

TOGETHER, WE ARE STRONGER

**SUMMARY OF A COMMUNICATIONS PROJECT
CONDUCTED BY STUDENTS
FROM THE CARLETON UNIVERSITY SCHOOL OF JOURNALISM
FOR
THE SOCIAL JUSTICE COMMITTEE
OASW EASTERN BRANCH
September to November, 2007**

Introduction

When it was brought to the attention of EB directors in the spring of 2007 that there was a course at the Carleton School of Journalism offering free public relations work for non-profit organizations, the Social Justice Committee submitted an application. The issue presented for study was a desire to develop two-way communication between the Social Justice Committee and OASW members employed in local agencies for the purpose of enhancing member involvement in social justice advocacy.

The Collaborative Process

Our project was chosen as one of three to be offered to students of the School of Journalism in the fall of 2007. On September 20, 2007, two members of the Social Justice Committee met for the first time for an information session with the 5 students who had chosen to work on our project. Information on OASW, CASW and Eastern Branch, as well as on the structure and activities of the Social Justice Committee, was provided to the students at that time. Subsequently, there were a number of face-to-face, telephone, and e-mail contacts with the students as they sought to fill in gaps in their knowledge of our organization and research our challenge. An e-mail message from our Branch President was sent to a large number of members employed in local agencies and to student members to inform them that they might be contacted by one of the students.¹ The journalism students were also given the contact information for a number of people in positions of responsibility for social workers in their agencies.

Presentation of the Report

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On November 29, 2007, all of the student teams presented the results of their work to representatives of the three non-profit organizations that had sought input into their public relations challenges. Using the title (or “tag line”) of “Amplifying the Voice of Social Workers”, the students reported on their research and their interviews for the Social Justice Committee of Eastern Branch. An independent public relations expert critiqued the various presentations. He commended the work of the student team on the plan that they produced for the Social Justice Committee. His one criticism took the form of suggestion that a more appropriate tag line might be something like: “Stronger

¹ Members were asked to respond if not willing to be contacted by students. Only 2 members responded.

Together”.² A 62-page written report was presented to us, as well as suggested implementation tools on CD and in hard copy.

In December, three of the student team presented their report at the board meeting of OASW Eastern Branch, where it was well received.

The Report

The report provided numerous communication strategies and a detailed action plan with goals and objectives. The communications plan was based on the following strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats, which were perceived by the students to be relevant to our organization:

Strengths

- Adequate funding
- A devoted social justice committee
- Large membership
- Strong advocacy efforts in the past
- Access to up-to-date research through the provincial and national bodies
- Close ties with other community organizations.

Weaknesses

- Limited communication with members
- Overworked members with minimal resources/time
- Lack of networking and educational activities
- Inaccessible office space

Opportunities

- Access to OASW website and resources
- Possible partnerships with other community organizations.
- Potential to lobby all three levels of government
- Students of two local social work schools as potential members
- Ease of communication with members via the Internet

Threats

- Agencies’ potential unwillingness to cooperate
- Overworked members
- Confidentiality barriers.

Personal interviews had been conducted with 21 Eastern Branch members, including two members who were Executive Directors of local agencies, plus two students who were not members of OASW.

Conclusions:

² The Social Justice Committee subsequently chose the “tag line: “Together, We Are Stronger”, rather than “Amplifying the voice”.

Based on their research and their interviews, the students came to the conclusion that three main factors affect communication between the Social Justice Committee and Eastern Branch members: limited internal communication, overworked members, and confidentiality concerns – “A lack of consistent and pro-active communication between you and your membership weakens social advocacy efforts that are relevant to your membership and the clients they serve.” They determined that the following concerns are not crucial:

Agency dependency on government funding a subsequent unwillingness to challenge government policy.

Agency desire to regulate work-related communication by it’s social workers to external groups.

Goals³:

Goal 1. To improve understanding of the social justice committee’s role and activities.

Goal 2. To increase incoming communication about social issues facing social workers and their clients.

