

Marketing & communications

Advice for community rail partnerships and groups



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The guidance booklet offers ideas and advice for community rail partnerships and groups on how marketing and communications can help you promote your work and your line(s) or station. Further support on this topic and discussion on any of the below points is available from Community Rail Network (CRN) for our members. Contact erin@communityrail.org.uk.

Benefits for you and your community

Effective marketing and communications carries many benefits for you and your community, including helping you to:

Raise the profile of your partnership or group, so more people and partners understand and see the benefits of what you do.

Promote your activities and projects, increasing involvement and volunteering.

Encourage greater use and understanding of your line(s) and stations, including for specific purposes and among particular groups, as part of inclusive, sustainable and healthy travel.

Consult and converse with your community, so you understand what they need and how they can benefit most from their railway.

Improve your partnership network and income base, by enabling funders and partners to benefit from 'cause-related' marketing, and promoting fundraising activities.

Auditing marketing and communications (or getting started)

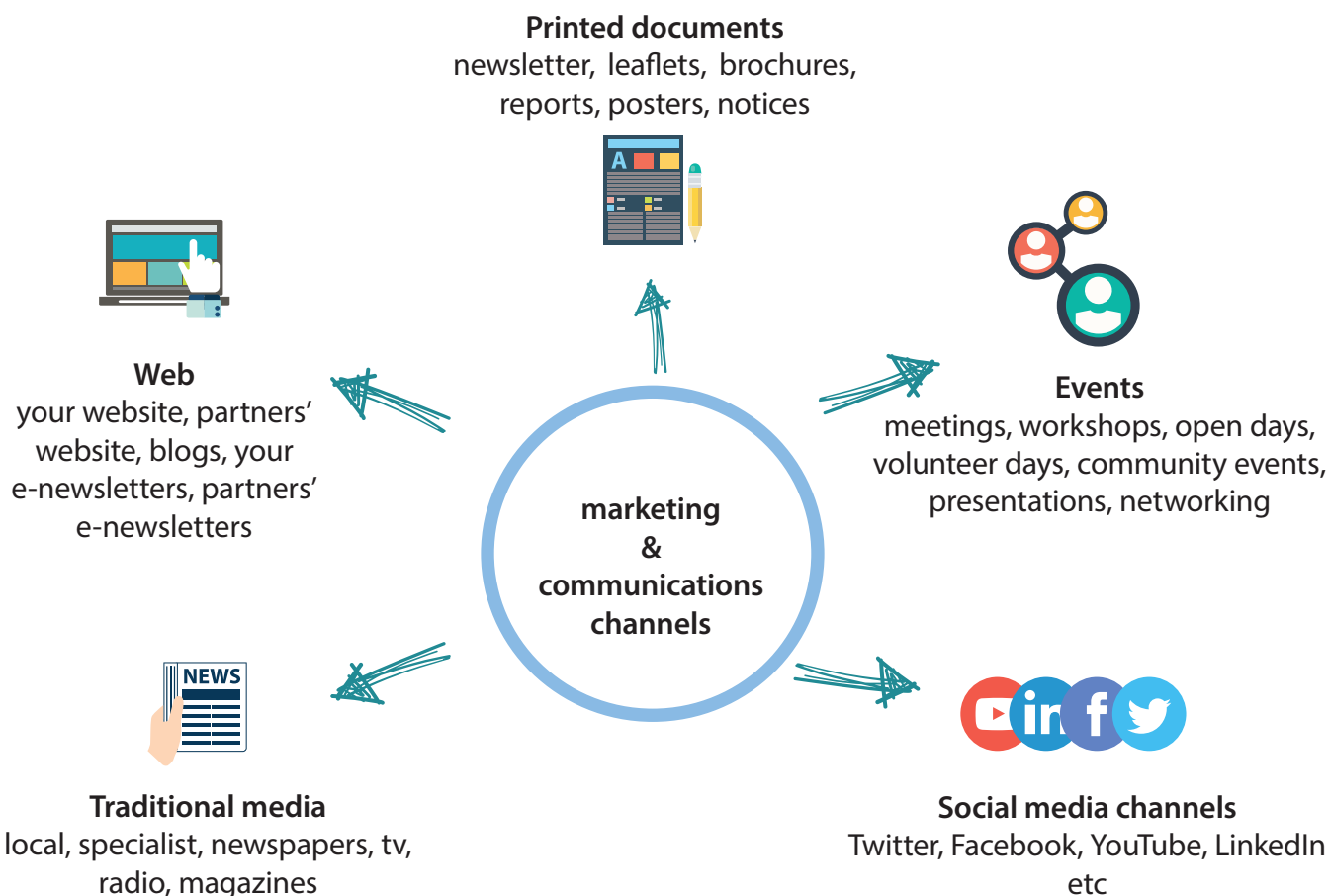
Whether you have a range of marketing and communications activities in place or are just getting started, carrying out an audit every year or two can help you to be effective with limited resources. This could simply involve asking yourself questions about what you are doing, how well it's working, and how you could improve.

