Communication Audit for the Interfaith Council of Southern Nevada

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# **Part I – Overview**

## **Executive Summary**

The purpose of this communications audit is to examine the effectiveness of the communication strategies used by the Interfaith Council of Southern Nevada (IFCSN). Three methods were used to identify communication practices: an employee survey, a network analysis, and observations. Overall, the current communication methods are effective in many ways to support the organization in its mission. The employee survey and network analysis reveal that there is some satisfaction with the current communication methods. All three methods revealed the flow of information through an organization that functions as an informal network. Network organizations have four major components: flexible structures that can be readily reconfigured, team-based work organization with an emphasis on autonomy, flat organizational structures that rely on coordination and negotiation, and the use of ICTs to work across organizational functions (Conrad & Poole, 2012, pp. 206-207). All four of the major components of a network organization were present in the communication audit of the IFCSN.

The responses to the questionnaire and the observations reveal aspects of ineffective communication for a network organization. More attention is needed to look at how to maintain motivation and control in a network organization. The responses revealed a need for more effective and easier way to maintain communication channels. The audit includes an examination of the methodology used, limitations to those methods, detailed information about internal and external communication approaches, appendixes of survey questionnaire responses, and recommendations for communication improvements throughout the organization.

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## **Methodology**

Three forms of methodology were used to conduct the audit. A questionnaire was sent to the employees for responses. A network analysis was completed for the communication channels within the organization. Observations of communication sequences for events were recorded to determine their effectiveness for a network organization. Limitations to these methods were also noted.

### **Questionnaire Survey**

The survey questionnaire consisted of fourteen questions. Seven of the fourteen questions (50%) focused on external communications, while six questions (42%) focused on internal communication. The remaining question was an open-ended question asking for recommendations to improve communications. The survey was distributed via email to the two part-time staff members. There was no permission given to distribute the survey to the board. An email asking permission was sent to the board president with no response back. Both staff members returned the survey via email. Completion of the survey was voluntary and respondents were assured confidentiality in the results.

Respondents were asked to identify the most frequently used forms of external communication for the organization. They were asked to respond to questions about what external communications have been most effective and which have been the least effective for the organization. They were asked to rate on a scale of one to five the effectiveness of their social media, website, and printed materials with five being strongly agree and one being strongly disagree; additional space below the rating was left for comments. Respondents were asked questions about internal communications using the same scale with comment areas. The topics for internal communication included effectiveness of email, use of meeting times, openness to feedback, and whether there is informal information flowing within the organization.

### **Network Analysis**

* The gears of communication in the organization start with the board president. All information disseminates through the board president both to the board members and then to the part-time staff members.
* The board of the IFCSN is an informal network organization with relationships among the board members that discuss behind-the-scenes information, which is loosely acted upon.
* The ability of the board to take any action is dependent upon relationships both with each other and with their outside faith communities.
* The part-time staff receives directions and instruction from the board president. They do not have defined roles or objectives other to ensure advertising of events, dissemination of information, and maintenance of finances and website.
* There is no definite answer as to who exactly is on the board, what the board term limits are, what the by-laws say, and who is secretary or treasurer.
* When someone on the board gathers enough support and has enough outside resources, then the council takes action.

### **Observations**

Observations were made about the sequences of communication surrounding some of the key events with IFCSN. Additionally, observation data was collected about the number of communication platforms that were used to create the events. In order to communicate a single event, the staff used email, website, Constant Contact, Facebook, phone, text, staff meeting, and Google Calendar.

Sample Sequence of the Prayer Vigil Communications

1. Board president begins discussing with board members the need to do a prayer vigil for the recent backlash against Muslims because of Paris and the shooting in San Bernardino. These are informal discussions via phone, text, and email.
2. Board members begin to discuss who should organize via phone and email.
3. Board president reaches out to multiple organizations including Catholic Charities, the Islamic Society of Nevada, and Community Lutheran Church via email.
4. A few Islamic Society leaders step forward because of the urging of a well-known Imam who was once part of the board. They contact IFCSN board president via email.
5. The board president informs the staff of potential vigil via email.
6. Muslim leaders decide on a place and time and email the board president.
7. Board president informs staff of the event details by forwarding email.
8. Staff advertises the event on Facebook, Google Calendar, and website. Staff exchanges multiple emails.
9. Staff sends a large group email for a call for speakers to the council board members and other faith leaders. Multiple emails return addressed to all thirty-five recipients.
10. The Muslim leaders organize the event through their mosque and invite the media.
11. In the process, sixty-four emails were sent to one of the staff members in response to organizing the event from twenty-one different people.

