

# Creating a research communications plan

by Kelli Whitlock, University Research Magazine Association

As creative types, we tend to avoid structures that are too formal or guidelines that are too rigid to allow us to set free our creative energies and the energies of the writers and artists who work with us. But as editors, we often are forced to commit to a plan—deadlines must be set, assignments given, design grids followed. We console ourselves with the knowledge that the plan is flexible—stories will fall through, art will not work out, and there’s always the next issue, which will allow us to scrap the plan altogether in favor of another, short-lived one.

Besides, who has time to plan anyway? We are too busy doing our jobs to plan how we could do them more efficiently. The mere mention of vision statements and strategic plans sends us scurrying to our keyboard, frantically typing an S.O.S. to any URMAn who will listen. I feel your anguish. I understand your hesitation. When my new vice president announced in September that he would hold a month-long series of retreats, the end result of which would be a strategic plan (“a matrix”) for the division, I grumbled, scuffed my feet and fired off a plea for help on the listserv.

I entered reluctantly into the process, putting it off as long as I could. But being an editor, I am sensitive to deadlines. And being a grown-up, I will admit when I am wrong. And I was wrong about this planning business. That’s not to say I found the experience enjoyable. But I did find it educational and empowering. By allowing me to write my own strategic plan, my vice president gave me control of my office’s destiny. I was able to set realistic goals, offer up expansions and modifications of existing services that I felt were appropriate, and define a measurement system I knew we could follow without the aid of bean counters, or at least without a fleet of them.

My advice to you: If you do not have a research communications plan, create one before one is foisted upon you. If you have one not of your liking, redesign it and take it to your leader. Trust me, a communication plan will be easier to follow if it is created by you—a communicator. Having a

plan for your magazine and how it fits into your larger communication efforts doesn’t force you into a corner. If you devise this plan yourself, it can protect you from divisional leaders who do not fully understand the time it takes to manage a publication, edit a white paper or create a Powerpoint presentation (or why doing the final two may not be the best use of your time).

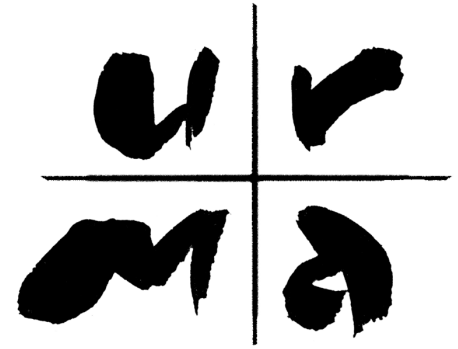
## Recipe for a plan:

### Step 1: What’s your research mission?

Chances are likely your vice president has established a set of missions or goals for your division. These may change a little from year to year, but they’re probably pretty standard: The research office at OU had a set of lofty, largely unattainable and immeasurable goals for *Perspectives* when we launched the publication in 1997. Articles should prompt sidewalk conversations “Did you know that they do research at OU?” Stories should inspire mass outbreaks of check-writing and corporate sponsorship for research. Professors at other universities should wait in line just for the chance to join our faculty ranks.

If these are the goals set out for you, now’s the time to tone them down with a little reality. Although missions or goals will vary, most are fairly standard: Enhance the stature of the university’s research activities (make more money). Convince state and federal officials that research at your institution is a good investment for tax dollars (make more money). Attract new faculty and students through a dynamic research program (make more money). And a new one I’ve heard several of you mention lately: Research contributes to the economic development of the state (so give us more money). Find out what your division’s missions are and put them on paper. If your division doesn’t have missions (mine didn’t), offer to help your VP write them (I did).

Now you’re ready to formulate a plan that includes your magazine and everything else you do. And once you’ve figured that out, tell people. Meet with deans, center directors, department heads. Ask for five min-



utes at fall faculty meetings. Set up a table at your annual new faculty/staff welcome (if you have one). Send e-mails to new faculty whose work you’ve been told is noteworthy or just plain interesting to you. To carry out your communication plan, you’ll need stuff to communicate—new stuff, off-the-wall stuff, stuff you wouldn’t expect to find in your own backyard. Making the rounds will encourage folks to bring their ideas to you. And with your plan in place, you’ll be ready to spread the word.