However, it may be useful to first look at examples of how other organisations deliver marketing and communications, by speaking to them, and/or simply looking at their websites and materials, considering whether their methods might work for you. This could include other community rail groups (who ACoRP can put you in touch with), or organisations in your area.

With these examples in mind, try using the matrix on page four (we suggest copying the headings then building in plenty of space for writing answers and ideas), to consider how well you are using different marketing and communication channels, and new avenues open to you. While doing this, keep in mind your group or partnership's wider aims and objectives. Depending on these, you may think of additional questions, such as whether your marketing and communications are reaching key target groups.

Filling this in yourself is a good first step, but involving colleagues, volunteers, partners and local community members in the process is likely to be more helpful. Consider if you could run this as an exercise at an event or meeting.

Channels you may be using already or that may be open to you include:



Once you have carried out the exercise, analyse how well each channel is (and could be) aligned and linked up. For example, do you put information about forthcoming events and projects on noticeboards, your website, Facebook page and email bulletin all at the same time? Do your social media profiles link to your website and vice versa? Do your posters and leaflets always include your website and social media accounts? The more you can interlink and 'harmonise' different channels, the better.



Tp

When using a range of marketing and communications channels, try to direct people through to ways for you to 'capture' them as a follower or subscriber, and keep them informed on an ongoing basis, such as by following you on social media or signing up to an email bulletin.



Tp

When signing people up to an email bulletin (through an online form or at events), you need to get their permission to contact them in this way and this regularly (e.g. 'Sign up to our fortnightly email bulletin'), and keep their data secure. Online email bulletin providers like www.mailchimp.com can be useful.

Marketing and communications matrix

Existing marketing & communications channels we use (online & offline)

How regular is our output through each channel?

How is the quality of our output through each channel?

How many people / groups do we reach through each channel?

Is each channel interactive (do we use it to record, listen and learn)?

How can we improve regularity, quality, reach & interaction of each channel?

Other potential marketing and communications channels (online & offline)?

Could we establish a regular output through each channel?

Could we deliver quality output through each channel?

How many people / groups could we reach through each channel?

Is each channel interactive (could we use it to record, listen and learn)?

Could we make use of each channel to achieve our aims?

Planning using the five Ps

When planning marketing and communications, you might find it helpful to think about the 'marketing mix', in relation to the five Ps: **Product, Place, Promotion, People, Price**. Considering each of these can help to make your marketing more targeted and effective. Think of them as ingredients for a cake... the better your ingredients, the tastier your cake will be.

Product

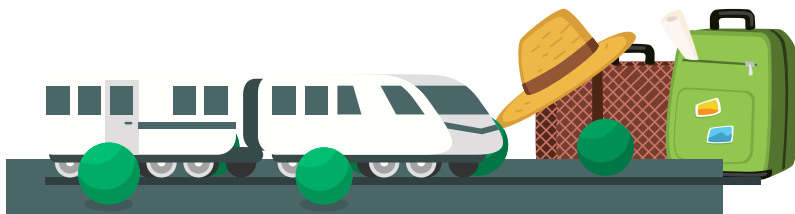
First, define the 'product' you are trying to market... what is it? A product is an item that satisfies someone's needs or wants. Products may be tangible (goods) or intangible (services, ideas or experiences). In community rail, the product isn't necessarily just the railway. It may include community events and volunteering activities, schemes to improve rail accessibility, education activities, arts and heritage projects, or anything you do that people can get involved with. Questions to ask yourself include:

What do you want to do with your product? Is it to increase passenger or visitor numbers at a particular time and place? Do you need to attract volunteers to deliver a project? What aims do you hope to achieve?

What do you want people to do with your product? You need to be clear the action you want people take, and why they would do this. For example, do you want people to turn up to do a particular type of volunteering on a certain day, register for an event, or travel by train at a particular time / location. Why would they do this? What need(s) would it fulfil?

How will you position your product? Where do you fit alongside the rail, community and public sectors, and how do you want people see you and your product? Do you have competition? Are there partners who may be able to complement your product with a joined offer? How will you set yourself apart from and / or align yourself with others? How is what you're doing different?

What is your product?