Sample Sequence of Interfaith Thanksgiving Service Communications

1. Event is nearly always held at the Jewish synagogue.
2. Rabbi uses his internal network to organize the bulk of the event, which includes his own communication system within his organization.
3. Rabbi asks council board members to provide different prayers every year for the event via email. The event is the same every year with only changes in the prayer readings and music.
4. Staff sends emails to the board members reminding them of the event and asking for readers. No board members commit to being there.
5. Staff communicates with text and email detail about what needs to be brought to the event and set up information.
6. Staff advertises event on Facebook, website, and Constant Contact.
7. At the event, staff members stand in the lobby looking for board members and other faith leaders to be readers.
8. One staff member participates in the reading in order to fill slots.

## **Limitations**

There are three main limitations to the audit. The first limitation is the short time frame for the audit. Many audits are completed over longer periods of time such as allowing six months of evaluation; because this audit was an assignment in a condensed eight-week college course, there was only six weeks of time from the beginning of the project to the final report. The second limitation was that the sample size for the survey was small with only two respondents. The board president never returned the email requesting an opportunity to send the survey out to the board members. Finally, there is a level of subjective response to the survey question ratings system between one and five with one being strongly disagree, five being strongly agree, and three being neutral.

# **Part II – Communications**

Both internal and external communications were analyzed using the survey, network analysis, and observation. Descriptions of both external and internal communications are included with overviews of recommendations.

## **External Communication**

Survey Questionnaire

The methods indicated as most frequently used for external communication were brochures, social media, banners, website, and email. When asked what method was most effective, both respondents answered that email and social media were the most effective. When asked what methods of external communication were least effective, one respondent stated that mass mailings were the least cost effective. One respondent wanted to see the addition of a e-newsletter, while the other felt that the website and business cards needed the most attention.

In the survey questionnaire, the response to the effectiveness of the website was neutral with respondents noting that it was out-of-date and needed to include other area events, not just the IFCSN events. Also, one noted a need to have a volunteer information page added to the website. Social media was seen as effective, but there is a need for staff to be able to effectively keep up-to-date. An investment in brochures was noted, but there was an emphasis on the need for business cards for the board members and staff that connected people to social media, website, and emails.

Observation

The staff utilized Constant Contact for marketing emails. They used Facebook for most of the social media. They started a Meetup page that they hoped to keep updated along with the calendar on the website. They use spreadsheets on one staff member’s computer to put all the information from donors. They are considering using a different program, Signup Genius, for volunteer and event management. Email is the primary means of communication among the group.

Network Analysis

The flow of information goes to the board president then disseminates throughout the network. Email is the primary communication system for their network structure. There are no accounting information systems in place to ensure all parts of the network are doing their work, which can be common in network organizations. “The network strategy, however, extends relationships over a much greater distance than does the relational strategy, and it calls for more flexibility in the control system than is typically allowed for by traditional strategy” (Conrad & Poole, 2012, p. 219). It is to be expected that this network organization would not have a substantial control system in place.

External Communication Summary

The recommendations for external communication improvement require changes in communication structures that need to be addressed by IFCSN. The majority of the external recommendation changes are to the accounting information systems and the communication systems. Communication system recommendations include updating the website and creating business cards for staff and board members so that it is easy to direct people to the website and social media resources. Improvements to the accounting information system include providing the staff with software database that makes management of information, financial data, and human resources easier and more effective. Finally, instead of large numbers of emails, the organization needs to utilizes social media such a Facebook more effectively by creating closed Facebook groups for events and for the board of directors to disseminate information collectively in one location. By implementing communication and accounting systems, the organization can more easily maintain an effective means of coordinating projects.

The areas that functioned properly were social media and email capabilities. Overall effectiveness of meetings was rated high because it helped to build the relationships necessary for the network structure. In a network organization, it is common to have a large network of participants whose roles are flexible, which is what the IFCSN utilizes.

