’s stage of development and current communication needs.
- Identify the direction you would like the network to go, and determine the best way to keep members connected.
- Identify potential obstacles that the network faces with member communication.
- Be realistic about your capacity. Predictable and consistent is more important than quantity.





Discussion



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)?



Discussion Cont.



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?

A background graphic consisting of a network of blue circles of varying sizes connected by thin, light blue lines, creating a complex web-like structure.

Thank you!

For more information, please contact:

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Appendix:

Example Member Survey

Example Member Survey: 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?

Example Member Survey: Heartland Network Kickoff Start-Up Survey Cont.

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?