



The Art of Strategic Communications

Laurie T. Schell*

Creative Generation; Nashville, TN, USA

abstract:

'Strategic communications' is a term describing an intentional and targeted messaging plan that is linked to overarching goals. This article places strategic communications in the context of arts and cultural education. It describes a framework for creating communications plans, guiding questions for engaging in different types of communications, a glossary of terms, and provides examples of effective strategic communications tactics used in campaigns to advance arts and cultural education. The fourth article in the series, the ideas inform advocacy of self, field, sector, and justice and are most enhanced when applied both to the individual and the collectives assembled to advance arts and cultural education.

keywords:

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*Laurie T. Schell is founder of Elevate Arts Ed and a Sr. Specialist, Content & Training with Creative Generation; laurie@elevateartsed.org.

As part of our commitment to authentically engaged learning, this article has been formatted to encourage critical dialogue with the text. Throughout, there are numerous spaces to write, draw, or otherwise reflect while reading the text.

Introduction

Strategic communications is a term describing an intentional and targeted messaging plan that is linked to overarching goals. It sits at the heart of advocacy success. Like much of our practice as art-makers, communicating requires a creative process.

The art of communicating seeks to engage effectively with targeted audiences in order to move decision makers through the use of mainstream, social, new and paid media. Bodies of research have shown (De Fond 2015, Kania *et al* 2016) that whether you are preparing a policy agenda at the state level, or a budget request at the local level, being strategic in your communications efforts is essential to achieving advocacy success.

Throughout the preceding articles within *Case-making and Systems Change in Arts & Cultural Education*, I have shared ideas to help practitioners locate themselves, their roles, their voices, and their power within an

ecosystem of advocacy for arts and cultural education. This article focuses primarily in the space of *Advocacy for Field*, and becomes more tactical, specifically about communications. These ideas about strategic communications can inform our advocacy of self, field, sector, and justice, but are most enhanced when applied both to ourselves and the collectives we assemble to advance advocacy work.

I was first introduced to the idea of strategic communications in 2007 when leading a campaign to secure \$105 million for arts education in the California state budget. Social and online media was in its infancy in 2007: Blackberrys still existed, and iPhones weren't that smart. The size of your listserv was a measure of how effective your communications might be. It was a different time from today.

At one point in the campaign, I got a call from Governor Schwarzenegger's communications chief to be "ready to go to the mattresses." (*Godfather* reference meaning "get ready to go

to war.”) The implication being that we would expand public advocacy efforts by engaging the media and grassroots-level advocates. From this experience, and through many more, I have noted several consistencies – regardless of the evolutions in technology, or sophistication of communications apparatuses. In this article, I will use this example and a powerful contemporary resource to outline the tested tactics which have advanced arts and cultural education through strategic communications.

Decisional Steps

The Smart Chart from Spitfire Strategies¹ is an invaluable planning tool for advocacy purposes - and it's free to the public. Smart Chart 4.0 moves from vision to action, describing the decisional processes along the way. The chart highlights equity and racial justice and incorporates brain research on decision-making.

According to the Spitfire Smart Chart (2021), an advocacy campaign has five major strategic decision steps:

- Decide what the organization wants to do: *What is your goal (e.g., visibility, policy change, budget allocation, etc.)?*

¹ Find more information about this tool here: [SmartChart](#) and the organization here: [Spitfire Strategies](#)

- Identify the context of your work and what you have to work with: *Are you working at the local, state, or national level? What are your assets (e.g., people, revenue, media sources, etc.)?*
- Make strategic choices about your audience and messages: *Who are the ultimate decision makers? Who can carry your message and have an impact on outcomes? What messages will resonate with your intended target audience?*
- Determine high impact activities to reach audiences with messages: *What high value activities will yield the most impact (e.g., personal connections with decisionmakers, high volume grassroots turnout, paid advertising, etc.)?*
- Create measurements of success: *What will success look like (e.g., policy change, greater awareness of an issue, increased number of active advocates, etc.)?*

As advocates for arts and cultural education, we can adopt these same major decision steps and customize our answers among our team of multiple perspectives – think back to my previous article outlining the unique perspectives which can be

unified to holistically craft your advocacy messages: practitioner advocate, field-builder advocate, policy advocate.

