# Overall Communication Plan: Strategic Considerations

## Purpose

To increase the chances that people (e.g., consumers or key audiences such as pregnant women, people with diabetes, new employees, or newcomers to your community) know about your public report and use it for decisionmaking, your Collaborative will need to communicate key messages multiple times through multiple channels. The purpose of an Overall Communication Plan is to help your Collaborative clarify its communication goals and related strategies and activities, then implement that plan to effectively promote the public report.

## Considerations

**Communication Is Essential But Not Simple.** There is no value in producing a public report comparing health care quality if no one knows about it and if they do not know that variation in health care quality is a problem they should be concerned about. People need to know about variation in care and why it matters and learn about your public report before they can use it to make more informed health care decisions. Thus, engaging in communication is an *essential* part of the public reporting process.

Challenges associated with coordinated communication to promote a public report typically include the following:

* **Community collaboratives often have ambitious goals with aggressive work plans, yet operate with limited financial resources and a small number of staff people.** A coordinated plan will help ensure that communication activities support important goals of the Collaborative, clarify who will engage in each activity, and help with prioritizing to ensure best use of limited time and money. This approach can extend your communication reach by working with and through members and allies of your Collaborative.
* **What, when, and how to communicate about a public report need to fit the unique circumstances in that local area.** Communication plans need to reflect your local market and Collaborative structure, stage of report development, public report content, opinion leaders’ attitudes about performance measurement and reporting, and other current events and issues. Each region has many potential topics and angles for promoting a public report and weaving messages about that public report into communication about external events and activities. An effective coordinated communication plan should be customized to fit your Collaborative.
* **Reporters tend to look for controversy or conflict in news stories as a way to grab the audience’s attention.** In contrast, the collaborative model to improving health care quality may be more successful with positive, inclusive messages (e.g., “Everyone can learn from this report” or “We all have room to improve” or “Each of us has a role in helping to improve health care quality”). Reporters may prefer divisive angles or approaches such as: “Look up who is below average” or “Use this report to avoid bad doctors or hospitals” or “Dr. Jones thinks this public report is wrong/harmful to patient care.” Smart communication involves developing and using shared key messages about the public report, cultivating trusted leaders in your community to be credible spokespeople, and working with reporters to reveal interesting news angles that do not conflict with the goals of your Collaborative.

With careful planning, such communication challenges can be managed. You will need to think through your goals and objectives, as well as related strategies and specific activities. In other words, to reduce the risk associated with the challenges above, engage in coordinated communication planning, customize your approach, and collaborate on the message.

**Opportunities To Promote Your Public Report Are Everywhere.** As you consider ways to raise awareness of your public report, think of ways to use community activities and events to discuss the relevant content of your public report, key milestones associated with producing your public report that are worthy of announcing to show continued progress, and potential allies who can help spread the word about your public report. For example:

* Community activities and events present many opportunities to market your public report. Tap into the monthly national campaigns to raise awareness about certain health topics. If your report addresses heart disease or cardiac care, for example, work with the local chapter of the American Heart Association to ensure that their announcements or events in February mention your public report as an important resource to ensure that local patients get quality heart care. To spur your thinking about how to make the most of such opportunities, see the strategy for Opportunistic Marketing (Toolkit Resource 2a) and the list of national events and observances (Toolkit Resource 2b).
* Your Collaborative’s work plan can be used to identify internal milestones that could be the topic of announcements to the media, other opinion leaders (e.g., your member organizations, elected officials), and your community via emailed newsletters and social media. Such announcements may not make the evening news but are important in showing the progress your Collaborative is making. Examples might include signing agreements with key partners, securing a major grant, completing validation of data or first-round results, starting quality improvement work that complements your public report and, publishing an updated version of your public report.
* Many professionals communicate about health in your region. Consider expanding the notion of media and reporters to include not only people associated with newspapers, radio, and TV, but also those who write for health-related Web sites and blogs, as well as communication staff within State medical associations, State hospital associations, large employers, health plans, and community groups. The partner organizations who support and participate in your Collaborative can also be a great resource for your communication activities. Many have Web sites, plus newsletters to employees and customers or members, in which they could share information about your public report. Some engage in activities, such as wellness fairs, that present a natural setting for promoting your public report. Review the resources in this Communication Toolkit for more ideas and templates to help you make the most of potential communication partners.

**It’s Never Too Soon To Start Your Coordinated Communication.** Even if you do not yet publish a public report, there is value in building awareness about the need for performance measurement, accountability, and shared information about health care in your region. Too many people continue to be unaware of quality problems in health care. Communicating about the problem can:

* Expand awareness of the need for the products and services of your Collaborative.
* Build anticipation for the public report that your Collaborative is developing.
* Create opportunities for announcements from your Collaborative along the way: progress made, milestones accomplished, and discussion of tradeoffs and reasons behind decisions made in the process.
* Increase communitywide discussion about health care quality and the performance measurement and public reporting process, which can result in better mutual understanding and trust in the collaborative process (and eventually trust in your public report).

The Overall Coordinated Communication Plan template (Resource 1b) can help you think through effective ways to promote your public report, with particular emphasis on coordinated approaches to media relations.