### Step 2: How does your magazine fit in?

For those of you who have research magazines, this publication should be the centerpiece of your plan. It sets the standard all other communication strategies in your plan must work to uphold. Magazines are either dearly loved by the senior administration or seen as a waste of paper. In either case, your plan should clearly demonstrate your magazine’s role as the tie that binds the rest of the plan together.

With your magazine, you reach the upper echelon of your target audience directly, with your words, your direction and your mission. You can’t do this with news releases or brochures and certainly not with annual reports.

Your magazine has many uses: a recruitment tool, information package, coffee table showpiece. But the text and art within it has many uses or reuses as well. We use photos from *Perspectives* in our annual report, with news releases and on the Web. We offer the copy and art to editors of the university’s alumni magazine, faculty/staff newspaper and to the people who produce individual college alumni publications. We reach a much larger audience that way and get more uses from the work that’s already been published in *Perspectives*.

If your magazine isn’t doing as much to meet your university’s research missions

as you think it could, perhaps you need to take a hard look at your distribution. This doesn't necessarily mean you'll need to increase your circulation, but it could mean you should drop some folks from your list who aren't key to your leader's goals and others who are. For the most part, you can safely assume the following off-campus folks should be on your list: reporters, legislators, key alumni, high school guidance counselors, public libraries, research supporters, etc.

You might also consider marketing your magazine on campus. Before each issue prints, the research office sends an e-mail to deans, department heads and development officers whose faculty will be featured in the coming issue. We offer to order additional copies for them, which they can use for recruiting, fundraising, etc. To help us offset the additional printing costs, we charge them about \$1 a unit for what they order. No one has ever balked at covering the cost and we usually have extra orders of between 750 and 1,200 copies each issue.

*Perspectives* turns more heads on my campus than any news release, annual report or glossy brochure. It gives me greater joy than any other part of my job. And it does succeed in meeting some of my vice president's divisional missions. But alone, it can't accomplish all the goals he's set. And how can it? There's only so much that can be done in 72 pages a year.

### Step 3: Beyond the Magazine

A recent informal survey suggests that most of us work in the research division. But some folks work in a university communications office, some folks work for an experiment station and a few people work for an individual college. No one communication plan will work for all of us. The communication projects I'll detail here work at Ohio University (or I hope they will) but they are by no means the best, the brightest or even the most entertaining when compared to what some of you are doing on your campuses. So, I'll just offer some background on a few of our projects first, then open the floor for others to share projects they've tackled. I've asked Roger Martin from the University of Kansas and Jeff Worley from the University of Kentucky to talk about two innovative projects they've started, but I invite others to join in, too.

News releases: Prior to my move into

a new office devoted solely to research communication, we distributed about 35 news releases a year that reported on the latest research findings through two packages: Research News (social sciences, communication, business) and Science News (medicine, engineering, physical sciences). But with the creation of my new office in March 1999, we've expanded that coverage. This year, I expect we'll produce between 50 and 75 releases reporting on new findings and another 25 or so on new studies and grants, workshops, and other divisional news. We've dropped the quarterly release package format and instead write releases as we hear of a new finding or new study. We've added coverage of the humanities to our roster and reformulated our packages (we now have Research News, Science News and a new Health & Medical News). We've increased our emphasis on state media and are working closely with our contacts in the Communications and Marketing division to pitch stories beyond our mailing lists and to broadcast stations around the state.

If research news releases on your campus are produced by the news services office, you should form a strong alliance with that office and become involved with the release process. I know this invites turf battles, but it can be done, especially if you enter into it with a "here's what we can do for you" attitude. If your news office is doing a great job of covering research, offer your help, but let them run the show. If their coverage is inconsistent or worse, inaccurate, offer your help and let them think they're running the show. Offer them stories—already written and in AP style. Offer to edit their science and research releases. And if they still don't budge, send the releases out yourself. This will no doubt incite a riot among your news services folks, so you should have the support of your VP first. Be armed with proof of their lack of response or inaccuracies, always maintaining that all you want to do is tell the good word about research at your university.