## **Internal Communication**

Observation

A large volume of email was sent through the whole organization to organize and communicate one event. Instead of responding to the sender, each person, in a thirty-five-person mass email to board and staff, responded “reply all.” The reply all from the board members were not useful information such as sending out a thank you to a staff member via the whole group or letting everyone know if they were attending or speaking at an event. They even replied to everyone when board members did not receive staff response quickly enough. In summary, there was a large volume of email traffic with very little useful information contained in the emails.

Survey Questionnaire

In the survey questionnaire, both respondents saw a need to find a software program that would manage donor information, volunteer sign-up, and mass emails. When asked if the email was an effective way of communicating, one respondent rated it high saying that it was convenient because she often works from home. The other respondent rated it lower and believed that there were more useful ways of communicating to the larger internal group such as Facebook closed groups.

When asked about the effectiveness of face-to-face meetings, respondents agreed that they were good for building relationships, information sharing, and spurring creative ideas. However, respondents had reservations about the quality of work completed during face-to-face meetings; they also mentioned meeting effectiveness depended upon the organization of the meeting leadership. When asked about hearing informal information, one respondent did not feel the question applied to the IFCSN, while the other one felt that information sharing about relationship challenges in interfaith work helped to understand the complex web of communications within the network.

The final question for the survey asked for recommendations to improve communications. Both respondents wanted a communications committee of volunteers to help manage the information and advertising. One respondent recommended software changes to make both internal and external communication more effective.

Network Analysis

The network analysis revealed that the organization is a network organization unified by inspiring, meaningful work. The network consists of multiple faith leaders in the Las Vegas area who participate in interfaith events such as a prayer breakfast, discussion forums, and prayer vigils. “A behavioral view is that a network is a pattern of social relations over a set of persons, positions, groups, or organizations (Alstyne, 1997). In terms of internal communication, the network organization is constantly in flux with membership in the organization being fluid. At the time of the audit, it was unknown how many faith traditions or faith leaders were a part of the IFCSN network. The person with the most access and information about that network is the president of the board. An accurate database of information on members was unavailable. There was no accurate count of board members or of who is the secretary or treasurer of the board.

Internal Communications Summary

The positive aspects of this network for internal communication is that it is always fluid and changing to adapt to changing external needs. The closest the network comes to any type of hierarchy is that the flow of communication pivots around the president of the board. The challenges to this fluidity of structure is that there is not a set group of people to contact for assistance with an event - meaning there is no exact list for internal communication. The network moves out from the faith leaders to their communities, but the IFCSN is unable to directly reach congregants of those communities for assistance, relying instead, on the internal communications network. Because membership in the organization is fluid, there is not an accurate count of who is actually on the board of directors to send official board communications. An email from the president to members can be sent to dozens of people or more depending on who he feels might be useful to the event. The network structure provides communication challenges to the staff simply because so many people are commenting or needing information from staff members that may or may not be important to the event.

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# **Part III – Conclusion and References**

## **Findings**

The recommendations for external communication improvement require changes in communication structures that need to be addressed by the organization. The largest impact of changes comes from the accounting information systems and communication systems. The following recommendations are necessary to improve the efficacy of the external communication:

1. Update the website. Make sure all the information is correct and that links and forms work.
2. Develop business cards for staff and board members so that it is easy to direct people to the website and social media resources.
3. Provide a database that makes management of information, financial data, and human resources easier and more effective.
4. Provide a social media platform to replace the email platform that is becoming overwhelmed with email. A closed Facebook group or part of the data management software might be useful for this information sharing collectively in one location.
5. Recruit volunteers to help with the external communications, such as data input and transferring of information from one media source to another.

By implementing ICTs and electronic communication systems, the network organization can more easily maintain an effective means of coordinating projects.

A source of motivation and control in network organizations are network-based formal systems for monitoring and controlling members and their activities…. A more effective means of coordination is first, to develop a project or workflow plan that specifies what should be done in what sequence and second, provide methods to enable units to monitor each other’s activities. When these are formally integrated with ICT, the result is full-disclosure accounting information system… that enables units to know that other units are contributing to the network and what earnings they are getting from it. The accounting information system is simply a set of databases accessible to participating units that shows them whether other units are meeting their responsibilities and the level of return obtained by the organization as a whole and by each unit….

Also important in this trust-building process are timely and effective use of electronic communication systems such as email, teleconferencing, and groupware, rapid communication and response help the network coordinate work and iron out problems. Both the accounting and communication systems help to build trust, open communication and to more trust, in an ever-increasing spiral (Conrad & Poole, 2012, pp. 217-218).