Visitor destination
Increasing passenger / visitor numbers



Community awareness
Volunteering / social inclusion

Place

You might think of place as your geographical location and reach. Questions to consider:

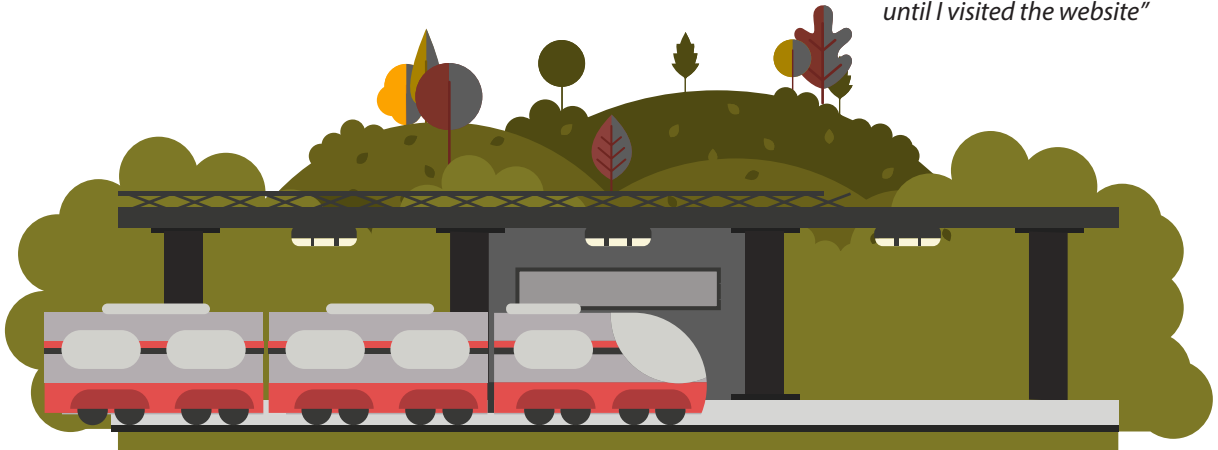
What opportunities and barriers arise from your location? How does this impact on people hearing about you and getting involved? Do you need to do anything to aid access, or provide alternative ways for people to engage?

Where are the centres of population nearby or nationally you wish to engage with and what infrastructure is in place to bring them to your location?

How will you connect what you do with your locale? How can you root your 'product' in your local area? What do you have in your location that people relate to or take pride in that can be used as a 'brand leader'. This could be a place of natural beauty, local heritage or even the best cuppa and bun in town.

"mmm... I love the cakes at the station cafe"

"I didn't realise it's so close and easy to get to, until I visited the website"



Promotion

Promotion is essentially your marketing and communications activity, which you might think of as the front end of your operation and often people's first point of contact with you. It is therefore a key factor in whether someone engages with you. Consider:

What promotional methods will be of most use to you? Consider the channels listed above, and think about how you might combine methods to maximise reach and impact. Mixing traditional and digital methods may help you get in front of wider audiences, and build familiarity among new people.

The value of verbal communications cannot be understated, and increasingly these methods can be supported by online information. Think of someone who hears about you through a conversation with a friend, but then searches online to find out more. Whatever your methods, it's important to keep your message and identity (your brand) consistent. This will help to reinforce your message and avoid confusion.

How can you best time your promotions? Think about how much lead in time people need to engage with you. For example, if you're promoting an event or volunteering day, you might want to start promoting it at least a month or two in advance so people put it in their diary, but issue reminders nearer the time. If engaging local media, and you want to get coverage on a particular day or to invite media to an event, issuing press notices and calling journalists a week ahead is helpful, as well as sending through more detailed information and pictures promptly afterwards.

When posting on social media, consider the best times of day. For example, at the weekend, it's great to post in the morning and early evening; on weekdays the morning commute and lunchtimes are good. Consider applications like Tweetdeck or Hootsuite, or built into Facebook, that enable you to schedule posts in advance.

How can you tell a story? Storytelling is an important component of marketing that helps you draw in your audience. Consider how you will convey the importance and value of your work and your 'product' and how this fits with people's lifestyles and values. Understanding your audiences and their needs and motivations will help you do this convincingly. However, take care not to be patronising or make assumptions about what people are thinking. In telling your story, it can help to show how you are listening to the community and helping them to have a voice (see two-way communications below).



Tip

With all your promotional activity, signpost to a key focal point, usually your website, where people can access the (up-to-date!) information they need and sign up to a bulletin and/or be directed to social media to keep engagement going.

Consider how you will keep your 'story' and brand consistent across all your promotional media.

