

Session title: Is it Gobbledygook? Using Plain Language to Make Your Public Materials Understandable

Moderator/Panelists:

Don Main, Manager, Communications, Elections BC

Betsy Byers, Director of Business Services, Missouri Ethics Commission

John Schaaf, Counsel, Kentucky Legislative Ethics Commission
Don Main, directeur des communications, Élections Colombie-Britannique

Matt Sollars, replacing Elizabeth Upp

Date and time: Monday December 9 2013, 15:30 pm

Rapporteur: Audrée Ross

Session Summary

The goal of the presentation was to provide conference participants with tools to make their public statements more effective and more easily understood by the general public.

To this end, managers must keep in mind that information has to be conveyed using the fewest possible words and sentences, given that the general public has a limited amount of time to read it. Information must also be presented in simple terms. Betsy Byers suggests keeping in mind that a child in fifth grade should be able to understand the message. It is thus preferable to keep the level of communication as simple as possible, while ensuring that the explanation of legal obligations remains clear and comprehensible. It is crucial to have a strong sense of one's target audience.

According to Matt Sollars, using social media is one of the best ways to ascertain whether or not the communication process has had the desired effect. People's reactions and their understanding of the message can be verified, and they can be set straight if necessary. On the other hand, using social media is not a simple matter for public agencies; on the contrary, it is something of a challenge.

Managers should also use simple and colourful charts and graphs rather than large, heavy tables, and photos should be added if an explanation needs completing.

It is important to build a relationship with one's public. The more the public gets to know you through your communications, the more you become a known commodity in the public mind and the more you earn their trust. Sometimes it will be worth your while to seek the assistance of an outside communications firm.

Lastly, it is recommended that you conduct surveys. You should not hesitate to ask other employees who are not part of the project for their opinion concerning your communications. This is an excellent way of improving the organization's communication strategy.

In conclusion, the panelists stated that to communicate successfully one needs to be clear, simple, brief, legible, and focused on the reader, with whom one wishes to establish a relationship.

They also identified certain invaluable resources for managers: style guides, online resources, the opinion of their employees, collaborative work with other jurisdictions, and the use of appropriate software.

In order to communicate effectively, three elements are key: the information to be communicated, the target public, and quality packaging.