

# Communicating Your Story

Tools and strategies for connecting with your supporters  
by Amy Walters

*“The stories we hear, read, or watch affect the worldview we adopt. This is why Plato wanted to ban the poets from the schools . . . He recognized the stories of the poets as more powerful than logical argumentation in developing worldview and character . . . Rather than banning the use of a most effective means, we must reclaim it for the good.” -Dr. Thayer Salisbury*

## **The Purpose of Missionary Communication**

Before we launch into the mechanics of communicating with supporters, we first need to establish a strong foundation for why we communicate. Is it because missionaries have always sent out prayer letters? Or because your mom wants to know how things are going? Or because it serves as a brain-dump, allowing you to process your thoughts?

Below are what I consider to be the main purposes of missionary communication:

- Keep supporters informed about your ministry
- Solicit prayer
- Provide accountability
- Request money
- Mobilize more people into missions
- Educate your supporters about missions

These purposes should guide the content of your communication.

## **Communication Format**

There are many possible formats available for communication, from hardcopy newsletters to blogs, from eblasts to videos uploaded to YouTube. Deciding which is best for supporters depends heavily on five factors.

1. **Distribution** – How will you deliver your communication? What are the costs for the possible distribution methods? Is the distribution process complicated?
2. **Security** – Is there sensitive information in your communication that needs to be protected? Who will have access to your communication? Should access be limited?
3. **Access** – Do your supporters have easy access to your communication or do they have to hunt for it? Can elderly supporters easily find and read it? Can just anybody access your communication and does that diminish your supporters' sense that they are on your special team?
4. **Readability** – Does the format of your communication make it easier or harder to read?

5. **Assembly** – How much time, effort and money does it take to create your communication? Does the amount effort needed outweigh the benefits of that form of communication?

### **Some Considerations:**

For those who choose to send out newsletters, it is important to have the right software. Publisher (for PCs) and Pages (for Macs) offer a wide variety of easy to use templates. If you send out your newsletter as an email attachment, save it as a PDF so that most people will be able to open it. Cute PDF writer is a free PDF writing software available online.

For those interested in using an email service, here is a short list of services to consider: Mail Chimp, Constant Contact, Vertical Response, Mad Mimi.

### **Communication Content**

Striking the right balance of information can be difficult—too little and your supporters will feel uninformed and wonder what you are doing, too much and it may be too long (and boring) to read. Here are some general elements that should be in your quarterly updates. (These are not all necessary for prayer updates, brief emails or personal blogs.)

- Title
- Your full name
  - Near the top so it's easy to find
- General date
  - Ex: Spring 2011
  - A general date keeps the content from seeming too old too soon
- SEND logo
  - For IRS and accountability purposes
- One good ministry story
  - It is ok to *occasionally* use support raising stories
- Praise and prayer requests
  - In an easy-to-spot location, easy-to-pray format
  - Bullet points often work best
- Support update
  - A visual cue to what percentage of support you have raised
  - Only use if you refer to your support level in your communication
- Address
  - Both SEND's and your own
- Family news
  - Include family news but don't overdo it—it's not a Christmas letter.
- Pictures
  - Include a caption
  - Do not use pictures that are poor quality
- IRS contributions statement

- **“Contributions are solicited with the understanding that the donee organization has complete discretion and control over the use of all donated funds.”**
- This statement is required on **ALL** communication that requests money

### **Writing Good Stories**

The main focus of your communication should be a ministry story. Stories draw in the readers and make them want to read more. They inspire them to pray and give to your ministry. They encourage supporters or give them a greater sense of urgency for the lost.

Stories are powerful motivators but they are not always easy to come by. Here are some suggestions for collecting stories:

- Keep a notebook of story ideas—things like people you met, events you participated in, or ministries you’re involved in.
- Borrow stories from fellow missionaries. Cite who the story comes from and draw a connection to your ministry.
- Look for cultural stories, fables or proverbs that offer insight into your country’s culture.

### **What Makes a Good Story?**

Even though we tell stories all the time, not all stories get the same response. Below are some keys to what makes a good story.

- **Memorable** – good stories are short and stick in people’s minds. Is your story interesting, compelling, or captivating?
- **Simple** – an important aspect of being memorable is simplicity. Does your story have too many characters or places? Are you trying to make too many different points in your story? Cut them out and simplify.
- **Strong ending** – this does not necessarily mean a good ending. It does mean closure, or if not closure, a teaser that something more is coming.
- **Engaging** – does it draw the reader in? A simple test for engagement is whether or not you like the story. If you don’t like it, your supporters probably won’t either.
- **Purposeful** – Does your story have a purpose? What do you want you readers to do as a result of reading the story? A clear purpose often goes hand in hand with a strong ending.

### **Communication Checklist**

The best story in the world could fall flat if grammar and spelling mistakes distract the reader. Here is a short checklist to go through before sending out your communication.

- Do you have a ministry story?

- ❑ Do you have strategic prayer requests?
- ❑ What's not important? Cut it!
- ❑ Run spell check and grammar again, and again!
- ❑ Make foreign words easy – Use phonetic spelling:  
Wroclaw = FROTZ-wahf  
Ptuj = p-TOO-ee
- ❑ Let someone else read it critically
- ❑ Watch out for anything culturally offensive
- ❑ Set it aside for 24 hours and then edit it for thought and content

### **Start Writing**

Effective communication connects your supporters to you and your ministry. It is necessary for maintaining the partnership and inspiring a new generation of missionaries. Do it well!

If you have questions or want some advice or input, contact Amy Walters in the Media Department of the US Office, [awalters@send.org](mailto:awalters@send.org).

### **Resources**

Givens, Elizabeth, *Writing What People Will Read*, class notes.

Morton, Scott, *Funding Your Ministry*, Dawson Media, Colorado Springs, 1999.

Tucker, David, *Speak Up!*, class notes.