People

These are the people who are involved in your work and will assist you in delivering a good marketing and communications campaign. Again, it's helpful if your whole group or partnership, partners and volunteers are 'on message'. This means making sure everyone understands and buys into the importance and value of your 'product' to aid consistency, so internal communications is key. Consider:

Who can do what within and around your group or partnership? You may have team members or volunteers who can add expertise, support or creative ideas. You might also have partners or volunteers who can play a key role.

"I do lots of Tweeting"



"I write press releases at work"

"What about if we use this image?"

"I've used Wordpress before"

Who might act as a great advocate among your target audiences? Who within or outside your group can tell your stories with knowledge and enthusiasm? Who has relevant contacts, networks or skills? Make sure they are consulted on your plans and involved in the delivery.

"Our partnership has developed some great links with the community..."



"I wasn't aware of that, please tell me more"

Is any training or briefing needed? Some training may be needed with your identified advocates or people who can take an active role in your marketing and communications. The internet is a great resource of how to guides, especially for social media, writing press releases and creating great images. A simple briefing and discussion session at the start of a campaign or promotion can also help everyone to understand the aims and messages and any important procedures to follow. See also the section on "resourcing, management and procedures" (p. 11).

"So, you hold the camera like this to get everything in the frame"



"That's great, I never knew that!"

Price

You will of course need to consider the costs of delivering your marketing and communications and the source of this funding. Draw up a budget for all known and possible costs well in advance, and ensure this is covered by your income (or voluntary or in-kind help). Planning this in advance allows you to choose options that fit your budget, as well as considering whether funders require (or would value) cause-related marketing benefits. Consider:

What can we do for free or low cost? Many activities can be done for free or at very low cost, such as using social media, press releases, and presentations at local events. However, if you are seeking specific sponsorship for these activities, and they are carried out by paid staff, it is a good idea to factor in staff costs if these are not already covered by other funding sources.



*"I can do our social media throughout the day.
More than happy to help out."*

What will the costs be, and can we minimise these? Get quotes for printed materials or other expenditure in advance, but bear in mind you may be able to negotiate. For example, you may be able to place a bulk order with local printers for all your campaign materials, or simply convey that you are a small not-for-profit community group, or possibly offer to include their logo on materials or your website as a 'supporter benefit'. Also consider if you may be able to access in-kind support, such as with graphic design and printing, from partners you work with, who may have such services in-house.

*"We can certainly do you a discount
for being a community group. Can we also
sponsor a project?"*



With this in mind, constantly monitor expenditure against your budget and assess if your approach is offering good value. Look at how many people are signing up to events, volunteering, your bulletin and social media to help you to assess this. It also helps to ask people getting involved 'where did you find out about us?' Armed with this knowledge, your future planning will become easier, your work more cost effective, and it allows you to see where more funding could be required.

Accessibility

Across your marketing and communications, whatever your aims, accessibility is a key principle to bear in mind. This is important to maximise your reach across diverse groups and make sure that everyone is equally able to keep informed about and engage with your work. The steps you should take to maximise accessibility will vary according to needs within your area and your objectives, but it is generally a good idea to:

Use a range of marketing and communication channels (see “auditing marketing and communications”) that are likely to be accessed by different people at different times.

Use plain English across all your marketing and communications. That means using short, simple sentences and terminology, never using jargon or technical language that excludes anyone, making all your materials as concise as possible.

Use open, positive, inclusive language and images, making clear that anyone can engage with you and you want to encourage more involvement.

Use large, plain fonts, especially on printed materials, e.g. no smaller than Arial 10pt.

Test key materials (especially leaflets, posters and campaign materials that will be in circulation for some time) with target audiences in advance, or better, engage them in their production.

Never issue or share content that may offend or alienate anyone, even indirectly, or that makes assumptions about other people’s views. For example, take care not to suggest that particular groups don’t care about the community or railway, or are especially likely to vandalise stations.

Consider if some people in your community may have particular needs in accessing your communications, such as language needs. Draw on partners’ expertise to understand these needs and how to meet them, such as your local authority, or local charities working with these groups.



Find advice on plain English at
www.plainenglish.co.uk/free-guides

Inclusive communications at
www.gov.uk/government/publications/inclusive-communication

Resourcing, management and procedures

Often the biggest challenge in delivering marketing and communications for community rail partnerships and groups, and other small groups within communities, is resourcing and managing the work. Marketing and communications requires regular output, updating, monitoring and responding.

Having a clear calendar of activity, ideally for the whole year, with key events and milestones planned well in advance, is vital. It means you can plan your marketing and communications around specific dates, with a build up of marketing ahead of each point in the calendar to encourage involvement, and a burst of communications on the day and afterwards letting everyone know what happened. However, maintaining some flexibility for seizing opportunities as they emerge is a good idea too.

