

Chapter Communications

This section will:

- Provide tips on developing an effective communication plan,
- Outline standard practices for disseminating information throughout the chapter and to the broader community.

As the rate of information flow continues to revolutionize the way we do business, now more than ever before, chapter leaders are called upon to understand the value of communication and to make use of its power. Whether focused on education or wildlife and habitat protection, every chapter's effectiveness can be defined by how well it communicates among its own members and with the larger community. Chapters that have developed strong standard practices of communication tend to have more involved members and are a visible, effective voice in their communities.

People are a chapter's most important asset, and good communication is key to keeping people energized and engaged. Disseminating information about issues and programs to members and the public, plugging people into the work of the chapter, and keeping members closely associated with one another are fundamental elements of healthy, productive chapters. The following steps and accompanying worksheets are designed to help chapters develop powerful communications systems that will improve their efficiency and organizational strength.

Once the chapter has held a strategic planning meeting, and identified the primary goals and activities of the chapter for the year, it is important to develop a communication plan that effectively addresses the following issues: What needs to be communicated? Who needs to know? How is information routed through the chapter?

- 1) Create a planning calendar.
- 2) Design networks for communicating among chapters.
- 3) Develop systems for outreach: Regularly communicate information about chapter and Audubon programs to the chapter membership and the broader community.
- 4) Establish mechanisms for conveying information and experience from current chapter presidents to incoming chapter presidents.
- 5) Participate in Audubon's electronic mail network.

1) Develop a communications plan

A communications plan is a set of standard practices, shared by the entire leadership of the chapter that keeps the key people in the chapter and in the community informed about all aspects of chapter business in a timely way. When chapter leaders fail to receive information they can, and want, to make good use of, breakdowns occur and people feel let down, ignored and frustrated. Establishing some simple standard practices for moving information through the chapter and out into the community will build good will and effectiveness.

Developing a communications plan should be a priority objective for the chapter's first annual board and/or planning meeting. An effective communications plan must answer the following questions:

- Who needs to know about specific programs and issues and what is happening in their area of interest?
- How are materials and announcements of key information, including mail and email, routed through the chapter?

Who needs to know about specific programs and issues and what is happening in their area of interest?

One of the most important questions chapters should always ask when they receive materials and information is, "Who needs to know?" Create a list (or update an existing one) of names, addresses, email, phone and fax numbers of all key chapter members and contacts. The list should include:

- All chapter board members, officers and committee chairs
- Key chapter members
- Audubon state office staff
- Other Audubon staff, including the Chapter Services and Grassroots Policy offices
- Regionally-elected board members
- Other state and local agency contacts

You may wish to use the Chapter Leader Report Form (found online at <http://www.audubon.org/local/businessAndSupport.html>) to develop or update a contact list. Be sure to distribute the contact list throughout the chapter. To ensure that all members have important contact information, print the list in the chapter newsletter and publish it on the chapter Web site.

How are materials and announcements of key information, including mail and email, routed through the chapter?

How does your chapter disseminate key information to the people who need to know about it? This question applies to all incoming information, especially mail and email, sent to the chapter. Who opens the mail, or responds to email in the chapter? How does he or she go about distributing the mail or forwarding email? Who else wants to know what is in the mail, who has received the information, and how does your chapter gain access to important materials sent from Audubon? The person or persons who have access to the chapter's mailbox and email box hold one of the most important and powerful positions in the chapter. It is vitally important that chapters have an effective system in place for handling and distributing the abundance of information that flows into the chapter.

- **Routing Slip.** Many chapters use a routing slip for all materials received. This slip includes the names and addresses of all board members and committee chairs. Incoming information is first circulated, with the routing slip, at the board meetings, then at chapter meetings, field trips, workshops, and other events, and may eventually be mailed to remaining individuals on the routing slip.
- **Targeted distribution.** A targeted system may provide a more efficient way of distributing mail for smaller chapters. This system seems to work better for chapters under 300 members, but may be applied to larger chapters as well. At the first chapter board or planning meeting, survey which members are interested in receiving the various materials sent to the chapter from Audubon.

Depending on the resources of each chapter, this sharing of information can happen in a variety of ways, such as using routing slips, copying key articles and information, posting on the Web site, or exchanging materials through mail and email or in-person at meetings. The key is to establish a standard of practice to ensure that the people who need to obtain key information and publications receive them in a timely manner.

