

Choose which communication methods to use



This worksheet will help you choose two to four communication methods that are appropriate for your program. Look at the chart below, which lists some common communication methods. Then answer the questions to decide which methods are right for your plan.

Common communication methods

The chart on the next page lists some common written and oral communication methods. Some methods are better for reaching a broad audience. Other methods are better for reaching a targeted audience.

Be sure to think about local options, too. In Haiti, for example, programs could ask traditional Rara bands to go through a community in order to draw people out of their houses. Then the community could enjoy the music and hear the program's messages.

Factors to consider when choosing communication methods

Local situation

1. What methods do community members and program participants say they would prefer you to use?

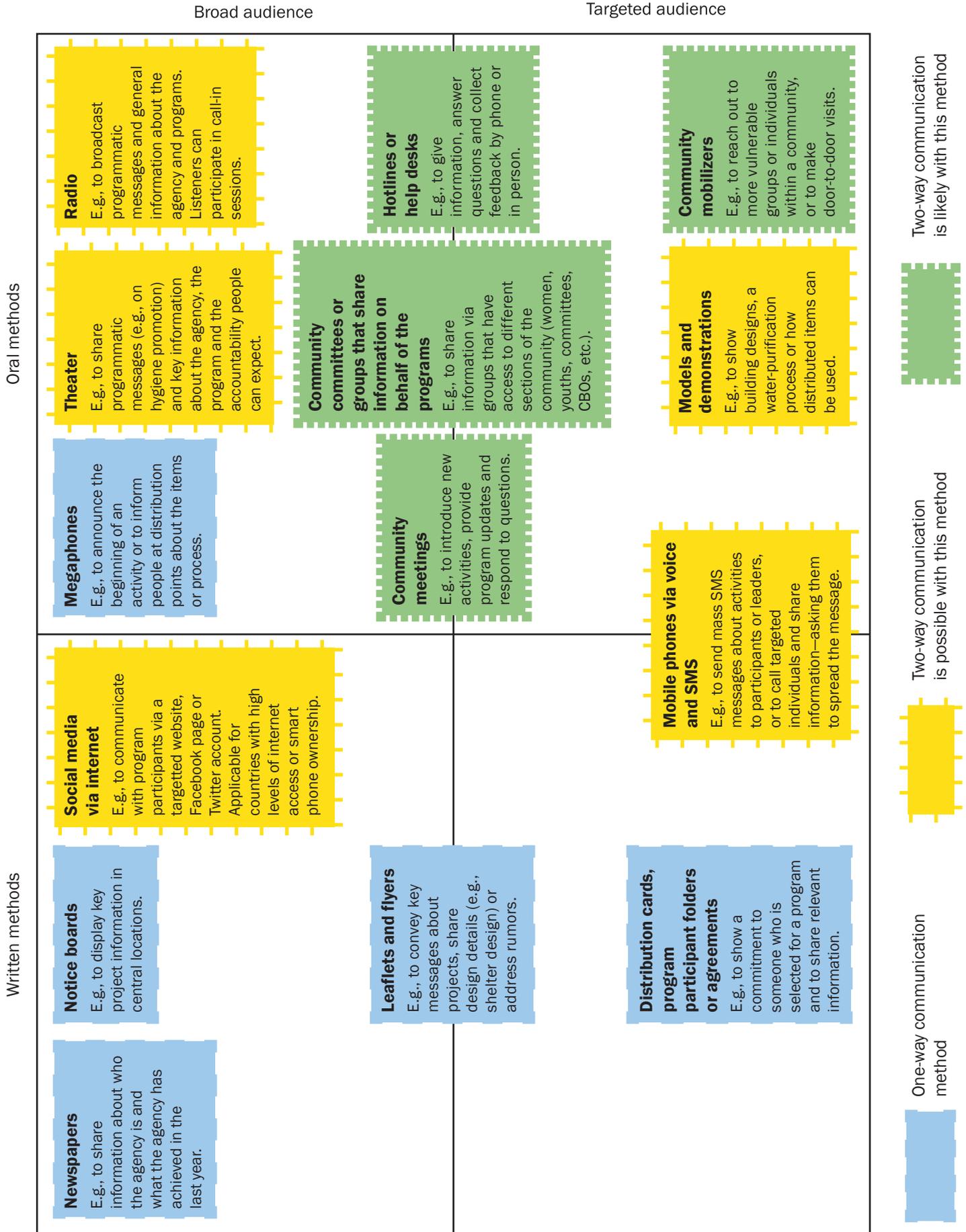
Speak to different community members. Use methods they say would work for them.

2. What methods are already common that you could build on?

For example, if most people have access to a radio or mobile phone, can you communicate this way? If people regularly go to meetings, can you share information at the meetings, too?

3. What planned program activities can be used for greater information sharing?

For example, if the program is gathering people to launch activities, take the opportunity to explain more about the program. If program participants will be given a distribution card, what extra information can you share on the card itself?



4. How accessible is the community?

For example, mountains and rivers might restrict how often and what times of the year you can physically visit a community. Security might affect whether you can visit certain areas. If it's hard to visit a community, consider using radio or SMS messaging, which can be good ways to share information with key community members and committees.