As reported by the students, the three main audiences that should be targeted in implementing the communications strategy are: members who are and members who are not currently active in social justice committee initiatives, and agencies. Others who may be influenced by the communication strategy are non-members social workers and non-member social work students.

The report provides an action plan over a two-year period, with a chart detailing actions for each goal and objective and tools to be used throughout the process.⁴

Implementation Tools⁵

1. Key Messages

In order to encourage target audiences to participate, five key messages have been suggested:

Social justice advocacy is easy!⁶

Social justice advocacy is rewarding!

Social justice advocacy is empowering!

Social justice advocacy is a way of networking!

Social justice advocacy respects confidentiality!

2. Posters

Three attractive posters, depicting social workers in various activities, with captions that refer to the key messages, were created for display in agencies to invite members to advocate with OASW Eastern Branch.

³ See Appendix 1 for a list of the objectives associated with each goal.

⁴ See Appendix B for actions

⁵ See Appendix C for other Implementation Tools

⁶ This message will be changed to: “Social Justice Advocacy is our responsibility!”

3. E-mail Account

A separate account (socialjustice.oasweb@gmail.com) was set up to facilitate communication between the Social Justice Committee and members interested in participating in advocacy.

4. Suggestions for Improving the Social Justice Report.

Suggestions related to the reports of the Social Justice Committee for the Bulletin and website call for more information about initiatives that members could engage in, more emphasis on results and accomplishments, and increased use of dynamic language.

5. Suggestions for Letter-writing Campaigns, with sample letter.

Implementation

The Social Justice Committee has studied the action plan and carefully reviewed the recommendations, strategies and tools. While not every suggestion may be practicable, give the limitations of a volunteer Social Justice Committee, it has been decided to take the initial step of contacting representatives of agencies to explain the project and enlist their support for active communication between the Social Justice Committee and OASW members in their organizations.

Appendix A.

Goals and Objectives

Goal 1: To improve understanding of the social justice committee's role and activities.

Objectives:

a) To increase by 40% the number of non-social justice committee members who attend a social justice committee meeting, within one year of implementing this campaign.

b) To increase by 50% the number of members who understand the social justice committee's current issues and advocacy projects, within six month of implementing this campaign.

c) To increase by 30% the number of agencies who understand the social justice committee's role and its respect for confidentiality, within six months of implementing this campaign.

Goal 2. To increase incoming communication about social issues facing social workers and their clients.

Objectives:

a) To increase by 40% the number of non-social justice committee members who attend a social justice committee meeting within one year of implementing this campaign.

b) To begin receiving social justice-related information on an ongoing basis from a minimum of six social workers within one year of implementing this campaign.

c) To increase by 15% the number of agencies who openly allow their social workers to work with the social justice committee within two years of implementing this campaign.

d) To double the number of members who participate in a social justice activity within a year of implementing this campaign.

Appendix B.

Actions to Achieve Objectives

Target Audience, members:

- E-mail update to members in agencies on a regular basis re: recent issues, initiatives, ways members can get involved, and to elicit social justice-related concerns in their workplace.
- standardize time for meetings
- hold open discussion during each committee meeting
- make follow-up telephone calls after committee meeting
- make telephone invitations to new OASW members
- hold a speaker's evening with special guests and discussion as a networking and educational opportunity

Target Audience, agencies:

- Initial personal contact with agency heads
- Contact with agency heads maintained using fax, phone or e-mail
- Follow up phone call to some survey respondents
- Letter writing campaigns

Appendix C.

Additional Tools

Logs:

Outgoing Communication Log to record calls to new OASW members

Incoming Communication Log to track the social justice-related information received from members

Communication Log to record calls to agencies and show which have received posters

Surveys:

Electronic social issues survey form for members in agencies

Speaker's evening evaluation form

Worker's year-end evaluation form

Agency evaluation form

Budget:

Solidarity Posters

Speaker's Evening

Social Issues Survey and Evaluation sheets.

Evaluation Survey