2) Create a planning calendar

One helpful component of a communications plan is to create a calendar of upcoming events. You may wish to use the sample calendar included in this section, or create one of your own. Develop a calendar for at least the first three to six months of the year that lists all board meetings, monthly meetings and field trips. Mapping out these events will help your chapter's board focus on the way monthly program meetings, board meetings and field trips fit together over the course of the year. For example, you may wish to schedule a monthly program meeting on wetlands with a field trip to a local wetland, or a program meeting on the IBA program with a field trip to a nearby IBA site.

The planning calendar will be a useful tool for letting members know what is happening and when. It can also help with volunteer recruitment by encouraging members to plan in advance to participate in upcoming events. Newsletter editors and publicity chairs should make every effort to publicize the calendar on a regular basis in chapter newsletters and the Web, as well as in local newspapers and other media outlets. Local radio stations and public access channels appreciate receiving calendars and may announce upcoming events on the air.

The planning calendar can become one of your most valuable planning tools. Use it to support all other chapter efforts and update it regularly.

3) Design networks for communicating among chapters.

State board or council meetings and other conferences or workshops continue to provide the best opportunities for chapter leaders to meet face to face, renew acquaintances, and share news and success stories. Most chapters find that the more delegates that participate in these inter-chapter events, the richer the mix of ideas flowing back into the chapter.

In the Western Great Lakes region, chapters decided to establish a regional meeting where they could share strategies for working together on regional issues and help each other at the state level. In some states, chapter leaders are using teleconferencing to plan state-wide or even region-wide projects, such as planning use of the collaborative funds. Alaska chapters use teleconferences to conduct council meetings and to discuss important issues in a state where getting together is prohibitively expensive.

4) Develop systems for outreach: Regularly communicate information about chapter and Audubon programs to the chapter membership and the broader community.

In many communities, Audubon chapters are the most important voice for conservation in the area. Is your chapter visible in the community? Do community and business leaders know the chapter exists and are member and the public informed about the programs sponsored by the chapter and by Audubon? Or is your chapter hiding its light? The following simple steps can help chapters reach out to inactive members and to the broader community and bridge communication gaps that may be hindering chapter effectiveness.

- Create a Web site and reference it in every communication.
- Announce upcoming chapter meetings and field trips in the chapter newsletter and be sure to list the names, phone numbers and email addresses of chapter officers in every issue of the newsletter. This information need not take up a lot of space. Creative newsletter editors can do wonders with small fonts.
- Add local media contacts to the newsletter mailing list. Include local newspaper editors and television and radio producers. Make sure media outlets receive the newsletter well in advance of chapter events. Follow up with a phone call to the appropriate reporter to encourage coverage of the event.
- Set up an information table at every chapter meeting with materials about local, state and regional issues, as well as Audubon's campaigns. Order outreach materials through the Chapter Services Distribution Center. The form is available online at <http://www.audubon.org/local/outreachHome.html>. Be sure to include a sign-up sheet for members who are interested in receiving *Audubon Newswire* and *Audubon In the News* via email each week.

There are many ways to increase chapter visibility. You may want to organize a committee to brainstorm other creative ideas to attract public recognition of chapter activities.

5) Establish mechanisms for conveying information and experience from current chapter presidents to incoming chapter presidents.

Passing on information, skill and experience from one president to the next is perhaps the most important thing any chapter can do to ensure long term continuity of chapter tradition, strength and effectiveness. It is critically important that current presidents plan a specific time to sit down with their successor to review files, ongoing projects, and job descriptions. Presidents should encourage all committee chairs and officers to do the same with their successors.

Some chapters develop customized information boxes for new presidents that contain key information needed for running the chapter. Information can include items such as:

- A copy of the Audubon mission statement
- Chapter mission statement, annual strategic plan, goals and objectives
- Chapter Leaders Guide – note: this Guide is now available online at <http://www.audubon.org/local/orientationAndTraining.html>
- Past *Chapter Networker* newsletters and other chapter newsletters
- Chapter history and records of past and ongoing projects, including past Chapter annual reports
- Calendars
- Financial reports
- Meeting minutes
- By-laws, Audubon chapter policy and Audubon membership policy
- Insurance policy
- State incorporation and federal tax exempt status, including IRS determination letter
- Fundraising information

Refer to the “New Chapter President’s Checklist” included in this section to assist in training chapter officers and committee chairs.

6) Audubon’s electronic mail network

Audubon’s Web site has a vast amount of information from critical Audubon issues to general membership and chapter information. The Web site is located at www.audubon.org.