By creating useful forms of external communication processes, the organization can be more effective at strengthening the trust building within the network and providing much needed information to the community and staff.

Recommendations for internal communications begin by looking at the flow of information through the network. Some areas of concern are the role of the board president in communications as well as the electronic methods used to communicate. If the bulk of the information of the network flows through one person, the information from that person needs to be shared consistently throughout the network.

1. Find a software database program that provides a way to track members of the organization, donors, and send information.
2. Utilize social media platforms to streamline communication for events or board internal communications.
3. Transfer relationship network information from the board president to the database and staff members so multiple people have access to the information.

In order for a network organization’s communication to be effective, an emphasis needs to be place on development of structures to ensure that communication is handled effectively and that all members of the organization can readily access the information. Email and social media have been an effective tool for the IFCSN as well as face-to-face meetings. The organization does an outstanding job of creating the relationship necessary to sustain a network organization and has the fluidity of a network. By adding business cards, finding software that will make a database of relationship information easier, and adding additional volunteer support for communications, the Interfaith Council of Southern Nevada will set the stage for even more effective communication practices within its network organization.

## **Appendix A – Completed Questionnaire**

As part of a communication audit process, this questionnaire is being administered in order to better understand the effectiveness of various communication practices used by the Interfaith Council of Southern Nevada. Also know that these responses are voluntary and confidential, and that your name will not be associated with the findings. You do not have to fill out any questions you do not wish to and are free to stop taking the survey at any time. Please read each question and rate your level of agreement with the statement. Using the scale provided, simply circle the number/value that most closely represents your opinion. You are encouraged to use the “Comments” line to expand on or clarify your responses.

**Please indicate your primary focus group**: (neither respondent answered)

**External Communication Methods:**

External communication methods are the means that IFCSN uses to communicates with our members OUTSIDE of IFCSN

**1. What types of external communication does IFCSN use regularly (check all that apply)**

* Business cards
* Mass mailings

X Brochures

* Flyers
* Newsletter
* Advertising

X Social media

X Banners

* PowerPoint

X Website

X Email

* Other (explain)

**2. Of the above listed types, what type of external communication has been most effective for IFCSN and why?**

Respondent 1 - We have done mailings in the past, and it was very costly to have documents printed and mailed out in bulk, so we were forced to stop that practice. What has worked primarily has been simple e-mail announcements and social media efforts, it’s cost effective for the organization.

Respondent 2 – Currently, email and social media have been the least expensive and most effective means of communication. Printed materials are difficult to keep up-to-date.

**3. Of the above listed types, what has been the least effective external communication method for IFCSN and why?**

Respondent 1 – Mailings has been the least effective. It has been costly, and addresses were often wrong. We have attempted to do mailings in the past with purchased lists of houses of worship in the area to get them involved, and often the mailing never went to anyone specific, or came back as return to sender.

Respondent 2 – no response.

**4. Of the above listed types, what is the one that most needs attention and improving at this time? How can it be improved?**

Respondent 1 - It would be great to have a regular e-newsletter that has information of interfaith efforts locally as well as globally. This takes time to develop, and we really haven’t had the staff to work on something like that that would capture the interfaith landscape nationally as well as on a global scale. I think this would be beneficial because people who are on our list serve who are interested in interfaith, may not be aware of what is taking place on a larger scale, which I think would bring more meaning and connection for our interfaith group locally.

Respondent 2 – Business cards and brochures because we do not have easy means of handing out information at gatherings or to people we meet. Also, website is well out of date. Email administrator difficult to use.

**5. The IFCSN web page does an effective job of explaining the events IFCSN offers to our community**

Strongly Disagree Neutral Strongly Agree

1 2 3 4 5

Respondent 1 – Rated 3 - I have to give this a 3, the basic set up is there, but I think we would be more effective if it was updated more regularly, and if it included more interfaith friendly events that take place locally that are outside of our direct events.

Respondent 2 – Rated 2 – Aspects of the website do not work. Calendar is out of date. Forms for people to share information are not used. Links need to be updated. There needs to be a place for volunteer information.

**6. Social media is an effective way to communicate what IFCSN can do to support the community**

Strongly Disagree Neutral Strongly Agree

1 2 3 4 5

Respondent 1 – Rated 5 - There is so much going on, and I think social media is a great way to spread the news of interfaith to our local community as well as stay informed about that is happening on a larger scale.