Types of Communicatons

In the context of arts and cultural education advocacy, we see three basic types of communications based around specific objectives:

- To build or share knowledge. Research and data studies that add to or reinforce the value and benefits of arts education.
- To create or increase public will. Traditional and new media posts, published articles, podcasts, blogs, videos, photos, etc. that enhance public sentiment regarding the value and benefits of arts education.
- To take action. Concrete calls to action to support advocacy objectives, including support for nonprofits, individual and community engagement, and legislative and budgetary policy.

As you begin to think about the strategic – and artful – nature of communications, consider these guiding questions. See the blue box on the next page for glossary of terms:

What is your role? Are you a messenger, active in broadcasting the message to the

targeted audience? Do you understand the objectives and duration of the campaign? Do you have the tools you need to act in your role as messenger?

How will you build or share knowledge?

Will you amplify a new research study that enhances understanding of the value of the arts within your network along with an added personal story? Will you use public data from the school district or state to help educate decisionmakers in your local context to understand the value as well as the inequities in arts participation?

How will you create public will?

Will you create and amplify good news stories through social media in your communities? Will you engage the media, parents, and community members in gathering good news stories in arts and cultural education?

How will you take action? Will you respond to and amplify calls to action from state and national advocates? Will you write your local, state, and local policymakers? Will you speak at a school board meeting? Will you reach out to your networks?

Glossary of Terms

Strategic communications has a distinct vocabulary. As advocates continue to work and refine their strategic communications, it may be helpful to adopt some common vocabulary. Here are a few of the terms that are useful in creating advocacy campaigns; this list is adapted from Spitfire Strategies (2021):

- **Messengers.** The current advocacy landscape demands multiple messenger voices and channels. You must repeat something 10 times before someone hears it.
- **Duration.** Concrete communications strategies for advocacy campaigns are fairly short term, usually no more than 24 months. These plans are different from (but not unrelated to) your organizational strategic plan.
- **Strategy** drives tactics, not the other way around. It's important to set out the Why (vision) before the How (activities/tactics).
- An **objective** is not simply a restatement of the vision. Beware of vague objectives, such as "increase public awareness." Public awareness is a step on the road to changing behavior, not an end itself. SMART objectives are specific, measurable, attainable, realistic, and time bound.
- **Targeted decision maker(s)** are the people who ultimately make the decision on a specific issue. It's important to know who the decision makers are. Policy issues are most often addressed in the national or state arena. Implementation of specific policies, such as compliance with state graduation requirements, is often a local issue, with the superintendent and school board as the decision makers.
- **Audience** refers to the people who can move your decision maker(s). The audience may be large or very targeted. In the case of the California budget item, the California State PTA with its 1 million members was a critical audience. In working at the local level, school administrators and board members or city councils are key audiences.
- **Positioning or framing** the debate is key to getting a message out that will be heard. Think of frames as a mental shortcut to help make sense of information and guide action. Can you name a values-based frame that will be helpful in your efforts? In the current arts and education climate, we see frames such as "equity," "justice," and "inclusion." (Manuel, n.d.)
- **Message.** In crafting an effective message, "it's not what you want to tell them, it's what they are willing to hear." Test your message with your target audience.

Link Communications Strategies with Goals

The most effective advocacy campaigns succeed when the communications strategies are linked to the overarching goal of the campaign.

In the 2007 campaign for K-12 arts education in California, the goal was to secure dedicated funding for arts education in the state budget. The communications strategies employed were both top/down and bottom/up. Together, we took three approaches:

First, we identified several well-placed advisors and legislators (messengers) at the top levels of government who made the case for the increased budget allocation to their constituents and peers (target audience).

Simultaneously, we mounted a grassroots campaign for local advocates like parents, teachers, and arts patrons (messengers) to contact their legislators (targeted audience) with the budget ask.

Finally, we employed print media, an effective communications ally and messenger to the general public (target audience), with well-placed editorials from key influencers (messengers) in

major newspapers across the state which aligned to the same messages for the increased budget.

