



COMMUNICATING FOUNDATIONS
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COMMUNICATING FOUNDATIONS

In 1997 The Commonwealth Fund undertook an analysis of foundation communication programs, to help inform deliberations by the Fund's Board of Directors on the foundation's own communications activities. The findings provide lessons of importance to all foundations seeking to help inform influential audiences on public policy issues and best practices in their fields

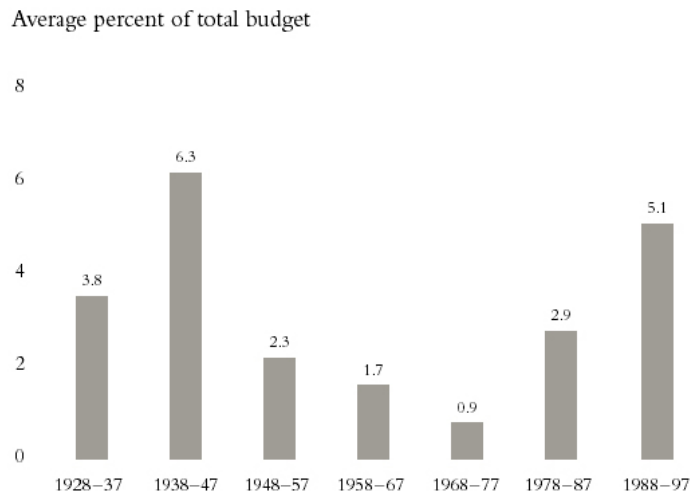
Why Foundations Communicate

The Commonwealth Fund has historically been a communicating foundation. Indeed, a commitment to communicating the results of its work to audiences in a position to improve health care practice and policy has been one of the Fund's consistent distinguishing features. During the foundation's first 30 years, its publications division became a significant communications franchise in the field of health policy and practice, producing a widely read quarterly newsletter, a long list of respected books, and scores of articles in professional journals. The Fund has devoted substantial effort in recent years to assuring that its communications activities keep pace with the times and achieve programmatic goals.

Many foundations devote only limited resources to communications. Others, like the Fund, which work actively on national and international problems, tend to see communications as a natural and essential extension of their grants programs, for some of the following reasons:

- Foundations that commit themselves to analyzing issues and identifying best practices, testing new service programs, and preparing future leaders in fields where improvements are needed are in the information business. Their task is not completed until the results of their work are in the hands of those able to act upon them.
- To receive the attention they deserve, the findings of researchers and innovators frequently benefit from restatement for policy and public audiences, synthesis to reveal the cumulative weight of disparate efforts, and distribution through sophisticated systems. Individual grantees may be inadequately equipped to carry out such work, but foundations can develop the resources, skills, and networks to do so. Foundations can also maintain a capacity to experiment with new communications technologies and methods.

Communications share of The Commonwealth Fund's total budget, by decade, 1928–97

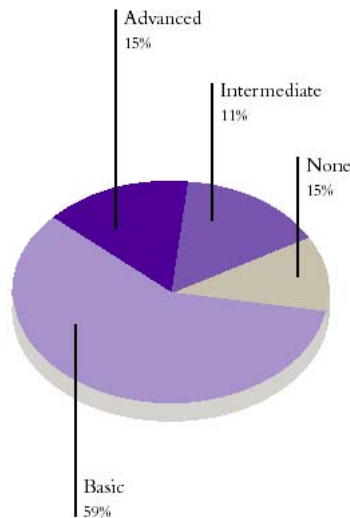


- Foundations are well suited for bringing together experts, policymakers, and opinion leaders to study issues and work toward consensus on solutions. The effectiveness of the convening function —whether carried out through commissions and task forces or symposia and policy briefings — depends heavily on communications skills.
- Foundations with ambitious national and international agendas owe the public an accurate accounting of their activities. A skilled communications staff helps to ensure the clarity and competence of a foundation's reporting of its own work and that of its grantees. Responding to requests for information in a timely, factual way is also regarded as an important service obligation by foundations like the Fund.

