

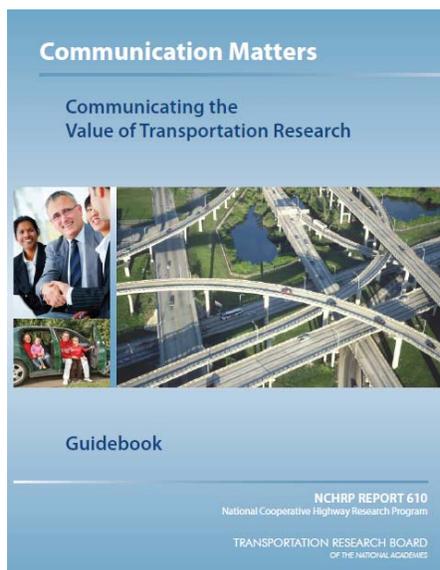
Value of Research Task Force

Tools and Methods to Communicate the Value of Transportation Research

In today's pervasive online environment, each state transportation department – including its research group – can be its own newsroom. You can customize your message for audiences without depending on the filter of traditional media for distribution. A state transportation research division can leverage the power of its agency's overall brand or public image to tell the world about the benefits they are providing. If you have a website, you are in the news business and can “communicate the value of research.”

Before you start posting your news on the Web, you need a plan. That's where your agency's communication or public affairs department comes in. Work with that group to develop a communication plan and to determine your messaging strategies.

The communications staff will help you integrate your message within the overall voice of your agency and find the newsworthy items to attract media attention. Communications professionals can guide you as you determine the goals, messages, audiences and tools for your program.



These tips – creating a communication plan and using your communicators – are discussed in the recent [NCHRP Report 610](#), “Communications Matters – Communicating the Value of Transportation Research.”

Here are the primary media platforms for getting the message out:

- Print – newspaper, newsletters, magazines
- Broadcast – television and radio
- Internet – websites for traditional media outlets, news aggregators, organization websites
- Social media – Twitter, Flickr, Facebook, YouTube

Print media should still be taken seriously. While newspaper circulation across the nation has been declining, niche, community and trade publications serving unique audiences and regions are holding their own or growing. We still rely on traditional news media – print and broadcast – to provide timely news, which is routinely picked up by new and old media.

Today's media consumers have countless sources of information bombarding them for attention. They demand short, concise pieces, and the press knows it. A well-written news release used to make the difference of a story getting ink, but news editors and producers, for example, now want a two-line intro to the information and, if possible, a video clip. Even newspapers have staff to produce videos for their websites. And since newspapers have found they can survive in electronic formats on the Web, those sites still must be updated several times a day to keep up with other Internet information providers.

Social media may be attracting a lot of attention, but it's no substitute for solid, newsworthy content that can tell your story in other more stable formats. However, state transportation departments and the federal government are now using social media to draw in their audiences (consumers) to information in lengthier formats that can be archived on the Web for longer use.



Using social media can enhance your brand by connecting with your audiences on sites such as Facebook and Twitter, as well as through blogs. If your DOT is announcing new research results or a new service, social media can connect your message with your audiences and increase your reach. Some research reports have titles that are nearly 140 characters long – the maximum length of a Twitter tweet. But you can say in an agency tweet, for example, “DOT researchers post benefits of environmentally friendly warm-mix asphalt; it saves money, too – more info, report on our website.”

Many state transportation departments are using various social media to get their message out over various platforms. Here are a couple of examples:

- The Missouri Department of Transportation (MoDOT) has been incorporating social media for the past couple of years. MoDOT staff produces the “MoDOT Minute,” a weekly broadcast highlighting transportation news affecting its customers. It also produces a weekly podcast featuring MoDOT Director Kevin Keith addressing transportation issues. For more information, see <http://www.modot.org/emodot/>.



- The Virginia Department of Transportation (VDOT) uses social media strategically to inform its audiences of news from other sources about the agency, provide 511 traffic updates through Twitter feeds and direct users to various services and information on its website. VDOT’s YouTube site offers timely information on seasonal weather issues (snow, hurricanes), customer service and news on major projects. For more information, see www.virginiadot.org.



News organizations monitor social media feeds on such government websites as another source of information. They also can use agency photos from Flickr and videos from YouTube videos posts (with proper credits). Cuts in budgets mean newsroom staffs depend on state DOTs to fill the gap on the creative side as well.

Good content – telling your story – is paramount to breaking through the clutter. As previously noted, since consumers have so many competing sources from which they can receive their news, communicators must create new and interesting content using a variety of channels to capture their audience’s attention.

Recycling evergreen content is the best way to get information out across various platforms. For example, information posted project pages on websites can also be used for project fact sheets. This information might have already been used as a news release announcing a new innovation. The information then can feed brochures, quarterly newsletters and annual reports. All of these products can be archived for reference on the agency website – for example, the quarterly reports page on the VDOT website.

When it comes to the type of products you choose to use, shorter and timelier content is better than longer and older. News releases, project briefs, e-newsletters and websites that can be produced quickly and cost effectively will all get your message out to your various audiences. Ultimately, the more conversations your communicators can ignite through good storytelling, the more likely your message will be heard.

New media have created new opportunities and challenges for communicators. Reaching our target audiences today is becoming easier – and more difficult – with the emergence of new communication channels. New social media platforms that link to mobile marketing devices make it easier to engage with more diverse, niche audiences. However, keeping abreast of these new opportunities requires organizations to dedicate more staff time, training and resources to using these media effectively. Economic realities mean that some organizations do not have the additional staff or resources and are asking communicators to do more with less and still outpace their competition.