

February 2017

COMMUNICATIONS GUIDE

FOR STATE DEPARTMENTS OF TRANSPORTATION



AMERICAN ASSOCIATION
OF STATE HIGHWAY AND
TRANSPORTATION OFFICIALS

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A WORD TO THE CEO

As a state department of transportation (DOT) Chief Executive, you know how important it is to communicate effectively with stakeholders and the public. Chances are you rely on your communications director to talk to the media, help “put out fires,” and manage department communications on a day-to-day basis. This guide is intended to help you and your communications unit:

- Develop a strategic framework and strategy for internal and external communications while identifying audiences and the appropriate messages and format for each.
- Utilize social media to engage customers “where they are”—increasingly, on mobile devices and at all hours. As customers move to new media, they expect government agencies to do the same.
- Tell the story of your DOT’s performance and its accomplishments in new and compelling ways. DOTs are under closer scrutiny from policy makers, stakeholders, taxpayers, and the public. Communications can help answer these growing demands for accountability.
- Create your own “newsroom” within the DOT and provide videos and other timely information to the media or directly to engaged customers.
- Improve employee engagement with a first-rate internal communications program that accounts for a diverse workforce including field staff.
- Achieve an integrated approach to all public-facing communications so messages are consistent—even across regions/districts.
- Develop or refresh the DOT “brand” and better communicate your mission to the public and stakeholders.

To be effective, your communications team needs to be led by a strong individual—and that person needs your ear and your support. He or she can serve as a trusted resource, advisor, strategist, and problem-solver—while setting a strategic framework for day-to-day messaging. This guide, based on national research, is intended to help your communications leader succeed in a changing and often challenging environment. You may find it of interest as well.

INTRODUCTION

A strong communications practice is essential to the operations of state departments of transportation (DOTs). Over time, it can help build trust among the agency's stakeholders, improve public understanding of the DOT's mission, and generate public support.

To be effective, a DOT communications team needs a strong leader, typically called communications director; the support of top management; and a skilled staff prepared to take on diverse tasks in a changing environment. Every DOT, however, is different. Some communications units lead almost all public-facing aspects of the department, from media relations and safety communications to project outreach and community relations, while in other DOTs some of these functions are handled separately by other divisions within the department.

Many DOTs have a decentralized, regional approach to communications, while others base their operations at headquarters. Other differences are due to variations in overall DOT functions. Some DOTs are mainly responsible for highways and others also oversee transit operations, airports, and motor vehicle services, each requiring different communications programs. The size of DOT communications units also varies widely.

Despite these differences in organization, size, and function, DOT communicators revealed in a nationwide survey and in dozens of interviews many common challenges, such as:

- What are the best ways to maximize the effectiveness of staff and funding resources?
- What are the best applications of new media tools as it relates to the core functions of the DOT?
- What are the best strategies to monitor performance and enhance the agency's public image?
- What are the most effective structure, organization, and reporting relationships for communications units?

This document discusses these issues and presents practices that DOTs are using to address these and other common challenges. As a general guide and toolkit (rather than a comprehensive manual), it covers effective ways to staff, strategize, and implement communications functions

and programs at a DOT, along with ways to analyze and strengthen current programs. The guide is intended as a resource for all DOTs, regardless of the size or structure of their communications units. It includes information targeted to communications directors and will also be of value to agency heads and communications staff.

The first national guidance on this topic in more than 20 years, the guide is based on research on the current state of the communications practice at state DOTs. The research, presented in a separate report, included a survey of all state DOT communications units, interviews with selected DOT Chief Executive Officers (CEOs) and division directors, case studies, a review of customer satisfaction surveys from all DOTs and an examination of each state's DOT website. In addition, the research included a review of emerging communications practices in the private sector, providing insight into effective approaches that may be of value to DOTs going forward.

This guide addresses topics such as:

- Recommended staff roles and skill sets for today's DOT communications unit
- Best practices for communications planning and performance measurement
- Achieving a coordinated approach across DOT districts or regions
- Tips for operating with a small staff, building a department, hiring staff, and working with consultants
- Communicating effectively with DOT employees, including field staff
- Effective use of social media, videography, and other digital communications

Throughout the guide the reader will find "In Practice" sidebars—brief discussions of specific topics and examples of successful approaches in use by DOTs today.

Today's DOT communications landscape is complex. It includes diverse audiences along with traditional and new media tools to reach customers. Striking the right balance to efficiently and effectively communicate with members of the public is vital to customer safety and satisfaction and will help enhance the image of each DOT. It is hoped that this guide will help DOTs achieve that balance and experience success.