

POWER^{UP} YOUR PANTRY

Communicating about Your Pantry



It's important to remember that you are your pantry's number one advocate - and communication is your key tool. Targeted, effective messages with food pantry clients, stakeholders, volunteers, the media, the community, prospective donors and partners will amplify your efforts and consequently, the lives of the people you want to help.

Establish communication goals

It's beneficial to first identify what key messages you want to communicate and to whom. Writing down your organization's needs or creating a "wish list" will help get this process started. Messages will vary from pantry to pantry, but most are trying to accomplish the following:

- Raise awareness of food pantry services
- Raise awareness of hunger in the community
- Encourage first-time donations of food or money
- Facilitate ongoing donations of food or money
- Recruit volunteers
- Share achievements and success stories

Planning is an important part of the goal setting process. It may be helpful to sit down with staff and volunteers to discuss short term (2-6 months), long-term (6+ months) and ongoing communication goals.

Targeting the audience

Once you have identified your communication goals, you need to decide who you want to reach with your messages. Who are your primary targets? Most food pantries will want to directly communicate with the following groups:

- Clients
- Community
- Donors/Stakeholders

Remember, each group has a unique perspective and expectations. Answering questions like "How much do they know about our food pantry?", "What information about our food pantry is relevant to them?", and "What action(s) do we want them to take?", are good starting points for creating targeted messages.



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This series is intended for food pantries and other hunger relief groups looking for ways to enhance their current operations and better meet the needs people who use their services.

The information provided is based on survey and other research conducted by the Interdisciplinary Center for Food Security at the University of Missouri.

How to tell your pantry's story

Deciding who you want to target with your communication will impact the content of your message, where you disseminate your message, and the tone and style of the message. Below are a few tips for effective story telling:

Build narrative. Narratives make the message personable and relatable. For example, if you are targeting prospective donors you could collect testimonials from your clients on how the food pantry has helped their household in times of need. Or you could collect testimonials from current donors on why they support your food pantry.

Share images. Depending on where you are sharing your message, bright, engaging images are important to use when trying to grab your audience's attention. On social media for example, a post with an image is 10 times more likely to receive engagement (i.e. sharing, commenting, etc.) than a post without an image. Best of all, they can help tell your pantry's story. Images of what donations or grants have been used to purchase or volunteers working behind the scenes are great images to have. Again, these images should support your message and be relevant to your target audience.

Use action words. You want to inspire action, right? If you want to solicit donations or recruit volunteers, for example, use compelling verbs like "change", "act", "save", "support", "reduce" to help your audience visualize how their actions will impact the food pantry and fellow community members.

Keep it short and simple. People's attention spans are getting increasingly shorter with more and more information competing for their attention. That's why your messages should be short, action-oriented, and to the point.

Call to action. A direct request to your audience focuses attention on your key message and the outcome you want. Let them know their action matters to the community and all of the people who go to your pantry for help. Whether it's a small, ongoing donation or participating in an upcoming food drive.

Sharing your message

Who you want to target will determine where and when you share your message. There are many options depending on the local options available in your community. In terms of timing, while people are more inclined to give during holidays, they might also be inundated with donation requests. An alternate option is to share your message when your food pantry's needs are the greatest. The most important thing is to simply ask!

Below are a few popular communication channels you can use to share your messages:

Work with your local media. Local media can be a great asset. Call your local reporter and see if they would be run a public service announcement or upcoming event announcement. It could include a call-to-action for an food/fund drive or be intended to let the audience know about food pantry services or raise awareness about the growth of hunger in your community. When working with the media, it's also important to share human interest stories. Including testimonials from clients, volunteers, or a spokesperson will add more impact.

Keep your website updated. Having (and updating) a website adds credibility to your food pantry. It's a platform for sharing the work you do, educating the public, and letting people know how they can get involved and donate. If you don't have a website, it's easy and inexpensive to create one. GoDaddy provides website templates specifically for food banks and pantries. You can visit godaddy.com/website-templates/food-bank to get started for free.