The Extent of Foundation Communications

In January 1997, the Fund commissioned a comparative study of communications programs at American foundations as part of a review of its own communications activities. The goals of the study were to assess the state of the art in foundation communications and stimulate thinking about the Fund's strategy and activities. The study had two major components: a survey of the 95 largest foundations regarding their communications activities and a set of case studies based on extensive interviews with communications officers and other executives at foundations sharing characteristics with the Fund. The study findings, summarized here, are likely to be of interest to foundations that are already active communicators and of use to those assessing their communications responsibilities and potential.¹

¹ Julia Vitullo-Martin and John E. Craig, Jr., *How Foundations Communicate*, The Commonwealth Fund, July 1997.



Foundations are not driven by the usual motivations to communicate: they do not need to be famous, nor do they need to raise money. Very few of the country's approximately 8,000 foundations with significant assets do serious communications work. Indeed, 15 percent of the 95 largest foundations do not even publish an annual report. Another 59 percent carry out basic communications only, publishing an annual report, grant releases, brochures on programs, and occasional press releases. Eleven percent conduct intermediate-level communications activities, publishing the basic products — sometimes in sophisticated formats — as well as program announcements and other occasional materials, such as simple newsletters. Some foundations in this group provide engaging information on their programs, but they are not proactive in working with policymakers and the media.

Only 15 percent of the 95 largest foundations do advanced communications work, pursuing proactive agendas in addition to basic and intermediate activities. These more advanced communicators seek to build personal contacts with journalists and policymakers, reach audiences through radio and television, and publish results of their work more regularly through such vehicles as report series or quarterlies.

A limited number of foundations outside the top 95 organizations are known to be serious communicators. Even so, the total number of foundations engaged in intermediate and advanced communications is almost certainly fewer than 100, and the number attempting advanced communications is probably fewer than 25. As a group, the 95 largest foundations report that they allocate only .7 percent of their budgets to communications. Actual spending on communications is somewhat higher, as some foundations fund communications through grants to other organizations; but even after correcting for underreporting, the share of all communications activities sponsored by large foundations cannot be much above 1 percent. The average communications office employs 1.6 staff members, and among the top foundations, 57 have no communications staff.

Why Some Foundations Choose Not to Communicate

In short, communications is not necessarily a fundamental tool of the foundation trade, and a basic approach to communications has historically been considered sufficient and appropriate for foundations. The following arguments delineate the majority view:

- Most foundations view their business as primarily or even exclusively grantmaking. Once they have distributed funds, most foundations regard communications as the grantee's job.
- Communications creates a strong potential for involvement in policy debates, against which there exists a general bias in the foundation community. Foundations tend to leave policy issues to those on the front lines, partly in recognition of their own privileged position but also because few foundations are professionally staffed with experts in the relevant professional fields.
- The political perils of being in the public eye can be substantial. The dangers were revealed most compellingly in the 1969 congressional hearings on the tax exempt status of foundations — which led to the adoption of broad new regulations on foundation activities — and more recently in a spate of articles in the print media criticizing foundations that work and communicate in policy fields.
- Few foundation presidents are polished communicators. Presidents are hired for other talents, with communications considered as an afterthought, if at all.
- A commitment to communications creates internal conflicts and stresses, particularly regarding staff skills and priorities. This no doubt explains a tendency among foundations to shy away from adding communications as a second “line of business.”
- Communications can be expensive, sometimes diverting resources away from more traditional grantmaking. High costs can cause not only internal stress but external problems as well, since a foundation's credibility derives primarily from its grantmaking capacity.

Indeed, an affirmative approach to communications can be demanding and troublesome for a foundation that has not developed clear objectives for its communications activities — objectives that should ideally be tied to the foundation's larger grantmaking goals.

Lessons for Effective Foundation Communications

Case studies of eight foundations — the Ford Foundation, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, the Annie E. Casey Foundation, Carnegie Corporation, the Edna McConnell

Clark Foundation, The Commonwealth Fund, the Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation, and the Twentieth Century Fund — examined a group of institutions that for much of their histories have set aside these arguments. Indeed, these organizations have been leaders in creating a different model, one in which grantmaking and communications are bound seamlessly together in advancing each foundation’s mission.

The case studies reveal that the world of foundation communications is immensely diverse, and that foundation strategies and activities are influenced heavily by traditions, experience, program focus, and the skills of chief executives and communications staffs. Tools used by the eight foundations include highly developed, targeted publications programs to disseminate the results of program grants; presidential speaking agendas; assertive media outreach, including national press events and meetings with prominent journalists; availability to journalists to comment on new developments in the foundation’s fields; editorial board meetings; op-ed pieces in top tier newspapers; policy briefings and invited testimony on policy issues in Washington; television and radio work, emphasizing appearances on topical news shows; advanced Internet web sites, enabling rapid dissemination to and feedback from audiences; and funding of documentaries and public events to improve understanding of issues.