Fast forward to the end of the story: the California state budget was approved with ongoing funds of \$105 million for arts education, and an additional one-time \$500 million which was shared with physical education, to be allocated equitably across all districts on a per pupil basis. Categorical funds such as this do not exist today. Though the funding line item didn't last, it gave a substantial boost to the nonprofit that spearheaded the campaign and opened the door to a new conversation among an expanded group of stakeholders about the importance of the arts in education.

To further illustrate this point, I'll reflect on a smaller scale initiative from later in my career: Music Makes Us is a recent example of how use of research and data helped to make the case for increased investment in music education in Metro Nashville Public Schools (MNPS). Music Makes Us is a unique partnership between MNPS, the Mayor's Office and the Nashville community. Since 2012, these

organizations have worked to provide meaningful support for Nashville's public school music programs, with the goal of increasing access, participation, and quality of music education for MNPS students. A research study was published in 2013 titled *Prelude: Music Makes Us Baseline Research Report*. The purpose of the study was to establish a benchmark for Nashville— a picture of students who have been enrolled in middle and high school music and the potential impact of music study on student engagement and academic achievement.

The findings of the study were presented in a public media briefing, to the CMA Foundation (a significant funder of music education), the MNPS Board of Directors, and the Music Makes Us Advisory Council. Findings showed that music participation had a positive impact on several key indicators, including attendance, discipline reports, grade point average, and ACT English and Math scores. It also pointed out the need for continued investments to provide equitable instruction across all schools in the district.

The research study and subsequent communications campaign provided a solid rationale and confidence for district investment in music and the arts

for administrators, funders and the community.

Final Thoughts

Once you have considered your own positionality in the field and harnessed your power as an individual advocate; and after you have identified your own role and (possibly) assembled a team with diverse perspectives; then it is time to think about your strategic communications.

The frameworks described above can be a tool among many that will enable you to be effective and efficient in your strategic communications efforts, and don't forget – it is also an art. Being flexible, adaptable, and generative are essential to your advocacy – and as artists, educators, and creatives of all stripes, that's where we excel.

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Article adapted by the author from "[Communications for Cause](#)" on [ElevateArtsEd](#).



Creative Generation believes that youth create change. We are a values-driven global collective that collaborates with young creatives and those who cultivate their creativity to take local actions towards global changes in pursuit of a more just world. Founded in 2019, Creative Generation operates five signature programs: The Campaign for a Creative Generation, the Institute for Creative Social Transformation,

The Academy for Creative Leadership, the Incubator for Creative Impact, and the Foundation for a Creative Generation. www.Creative-Generation.org

The Creative Generation Journal aims to create a scholarly space to amplify the voices of young creatives and practitioners who catalyze social transformation and document and disseminate promising cultural, education, and social change practices which cultivate creativity in youth.

Laurie T. Schell
Senior Specialist, Content & Training
Creative Generation; Nashville, TN

Laurie Schell (she/her) serves as the Senior Specialist for Content and Training with a focus on case making and systems change. In this role, she contributes to specific projects related to professional development and curriculum development.

Laurie is founding principal of Laurie Schell Associates | ElevateArtsEd, providing consulting services and issue expertise in arts education. Widely recognized for leadership in the nonprofit and education sectors, Laurie Schell has worked to foster arts education through strategic alliances and partnerships, policy and advocacy campaigns, innovative programs, directed research, and mobilizing constituencies for action.

Ms. Schell served as the the inaugural director of Music Makes Us (2012-2017), the public/private music education initiative in Metro Nashville Public Schools, jointly supported by the mayor's office, music industry, and the school district. During her tenure, participation in music increased to over 60% of the K-12 student population. Forty-five classes were added in 18 schools, with over \$5 million raised in private and government funds to augment district funding.

Previously, Ms. Schell was the executive director of the California Alliance for Arts Education (2001 – 2011), where she led a successful campaign to secure a historic \$605

million investment in K-12 arts education, co-edited numerous policy papers, and co-created the Insider's Guide to Arts Education Planning, now in its 3rd edition.

Ms. Schell holds a B.A. from Stanford University, an M.A. in Liberal Studies/Dance from Wesleyan University in Connecticut and pursued further studies at the Harvard Kennedy School of Government. She currently serves on the board of Save the Music Foundation and ArtsEd Tennessee, a statewide advocacy coalition.