

- Robert G:** We put together a communications plan but I'm not sure what happened?
- Lisa M:** What do you mean?
- Robert G:** Well I'm not sure we communicated very well.
- Lisa M:** Didn't the plan identify all your communication requirements?
- Robert G:** I thought it did. But in the end we overlooked some people, gave too much to others and completely missed some good opportunities. I wonder what we could have done better.
- Lisa M:** Did it really impact your project?
- Robert G:** It did. There were some key people we didn't get on board in time. I know what we implemented is a really great product but people didn't see that immediately.
- Lisa M:** Wow. I didn't think a communications plan was that important. I thought it was just something you did because of methodology. Guess I was wrong.
- Robert G:** Yea...learn from my mistake.

The conversation above illustrates what many projects face. A team creates a communications plan but fails to give it proper time and attention.

Launching a new application, deploying a major upgrade, or even releasing a simple modification can disrupt our users' normal operating environment. We need to minimize this disruption and can do so by developing a good communications plan.

Sometimes we underestimate the value of good plan. So consider this - a well designed plan can make a significant difference in how customers receive our applications.

A Tale From My Crypt

In the early 90s, a major software company released a new version of its word processing tool. It was a major upgrade with an expansive set of new functionality. But after my desktop was upgraded I was very angry. I thought the company had overdone it. I said, and I quote myself, "Why can't they leave well enough alone. They're over thinking it."

It took some time for me to get used to the new tool. Although a packaged software with a world wide release is a much bigger undertaking than what we're doing in our companies, I always felt like maybe I wasn't prepared for the changes

that came with the upgraded tool. It left me with a bad opinion about the product and the company. It was an opinion what would last for many years.

We can't rely on the laurels of our system's great functionality. Even what seems like the easiest tool in the world can be frustrating if people weren't aware it was coming, have no idea how to access or use it, and/or can't make a natural leap to how to apply it to their daily life.

We don't want a bad reputation within our user community. However, this is what will potentially happen if we don't take care to prepare them for the upcoming changes. A communications plan helps prepare our users and is part of building a relationship with them.

A Communications Plan Defined

A communications plan helps you clearly identify who you want to inform about your application, what you want to tell them, why they need to know, when you want them to know and how you want to tell them. It's a written roadmap for informing and promoting your application.

It sounds simple and this is probably why most people approach it with minimal seriousness. Some projects completely forget about the plan launching

forward with all other project activities and addressing communications at the last minute.

A well thought out plan helps identify questions you may otherwise forget to ask. Questions such as:

- “Is there a group we’re forgetting to inform? “
- “Are there people or groups who can help champion the change?”
- “Are there people or groups who should be communicated to earlier than others?”
- “ Are there other methods of communication we can use besides the obvious ones?”
- “Are there upcoming venues we can take advantage of?”

Without the guidance of a good communications plan we may forget to ask such questions.

The Value of a Good Plan

There is a direct relationship between perception, acceptance and communications. A good plan helps drive the perception and acceptance of our application. Our level of communications can help shape how are users perceive the value of the new application and if they perceive good value they are more accepting of the application.

Our communications plan can be thought of as the marketing strategy for our applications. A good marketing plan can deliver several benefits including, 1) building long-lasting relationships with

our customers, 2) building our credibility and 3) minimizing disruption for our users.

Quick Tips

Here are some quick tips to use as you begin to think about preparing your communications plan.

Follow a methodology

If you don’t have an in-house methodology, research one. The internet is full of ideas. I’d recommend doing this even if you do have a methodology. You may find some techniques that will improve upon you company’s methodology.

Do the plan early

Most methodologies suggest doing a plan as part of your initial project plan design.

Unfortunately, this is usually after we’ve got budget dollars already identified. If possible, I also recommend doing a quick draft of a plan as part of your budgetary analysis. This allows you to give

early thought to what funds you may need to help with communications and you can include those funds in your budget request proposal.

Use your customer

Let a few of your users see your plan. They’re in the trenches and can help identify some areas you may miss. You may also be able to see early champions. These are people you can use to help promote communications about your application.

Spend time on your communications plan and you’ll see the payoff with fewer users sighing (our outright complaining about your application.

A good plan helps drive the perception and acceptance of our application.