Each Friday, Audubon distributes alternating email communications called *Audubon Newswire* and *Audubon In the News*. Each of these contains up-to-the-minute information about what’s happening in Audubon, nationally and with local chapters. Each chapter leader is sent this email communication automatically unless the member has notified Audubon and asked to “unsubscribe.” The benefit of receiving these communications is enormous. For example, the ability to capture or download newsletter articles, fact sheets, Action Alerts, and other issue-specific information will provide users with the information they need to respond to pressing environmental issues of the day.

The success of major national campaigns, like the decades-long campaign to preserve the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge or efforts to keep a strong Endangered Species Act, hinges on the actions of chapters and Audubon members nationwide. Your state office staff or the Audubon Policy office in Washington, DC can advise you regarding the status of national issues and suggest how you can be most effective in influencing federal legislation. Remember, federal legislation is comprehensive—it influences state and local regulations. Be sure you and your committee are part of the Audubon E-Activist network. You'll get the monthly newsletter, Audubon Advisory, on what's hot in Congress. Also, when your emails, letters or phone calls can make or break an issue for wildlife, you may receive an Action Alert. To sign up, go to <http://www.capitolconnect.com/audubon/>. Encourage everyone in your chapter to join the E-Activist list and make a difference for wildlife.

Additionally, the chapter services office publishes *Audubon Chapter Networker* each quarter. This newsletter contains the latest important information needed to run an effective and efficient Audubon chapter. Notice of the *Networker* publication is emailed to all chapter leaders and is posted on the Audubon Web site.

Key questions to ask when developing a communications plan:

Every chapter can benefit from a thoroughly developed communications plan. Your communications plan will ensure that the right information is communicated to the right people. To do this, your plan must answer the following questions.

Who are your key audiences?

- Chapter officers, committee chairs board members, other key leaders
- Activist members
- Inactive chapter members
- Local media
- Local, state and national decision-makers
- General Public
- Others

What is required by each audience?

- A copy of the Audubon 5-year plan
- Action Alerts
- Local issue alerts
- Calendar of chapter activities
- Other

NEW CHAPTER PRESIDENT'S CHECKLIST

To help you get started as a new Audubon chapter president, we are providing the following checklist of essential items you should attend to as you assume your leadership position.

Contact your State Office or the Chapter Services Office.

If you don't already know your state office Vice President, it is a good idea to call or write to introduce yourself as the new president.

Post the Chapter Services Office Hotline number.

The toll-free number is 1-800-542-2748. Pass this number to your top officers, telling them that it is for the use of chapter offices for all inquiries having to do with chapter operations.

Make sure a Chapter Leader Report Form has been sent to your State Office or the

Chapter Services Office. Usually sent after an officer election, the CLRF is essential if your officers are to be kept up-to-date on relevant issues. The CLRF can be accessed online at <http://www.audubon.org/local/cso/chapter-ar/doc/chapterleaderreport.doc>.

Review the following materials from the outgoing officers and file them together so they can be easily turned over to the next president:

Chapter Leaders Guide

The Guide is the property of the chapter and covers virtually all aspects of chapter operations, including the duties of the board, committee chairs, and chapter officers. It is a convenient and comprehensive guide that chapter leaders should have on hand for quick reference. Current orientation and training materials are also available online at <http://www.audubon.org/local/orientationAndTraining.html/>.

Chapter Constitution, By-laws, and (if applicable) Incorporation Papers

Incorporation papers are issued by your state government. They will not exist if the chapter is not incorporated, but you should be aware of the legal status of the chapter. Review other paperwork.

Chapter Federal Tax Exempt Status Certification

Here again your chapter may not possess this paperwork. But, if it does not, you may want to consider applying to the IRS. Potential donors of property, funds, or even labor may want to claim a charitable deduction, which will apply only if your chapter is recognized by the IRS as tax-exempt. The tax-exempt status of National Audubon does NOT apply to your chapter.

Audubon Chapter Charter

While not essential for chapter operation, the chapter charter certifies when your chapter was certified by National Audubon, and that it is recognized as an official chapter.

Chapter Insurance Policy

It is strongly recommended that all chapters hold some sort of insurance against liability arising from any and all activities in which the chapter is engaged. For additional insurance information see the Audubon website at http://www.audubon.org/local/cso/chapter_insurance.html.

Planning Calendar

Use this calendar to coordinate events over the course of the year. Committee Chairs may choose to devise more detailed planning schedules for specific programs and activities.

Event	January	February	March	April	May	June
Board Meetings						
Membership Meetings						
State Council Events						
National Events						
Other Events						

Event	July	August	September	October	November	December
Board Meetings						
Membership Meetings						
State Council Events						
National Events						
Other Events						