Respondent 2 – Rated 4 – Difficult for staff to maintain social media. Facebook is going well, but meetup needs updating. There isn’t a good pathway for putting interfaith events outside the Council on the social media or website.

**7. Flyers and brochures do an effective job of communicating the mission and vision of the IFCSN**

Strongly Disagree Neutral Strongly Agree

1 2 3 4 5

Respondent 1 – Rated 3 - We have flyers and brochures for some of our events, but due to cost we haven’t utilized this medium as much as we could. I think visuals go a long way in educating people and bring a degree of professionalism.

Respondent 2 – Rated 3 – I think an investment in brochures would be useful. More importantly, I think we need business cards because those direct people to our website, Facebook, and meetup.

**Internal Communication Methods:**

**Internal communication methods are those methods that IFCSN uses to communicate with employees INSIDE IFCSN.**

**1. E-mail is an effective way for management to communicate with me.**

Strongly Disagree Neutral Strongly Agree

1 2 3 4 5

Respondent 1 – Rating 5 - I prefer to organize through e-mail. Working for the Interfaith Council is not a regular, 9-5 job. Often it is something that I need to check in with at night, or on the weekends, and not something I can be regularly available for during the day. I prefer e-mail to any other method of contact.

Respondent 2 – Rating 3 – I find the email cumbersome. We recently had an event, I received over 60 emails most of which did not really have any important information in them. I prefer email to face to face meetings, but I think we don’t use Facebook groups enough for our events. It would be easier way to communicate.

**2. Face-to-face meetings are a good use of my time.**

Strongly Disagree Neutral Strongly Agree

1 2 3 4 5

Respondent 1 – Rating 3 - Face to face meetings are important, but again, not something that I have been readily available for often. I have to give a 3 for this one, I think they are very important, but at times, I also feel like they are counterproductive and take more effort than is necessary. With our interfaith forum committee meetings, we have gone from face to face meetings, to an online platform with a couple of meetings to determine details, and we have been able to be a lot more effective this way. I think face to face meetings are important to developing relationships, especially working relationships, but there has been the issue of time and availability.

Respondent 2 – Rating 3 – Face to face meetings cover more ground and develop better relationships. However, unless the person running the meeting is organized, then the meeting can be all over the place.

**3. IFCSN staff meetings are an effective way to communicate current issues, changes, and project updates.**

Strongly Disagree Neutral Strongly Agree

1 2 3 4 5

Respondent 1 – Rating 4 - I think regular staff meetings are essential to remaining organized for an interfaith council. It is difficult to work on your own when it comes to interfaith, I think it is imperative to have regular staff meetings to discuss any issues, changes or project updates to uphold momentum and connection.

Respondent 2 – Rating 4 – I think that staff meetings really help delegate who is doing what and helps to bounce ideas off of each other.

**4. Meetings provide me with an opportunity to express my opinions and ask questions.**

Strongly Disagree Neutral Strongly Agree

1 2 3 4 5

Respondent 1 – Rating 4 - I think, in interfaith work, it is important to bounce ideas off of each other in meetings in order to include as many points of view as possible.

Respondent 2 – Rating 4 – I think it is good to share ideas. I do feel heard, but there is often not enough staff to implement good ideas.

**5. I often hear about things in informal conversations before they are officially announced.**

Strongly Disagree Neutral Strongly Agree

1 2 3 4 5

Respondent 1 – Rating 3 - This doesn’t really apply to the IFCSN.

Respondent 2 – Rating 4 – Some of that information sharing is necessary to understand the complex web of relationships in interfaith work.

**6. The “grapevine” a good source of information for things going on in IFCSN.**

Strongly Disagree Neutral Strongly Agree

1 2 3 4 5

Respondent 1 – Rating 3 - I don’t feel this applies to IFCSN because of the limited staff.

Respondent 2 – Rating 3 – There is limited staff unless you are talking about including board.

**What suggestions do have for improving the communication methods used in IFCSN?**

Respondent 1 - It would be great to have working committees to help in the different areas of communication, such as graphic art, social media campaigns, direct mailings if deemed necessary, etc.

Respondent 2 – Develop the volunteers to help with communications. Also, software that is easy to use would be helpful. Currently we use too many different programs that do not communicate to each other.

Thank you for taking time to complete this questionnaire. Please return to me via e-mail.

# **References**

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