The survey and case studies suggest the following conclusions about the state of the art of foundation communications:

- The foundations that communicate assertively are those that see their domain as public policy and their mission as helping to inform public debates. A communications focus is particularly likely and appropriate for a national foundation operating in an area such as health care, where federal policies are a dominating influence and where sound foundation strategies must take into account trends and developments in public policy.
- The ability to communicate effectively is enhanced by a foundation’s having a well-defined policy arena. If the foundation is very large, the arena can be rather broad if the communications techniques are carefully honed. Smaller foundations working in many policy fields arguably have less impact in a particular arena than would be the case if their work were more narrowly focused.
- A foundation needs to know its audience and who matters to its work, then target its communications accordingly. Policy-oriented foundations need to focus closely on the information needs of legislators, government agency staff, opinion makers, and academic policy researchers. All successful communicators devote considerable resources to developing targeted mailing and contact lists and keeping them up to date.

- Focus is as important in communications as in program strategy. Successful foundations concentrate upon a limited number of techniques that have worked well for them. Very large foundations can mount a wider array of communications activities than can mid-size ones, but even a very large foundation benefits by selecting a few approaches in which it has a comparative advantage through its history and the personal qualities and strengths of its chief executive.
- Communications is fundamentally a chief executive function. Foundations that communicate well have chief executives who are committed to communicating as a key element of their jobs. Generally, executives who communicate well were hired in part for this quality, although a number of foundation presidents today participate in media training, and several have been able to upgrade their skills substantially.
- The communications director needs regular and open access to the chief executive. This is particularly important if the foundation intends to become more assertive in communications.
- Because communications is so naturally a chief executive function, it is rare for a foundation's primary communicator to be the director of communications. Communications directors of major foundations, however, must be able to command respect in their own right. Otherwise, they struggle to get access to opinion makers before having a chance to get their message across.
- Despite the rapid and continuing emergence of new media, publications remain basic to foundation communications. Publications must be carefully designed to meet the needs of the target audience. The publications unit should be staffed by people with high levels of expertise in design, editing, and production.
- Tension about allocation of resources between program and communications activities can be serious in all but the largest foundations. The plethora of new communications technologies, paired with institutional inclinations to hold on to old ones, can only increase these tensions. Close integration of program and communications work, however, facilitates sound decision making, as does viewing communications not as a separate activity but as a programmatic, action-oriented approach for advancing a foundation's mission.

- Communications budgets are defined by strategies and require strong management. The survey and case studies uncovered remarkable range both in the amount of money allocated for communications and in how that money is spent. In an enterprise where the menu of possible activities is almost limitless and outcomes are difficult to measure, communications staff must be strong project managers, disposed to making choices, negotiating skillfully, and purchasing wisely.
- Every major foundation must consider carefully what to do when hostile media comes calling. Several prominent foundations have experienced recent critiques in the press, and many communications directors develop in advance a strategy for responding to criticism.
- Measuring results and the effectiveness of communications work is difficult, but such measurements can be helpful in guiding strategy. All eight case study foundations wrestle with the question of how to measure the results of their communications activities. Rudimentary tracking systems — for publications mailings and requests, Internet web page visits, media coverage, or attendance at briefings — should be maintained to provide basic information on the size and character of the audiences being reached. Electronic on-line searches to quantify media citations of foundation-sponsored work are now readily available; skillfully employed, these can be used to assess immediate and continuing coverage of specific communications efforts, as well as the foundation's overall identity. Foundations should also periodically survey their target audiences to obtain feedback on the utility of their publications, other public information products, and events. Finally, periodic comprehensive review of the communications program provides an opportunity for fruitful debate on strategy, examination of operating practices, and broader qualitative assessment of effectiveness.

The survey and case studies reveal that a very small number of influential foundations, including The Commonwealth Fund, are in the vanguard of foundation communications. The examples they are setting not only advance their own missions but are likely to stimulate other foundations to reexamine their traditional practices and look for new opportunities made possible by the communications revolution.