Because most of you don't do releases, I won't include more detail here. But if you have questions about our news services, please feel free to ask.

Media relations: Beyond news releases, we receive Profnet, make cold pitches to the press, and work with the News Services office to pitch research experts. We've also collaborated with News Services to create

a new faculty media training program to prepare our faculty to deal with the news media.

Annual Report: Last year marked the first time Ohio University published an annual report on external funding for research and other sponsored programs. The publication was short and simple—just 12 pages plus covers. We used art from past issues of *Perspectives* and included copy that highlighted some of our innovative research and creative projects. We also underestimated how many we'd need and ran very short. I have just about five copies here with me, which I can pass around. I'll leave the rest of the annual report discussion to Joe Kays.

Web site: I feel unqualified to talk about using your Web site as an effective communication tool, given the sad out-of-date state of our Web page. But here's what we will be doing in the next two months: Our Web site will be redesigned to include the latest headlines from news releases and *Perspectives*. Our news releases are going to be archived and searchable by keyword and by department. *Perspectives* will be current by the end of next week and will stay current. We'll take better advantage of links on the Web to provide readers with additional information on topics in releases and publications and make use of video and audio available from our Media Productions office. Everything we produce in print will be available online at the same time it's available in print. Then we'll begin to promote the site with bookmarks and postcards—to audiences on and off campus. The site will be updated every time we have a new story to add to it.

Center and Institute fact sheets: Our public relations intern created one-page fact sheets for each of our more than 40 centers and institutes to help us in promoting them to potential research sponsors, elected officials and whoever else expresses an interest in a particular center or institute.

We will be starting a few new projects this year to help us meet our divisional goals. The first is a video and Web site that will provide an overall look at research and creative activity at Ohio University. The 3- to 5-minute video will offer quick glances at research facilities with a script that details our research figures and growth, statistics about undergraduate research and technology transfer. It will serve as a teaser for the Web site, where people will be directed for more detail. On the Web, we'll

highlight between a dozen and 20 separate research projects, offering about two paragraphs of detail, images, graphics, video, audio and links for more information. The design is still to be worked out—we just began work on this this week. But the idea is to showcase the video during presentations given by the senior research administration and promote the Web site independently to alumni, legislators, prospective students and faculty and potential research sponsors. The site would be updated at least once a year, maybe twice, to allow for new information and project highlights. It's not a site people will bookmark and visit frequently; it's one that will pique readers' interest in Ohio University.

Online divisional newspaper: We will be launching in fall 2000 a new online divisional newspaper for faculty and staff to communicate details about new workshops, funding opportunities, changes in research policies for lab animal use or human subjects and any other news the vice president wants to pass on. Because a newspaper limited to this content would be, well, drab, we'll use photos and stories from *Perspectives* and bits from news releases to round out the paper. We'll market the monthly newspaper, tentatively called Research Notes, via a postcard sent to faculty that includes the latest headlines. We'll ultimately send out this announcement of our new issue via e-mail. Most faculty and staff currently do not receive our news releases and many don't get *Perspectives*, so this allows us to get information detailed there to the masses.

Research Summaries: To reach a few of our more important, hard-to-reach audiences—state and federal elected officials, board of trustees and alumni and foundation board members, we're creating one-page monthly summaries that will very briefly detail some of the research projects we reported on that month in our news releases or in the latest issue of *Perspectives*. We will select items with an eye toward projects that have application in the public sector—new device, new health news, new patent, etc. These summaries will be more self-promotional than our news releases “here's what we're doing for you and with your money” and will be sent via snail mail beginning Feb. 1. We'll ask recipients for their e-mail addresses in the hopes we can send this out electronically very soon.

While I'm proud of what we're doing at OU and hopeful for the projects we're

starting, there's a lot more we could do. I have a lot of ideas but not enough energy or staff or money to put them into motion. To avoid a feeling of total inadequacy, I constantly tell myself that we aren't doing so bad for a two-person shop aided by a few students. My vice president's goals are still lofty and immeasurable, but they are attainable. More importantly, they're clear.