Target audience

5. Who needs to know this information? The wider community or only program participants?

Certain methods, such as radio, megaphones and notice boards, target the whole community. Sometimes a program may want to give additional information to participants (for example, information about their roles and responsibilities as part of the program). You could use program participant agreements, distribution cards or targeted meetings to communicate this information.

6. What are the levels of literacy among men and women?

Use oral and visual communication methods if less than 100 percent of the target audience is literate. Do not rely on written methods alone. Oral and visual methods include speaking at community meetings, giving demonstrations and creating illustrated posters. Test the visual methods to ensure that people understand the pictures.

7. How can we communicate with groups that are more vulnerable?

Traditional methods (such as communicating via community leaders) and methods that cost money (such as buying a newspaper) may exclude vulnerable groups. It often takes extra effort to reach these groups. For example, you might need to go door to door or work with community groups, such as a women's group, who can pass information on to people who are hard to reach.

8. Does the program need to communicate with men and women equally?

Certain channels, such as by communicating via church groups or women's groups, may not reach men. Other channels may not reach women.

Risk management

9. If information is misunderstood, will it put the program at risk? Is there a risk of rumors or distortions if people pass the information from person to person?

For sensitive information that is more likely to be misunderstood or distorted, use written methods (such as leaflets and posters) to complement oral methods. A good example of sensitive information is a program's selection criteria and selection process.

10. Will certain communication methods put staff or community members at risk?

For example, will inviting mothers and children to a central meeting point put them at risk when they travel home? Work with groups to identify how to minimize risk.

Available resources

11. How much money, staff time and other resources are available for the program?

Some methods need more initial financial investment (such as developing a radio message). Other methods may need sustained staff time (for example, keeping a notice board up to date). Door-to-door mobilization often requires the most staff time.

Two-way versus one-way communication

12. Does the program want to gather feedback while sharing information?

Community meetings and door-to-door visits create an opportunity for dialogue when staff are present. Hotlines provide an opportunity for community members to contact the agency even when staff are not in their community. Programs should only seek feedback if they believe they can use it. If the program has already made a decision or if it is not possible to change certain aspects of the program, then collecting feedback can raise false expectations.

13. Are people likely to have questions about the information that the program shares?

Two-way methods enable people to ask questions and feel heard. They also allow field staff to respond to people's questions, comments and concerns.

Advantages and disadvantages of written and oral methods

Reflecting on the advantages and disadvantages of written and oral methods will help you identify what combination of methods might be most appropriate for your program.

Written methods

Advantages

- Presents a formalized, consistent message to communities. This can reduce the risk of misunderstandings and rumors. (E.g., publishing distribution times helps assure people that the distribution will happen.)
- Helps make formal agreements (e.g., between an agency and a committee).
- Lasts for a long time.
- Makes it easier to follow up because there is a paper trail. (E.g., you can more easily identify program participants if they receive a receipt after registering.)
- Makes it easier to display information (e.g., designs, pictures or other visual data).

Disadvantages

- Needs higher levels of literacy or relies on some people to read to others.
- Takes time to develop the materials.
- Makes plans more concrete, which may present a challenge in quickly changing contexts.
- Tends to result in one-way communication.

Oral methods

Advantages

- Allows communication with target populations that have high levels of illiteracy.
- Allows staff to tailor their message to the audience.
- Prompts dialogue between field staff and the community.
- Provides the opportunity for people to ask questions and for staff to hear suggestions from the community.

Disadvantages

- Sometimes leads to misunderstandings, distortions and rumors as messages pass from person to person.
- Requires staff to be briefed to ensure consistency of the message.
- Often relies on key contact people at the community level, who may not deliver the message to the intended audience.
- Requires the audience to be present at a given time. If people are out during the day, they may miss staff visits or community meetings.

Consulting with communities to identify their preferred methods

Staff can ask community members the following questions to identify which methods of communication they would prefer and which methods might be more effective. If the program has already started, staff can revise these questions to review the effectiveness of existing communication methods.

1. How do you currently find out about what is happening in your community?
2. Which groups of people in the community are generally more informed about what is happening? Which groups are normally less informed? Why?
3. What communication methods would you prefer that we use to keep you informed about this program?
 - You may give some examples of different communication methods to help start the discussion.
 - You may wish to discuss written and oral options, and then ask people which ones they prefer.
 - You may also need to discuss the resource limitations or constraints your program is operating under. For example, if people say they would like you to come door to door every week and the program site is 5 hours away, you may need to discuss whether this is feasible.
 - You should explore details about preferred communication methods. For example, if certain groups prefer community meetings, how often should they occur? Is there a day or time that is more convenient? If people prefer to receive information via a notice board, where should it be placed?
4. Who might be excluded if we use the communication methods that you have selected?

Explore issues that might affect people's access to information (including time, resources, mobility and culture). It is important to consult different vulnerable groups as part of this process.

5. What would you like to know about the program right now? What would you like us to keep you updated about?

Another way of asking this is, "What questions do you have about the program?"

6. How would you like to provide feedback to us about the program?