Consider starting a blog. Blogs are great for reader engagement. Blogs are frequently updated with new content that provide readers on news about your pantry, tips, or other relevant information. You can include a blog on your website or create one on Wordpress. They contain links to your other social media platforms. You can post recipes, community events/issues, highlight volunteers, staff members, and upcoming community events. Every post doesn't have to be about the pantry but should support what the pantry values (i.e. community engagement, healthy eating, etc.). Overall, it's another way to engage with the community and provide resources and information that the community and pantry clients will find interesting and useful.



Image credit: The Food Bank of Central & Northeast Missouri.

Establish a social media presence. This is one of the easiest ways to connect people to your food pantry. It's a great platform to share your food pantry's story and values. The things you can share are nearly limitless and include success stories, pictures, posts from your blog, information from your website, upcoming pantry and community events, and more! It's also a place to emphasize your calls to action. Facebook is one of the most popular social media channels, but Twitter, Instagram, and Pinterest are popular as well. Because it's important to post consistently, create an editorial calendar that shows what content you are going to post, when you are going to post it, and on what social media platform. For Facebook, start out posting three times per week and adjust from there.

Paid media (online banner ads, radio ads). If you want to expand your reach, use paid media channels to consistently promote your message to your target audience. Promoting posts on Facebook, or purchasing online banner ads or radio ads, are a few options to consider. While online channels may be effective for reaching potential donors, it's important to keep in mind that radio is the most cost-effective channel to reach low-income groups. Print ads in newspapers, including community daily or weekly papers, are most effective at reaching low-income people over 60. Some of these papers might even include a print ad for free. You will be responsible for developing content for your ad, so focus on the key message you want to share and include a call to action, as mentioned previously.

It's worthwhile to meet with staff and volunteers to establish how you will communicate about your pantry. What is the most important information that needs to be communicated internally and externally? What should not be said? It may be useful to write a communications factsheet that can be used internally that highlights key messages, talking points, statistics, or information that can be shared with the public. This helps keep messaging accurate and consistent.

Evaluate your messaging strategy

To see the impact of your message(s) and improve your messaging strategy, evaluate your efforts. Before you share any message you should define 1) what success looks like and 2) how you will know your objectives have been met. For example, do you want to see donations increase by 20% after mailing a direct mail piece? Have you raised awareness of food pantry services among 50 of people?

On Facebook, it's easy to keep track of how your messages are performing. Interactions with your page and posts are tracked over time. In this way, you can adjust messages and content based on how they are performing among your audience.

Check out the USDA's, *Communication Channels: How to Get the Word out* at bit.ly/usdacommstrategies for more communication strategies.



Image credit: Feeding Missouri.



SPOTLIGHT:
THE FOOD BANK OF CENTRAL AND
NORTHEAST MISSOURI
COLUMBIA, MO



Janese Silvey

The Food Bank is a large operation that serves thousands of people in 32 Missouri counties every month. While their communication goals and strategies are different compared to pantries in smaller communities, Janese offers several ideas and tips that can spur food donations in communities across the state.

Communication Tips

“In small towns, newspapers and newsletters are still relevant,” she says, “Make sure your newspaper editor knows who you are and what you’re doing. Let them know your hours and if there will be special events. Invite them for a tour and talk about the need. [Also], monthly newsletters are good. Find a high school or college journalism student who wants some experience writing, or a retired volunteer”.

Newspapers and newsletters can help get the word out about your needs. You can encourage schools, churches, etc. to host food drives and let people in your community know what you need each month.

Newsletter are also versatile in that they can be shared with friends, family, churches, community organizations, and are great ways to feature donors and volunteers “People love being in newsletters”, Janice emphasized. It makes them feel special and they enjoy sharing their story with friends and family.

In terms of social media, Janese doesn’t see a need for agencies to go beyond Facebook. The Food Bank has even pulled back from Instagram. And just like newsletters, Facebook is great for recognizing donors and volunteers. It’s also a great way to host virtual food drives and solicit donations.

For example, the Food Bank’s *Giving Tuesday* Facebook campaign was a series of pre-created posts that went up every hour. It showed a shopping cart that started empty, but gradually filled up throughout the day as donations were received. They were able to find a matching donor to help boost donations as well. To donate, people would just click on a link where donations could be submitted. The goal was to raise \$10,000. However, by the end of the campaign, \$30,000 had been raised.

In terms of communication strategy, a less is more approach is often the best route. “Do one or two things, and do them well.”

For more information:
foodsecurity.missouri.edu