It's also important to acknowledge that many marketing and communication channels need ongoing management. In particular:

Social media works best if maintained daily or as often as possible, with new posts and replying to queries and comments.

Websites need periodic checking and updating quickly whenever something new happens and to promote your events and involvement opportunities well ahead of time.

Email bulletins or newsletters should always go out at regular intervals (e.g. start of the month, or every other Friday) and you should make clear this regularity when people sign up.

Although engagement of local media will centre around your calendar, it's a good idea to have a clear media contact on your website and press releases who is able to take calls and answer questions whenever needed.

To help you resource this ongoing maintenance and development of communications and marketing, you may need to build these responsibilities into an officer's job description, ensuring they have the skills and time to do this. Community Rail Network members can access advice on delivering this kind of work.

Alternatively (or additionally), you may be able to access volunteer help. There may be people in your area who have skills in social media, writing, web development and the like who can assist. As marketing and communications is a competitive area of work, many may be glad to gain experience delivering this kind of work in a community setting. This may also help you to offer a broader range of volunteering opportunities that appeal to different people.

Whether you are resourcing communications and marketing through paid staff, volunteers or a combination, the work needs to be managed effectively, with someone taking responsibility for it being delivered well. Having clear procedures in place tends to be helpful to managing this kind of work, especially if it is being delivered by several people. Make sure your procedures include:

Who is responsible for what, and how cover can be arranged (e.g. during holidays).

The regularity of issuing bulletins, updating the website (see below), checking social media etc.

How far in advance you aim to market activities and events.

Approval processes, such as getting press releases or major website changes approved by appropriate colleagues or partners.

How to answer queries, including who can answer questions from media or on social media, and how to defer to a more senior/expert colleague/contact when needed.

Key principles, like those outlined above under 'accessibility', fitting with your aims and ethos.

Steps to take if something goes wrong, including who will make decisions in these cases.

Community Rail Network can advise members further on drawing up procedures appropriate to your circumstances.



Make sure you are compliant with data protection laws and good practice in email communications. This includes keeping data securely, not sharing it with third parties without express permission, and only emailing people that have given you permission to contact them in this way. You will find free advice on email communications at www.mailchimp.com.

Working with partners

Very often, community rail partnerships and groups will be delivering marketing and communications activities in partnership with other organisations. This brings a number of considerations and advantages. It may mean that you can use the communications and marketing channels of multiple partners, widening your reach, as well as pooling resources and expertise. Between you, you may be able to deliver more impactful activities that are more in tune with your local area. It's therefore important to involve partners in planning, to explore how you can work together, and keep them informed and consulted thereafter.

It is particularly advisable to discuss and agree the following with partners, to make sure you are clear in advance how things will work:

As with any partnership activity, a defined schedule of activity, with respective responsibilities and points for conferring and discussion made clear.

How you can take full advantage of marketing and communication opportunities open to both/all partners. For example, you might provide an article and image for partners to include on their websites, social media and bulletins.

Whether your partners and funders have any particular requirements or expectations related to marketing and communications. For example, funders may ask that their branding is included on your materials. Even if they don't ask, it's a benefit you could offer.

How you will make clear the role of different partners in your marketing and communications. For example, if you are the lead party delivering the work your branding should be most prominent, and others' logos may be best preceded with text such as 'Sponsored by:' or 'Kindly supported by:'

Approval (and decision-making) processes, such as for signing off materials. For example, you might show your partners draft materials pre and post-design for their approval, allowing an agreed amount of time for this, but with the understanding that only minor changes may be made post-design.

Who your 'spokespeople' are, particularly in relation to media interviews or comments, and their availability, making sure that they are appropriately informed and 'on message'.



When working with partners, you should still ensure that your marketing and communications are immediately recognisable as 'yours', with messaging from you and clear, prominent branding of your group or partnership. Having a consistent look across your materials and communications helps with this (e.g. using the same colours and font).

Further help and information

More information and advice for those working in community rail, and industry, public sector and third sector partners, can be found at www.communityrail.org.uk. This includes further reports and resources, information on forthcoming events, and signposting to our partners.

Community Rail Network offers its members additional support and information specific to needs and circumstances. If you're a member, let us know how we can help on erin@communityrail.org.uk. If you're not a member, find out about joining us at www.communityrail.org.uk/join-us/.

This guidance sheet was produced by Community Rail Network, thanks to funding from Northern. It is part of a growing range of resources produced for community rail partnerships and groups, helping them to engage and benefit their communities. If you have suggestions of how we can further develop our resources and support, let us know at news@communityrail.org.uk.